

Why Are There Four Books about Jesus?



Session 1



Matthew 28:1-15; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18

Session Objective






The fact that we have four Gospels in the Bible can lead people to wonder not only why there are four books, but also which one is the most authentic, important, or “true” account. In this session, we will explore how each Gospel plays its own unique role in sharing the message of Christ’s life and ministry. We will also see how the combination of the four Gospels gives us a more holistic image of who Jesus was and why we believe what we do.

Faith Statement

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 7–26)

Session Overview

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Enhancements

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Worship Connections
Web Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Take a few moments to read through each of the resurrection stories: Matthew 28:1–15, Mark 16:1–8, Luke 24:1–12, and John 20:1–18. Reflect on the following questions:

- Which of the stories is your favorite? Why?
- What do you think is the most important image or message to take from that account?
- How would you share that with others?
- Looking at the other accounts, what do you think is the most important image or message in them?
- When you put all these images together, how does Jesus appear to you? How would you share that with others?

Pray for your group and your time together. Pray that your group may discover the joys of exploring all the Gospels and that their questions may lead to deeper faith.



Understanding the Scripture

The four Gospels come to us from the authors' distinct perspectives, experiences, and agendas. Each Gospel has a purpose and the stories that it tells share that purpose. No one Gospel is more important than the others, and when we read from all four we discover more fully who Jesus is.

Mark begins his Gospel with Jesus' ministry. From the beginning, we are warned that this story is no mere biography. Mark's Gospel is a confession written to establish the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. Throughout the Gospel, Mark focuses on Jesus' divinity, culminating in the crucifixion—for Mark, the cross is the key to Jesus' identity.

Matthew is the most ecclesiastical of the Gospels. He writes for the community of believers and he focuses on how to be this community. Some people refer to Matthew's Gospel as the "Jewish Gospel" because of his focus on the traditions, Scripture, and customs of the Jewish community. However, it seems more likely that the community was made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers.

Luke is our storyteller. He weaves the narrative to the history of Israel, the Scriptures, and contemporary history to show how God's redemptive purpose unfolds in history through Jesus Christ. God sent Jesus, the Savior, to seek and save the lost, which is why Luke's Gospel contains the parables about lost-and-found items and people.

John's Gospel is the most unique of the four. John allows the reader to discover the presence of God in Jesus for himself or herself. The value of Jesus' life and ministry lies in the way they reveal God, which is why John gives us the "I am" statements. The chronological events are not as important as what the stories show us about Jesus.



Understanding the Faith Statement

“In 1983 the two largest Presbyterian churches in the United States reunited. *The Plan for Reunion* called for the preparation of a brief statement of the Reformed faith for possible inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*. This statement is therefore not intended to stand alone, apart from the other confessions of our church. It does not pretend to be a complete list of all our beliefs, nor does it explain any of them in detail. . . . It celebrates our rediscovery that for all our undoubted diversity, we are bound together by a common faith and a common task.”¹

One of the unique aspects of *A Brief Statement of Faith* is that it draws from all of the Gospels to create a more holistic statement on the person and ministry of Christ. Lines 7 through 26 give us a definitive statement on who we believe Jesus to be. In this session, the participants will have the opportunity to do the same and to see how this confession was created to include the similarities and differences found in Scripture.



Teaching Today's Question

As teenagers get older, they become aware that not everything in the world is black and white. They begin to explore for themselves and discover the inconsistencies in life. For some, the realization that there are inconsistencies in Scripture is startling and leads to questions about what to believe. For others, these differences can lead to doubts about faith. This session invites the participants to ask those questions and to explore the similarities and differences found in the Gospels.

In our world, where so much information is literally at our fingertips, it is important for teenagers to begin learning how to discern fact from fiction, and truth from bias. Exploration of the Gospels (as with all the Scriptures) can help them on their journey. They can begin to make choices on what to believe and develop the tools that can help them decide for themselves what is real and what is not—they can begin to develop faith that seeks understanding.

1. Preface to *A Brief Statement of Faith*, in *Book of Confessions*, Part I of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2007), p. 265.



Enter

Option A: What Do You See?

- Copies of “In the Eye of the Beholder” (Web Resource 1a)

As participants arrive, distribute copies of “In the Eye of the Beholder” (Web Resource 1a). Invite participants to look at the image on the page and to stand on one side of the meeting space if they think it is a picture of a duck or on the other side if they think it’s a rabbit. Ask: How many of you saw the other image as soon as I mentioned it? Say something like:

Puzzles like this one play with a person’s eyes and mind. Our eyes see the image, but our mind makes sense of the image. It is not surprising that when we think we see one thing, we can suddenly see another when someone suggests it.

