



MT. OLIVET BAPTIST CHURCH
REV. EUGENE L. GIBSON, JR., PH.D.