Option B: He Said/She Said

As participants arrive, have them line up next to one another. Whisper a sentence to the person at one end of the line and have him or her whisper the sentence to the next person. Have the participants continue to whisper the sentence down the line until the last person has heard the sentence. Invite the last person to share what he or she heard. Share the sentence you originally whispered and note how it changed as it was passed along. Say something like:

Just as the sentence changed as it was passed along, so stories can change as they are passed along. We hear things in different ways and put different emphases on the story depending on who we are and what our circumstance is. Sometimes this can lead to confusion, but it can also lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves and what we believe.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Gather the participants in a comfortable location and reflect on the following questions:

- How do we know if something is true or not?
- When we research things, how do we know which sources to believe?
- What do you do when one source says one thing and another source says the opposite?
- Why do you think there are four Gospels in the Bible?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

God of grace and truth, we ask that you send your Spirit down upon us this day. Help us to set aside the worries, concerns, and plans that distract us. Give us peace of mind and body. As we search for truth, we ask that you will open our eyes, minds, and hearts to your living Word revealed to us in Scripture and through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Option B: Which Gospel Are You?

- Copy of "Which Gospel Are You?" (Web Resource 1b) for each participant, pens, newsprint, markers, self-adhesive notes

Write the name of each Gospel at the top of a separate, posted sheet of newsprint.

Give each participant a copy of "Which Gospel Are You?" (Web Resource 1b) and a pen. Invite each participant to take the quiz on the page. Give each person five self-adhesive notes and ask him or her to write his or her name on each note. Review each question with the group, asking your participants to put a self-adhesive note on the posted sheet of newsprint that corresponds with their selected answer.

ANSWER KEY	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
	A. Mark	A. Mark	A. Luke	A. Matthew	A. Matthew
	B. Luke	B. Luke	B. Matthew	B. Mark	B. Luke
	C. Matthew	C. Matthew	C. John	C. John	C. Mark
	D. John	D. John	D. Mark	D. Luke	D. John

Have each participant count how many of his or her self-adhesive notes appear on each sheet of newsprint, noting that the Gospel with the majority of his or her notes is the one he or she is most like. Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Bible Study

- Bibles, newsprint, markers

Before the session, either write the name of each Gospel at the top of a separate sheet of newsprint or use the sheets of newsprint from Option B in Engage.

Divide your participants into four equal groups and assign each group one of the Gospels. (A group may be one person if need be.) Make sure each participant has a Bible and invite each group to look at the Scripture passage from their assigned Gospel: Matthew 28:1–15; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18. Give each group the prepared sheet of newsprint that corresponds with their Gospel and have each group write down the key points found in their assigned passage.

Consider dividing the participants into groups according to which Gospel they were the most like.

Give each group an opportunity to share the key points from their passage. After all the groups have shared, help the participants work together to identify and circle the points listed in more than one of the Gospels. Have them put a star next to the points listed in all four Gospels and underline points that are unique to that particular Gospel. Explore the following questions:



- What key points were found in all four Gospels? Are these points more true because they are found in all four Gospels? Why or why not?
- What key points are unique to a particular Gospel? If a point is found in only one Gospel, does that make it false? Why or why not?
- Do you think we should focus only on the points found in all four Gospels? What would be good about doing so? What could be bad about doing so?
- Why do you think it could be good to focus on the unique points?

Option B: What to Do with the Differences

Bibles, copies of “Cut and Paste” (Web Resource 1c) and “Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1d), four highlighters

Distribute copies of “Cut and Paste” (Web Resource 1c) to the participants and read the page together. Ask: Which Gospel did this passage come from? Share that the passage actually pulls excerpts from all four Gospels.

Divide the participants into four equal groups, give each group a highlighter, and assign each group one of the Gospels. (A group may be one person if need be.) Make sure each participant has a Bible and invite each group to look at the Scripture passage from their assigned Gospel: Matthew 28:1–15; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18. Ask each group to highlight the portions of the passage on “Cut and Paste” (Web Resource 1c) that they believe comes from their assigned Scripture passage. Share the following information with the group:



Consider dividing the participants into groups according to which Gospel they were the most like.



- From the time that the four Gospels were selected for the Bible, there has been discussion over what to do with the contradictions and differences found in the Gospels.
- Some groups tried to eliminate all but one Gospel.
- Other groups tried to combine the four Gospels into one account.
- In the second century A.D., a leader named Tatian combined the various Gospels into one account.
- The paragraph on “Cut and Paste” (Web Resource 1c) is an example of what Tatian did.

Explore the following questions:



- Do you think combining the Gospels is a good idea? Why or why not?
- If you had to remove the contradictions and differences found in the Gospels, which approach would you use: elimination (choosing only one Gospel), combination (what Tatian tried to do), or harmonization (instead of four Gospels, we look at the books as one Gospel told from four different perspectives)?
- What are the strengths of each approach? What are the weaknesses?
- If someone asked you why there are four books about Jesus, what would you say?

Say something like:



Our faith statement for today comes from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, which was written in part to celebrate the fact that, despite all our diversity, we are bound together by a common faith. The portion of the statement on Jesus Christ pulls from not only all four Gospels, but all of Scripture.

Distribute and read together the copies of “Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1d) before exploring the following questions:



- Do you think this statement gives us a good picture of who Jesus was? Why or why not?
- Is there anything you would add to it? If so, what would you add?



Express

Option A: Know Your Audience



Four copies each of “Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1d) and “Rewrite” (Web Resource 1e), paper and pens

Divide your participants into four equal groups. (One person can be a group if need be.) Give each group:



- The name of one of the Gospels
- A copy of “Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1d)
- A copy of “Rewrite” (Web Resource 1e)
- A sheet of paper and a pen

Read together *A Brief Statement of Faith* printed on “Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1d). Have each group follow the instructions on “Rewrite” (Web Resource 1e) to rewrite the faith statement for their Gospel’s audience. After a few minutes, give each group an opportunity to share the statement they wrote with the rest of the participants before exploring the following questions:

- What is the same in each statement? What is different?
- Do the differences make some statements less reliable than other statements? Why or why not?
- What key points about Jesus should always be present?
- Why is knowing the audience you are addressing important?

Option B: Video Clips—“Bad Blood” from *The X-Files*

- “Bad Blood” from *The X-Files: Season 5* (1998, not rated) and video-viewing equipment

Before the session, preview the following clips from “Bad Blood” from *The X-Files: Season 5*:

Clip 1—02:20–06:54 (Chapter 3)

Clip 2—17:46–21:11 (Chapter 7)

Share the following with your group: These two clips come from an episode of *The X-Files*. The first clip tells the story from the perspective of one character and the second clip tells the same story from another person’s perspective. Ask the participants to pay attention to what is the same in each account as well as what is different.

Watch the two clips and explore the following questions:

- What facts are the same in each account?
- Why do you think there are differences in the accounts?
- What does this tell us about the way people will tell the same story?
- Does the fact that there are differences in the story mean that one of the characters is being less truthful than the other? Why or why not?
- Since people tell stories from their own perspectives, what does this tell us about the way we share our faith stories?
- Should we all try to tell these stories in exactly the same way? Why or why not?



Option A: Popcorn Statement of Faith

Have participants gather in a circle and hold hands. Go around the circle, giving each person an opportunity to finish the sentence “I believe Jesus . . .” Pray the closing prayer.

Option B: Pray in Which Way?

- White pillar candle, matches

Gather your group in a circle around the candle.
Read the following version of the Lord's Prayer:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for the many different perspectives and clues you have given us to help us in our search for you. Help us to find the ways to share with one another what we believe, celebrating the things that are the same and respecting the things that are different. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Ask: Did this version of the Lord's Prayer sound "right"? What was missing? Explain that this version of the Lord's Prayer is found in Luke's Gospel and that the version we are more familiar with is closer to the prayer found in Matthew. Read Matthew's version to the participants:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Light the candle and invite your group to join you in praying the Lord's Prayer, using the version your congregation is most familiar with.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Worship Connections

Since many stories exist in more than one Gospel, have your group work with your pastor or worship committee to weave the stories together to be read in worship one Sunday. This exercise can work well for the story of Jesus' baptism, the transfiguration, or even Holy Week. Consider having your participants take on different parts to read to help the congregation see how the different accounts come together. Consider challenging the group to bring one of the "woven" stories to life in a video or slide show. Post the video or slide show on your congregation's Web site.

Web Connections

As a group, examine three different accounts of a major news story by looking up a current news story on three different news Web sites. Discuss the following questions:

- What is the same in all of the stories? What is different?
- What do you believe to be true?
- Is what you believe the popular view? Why or why not?

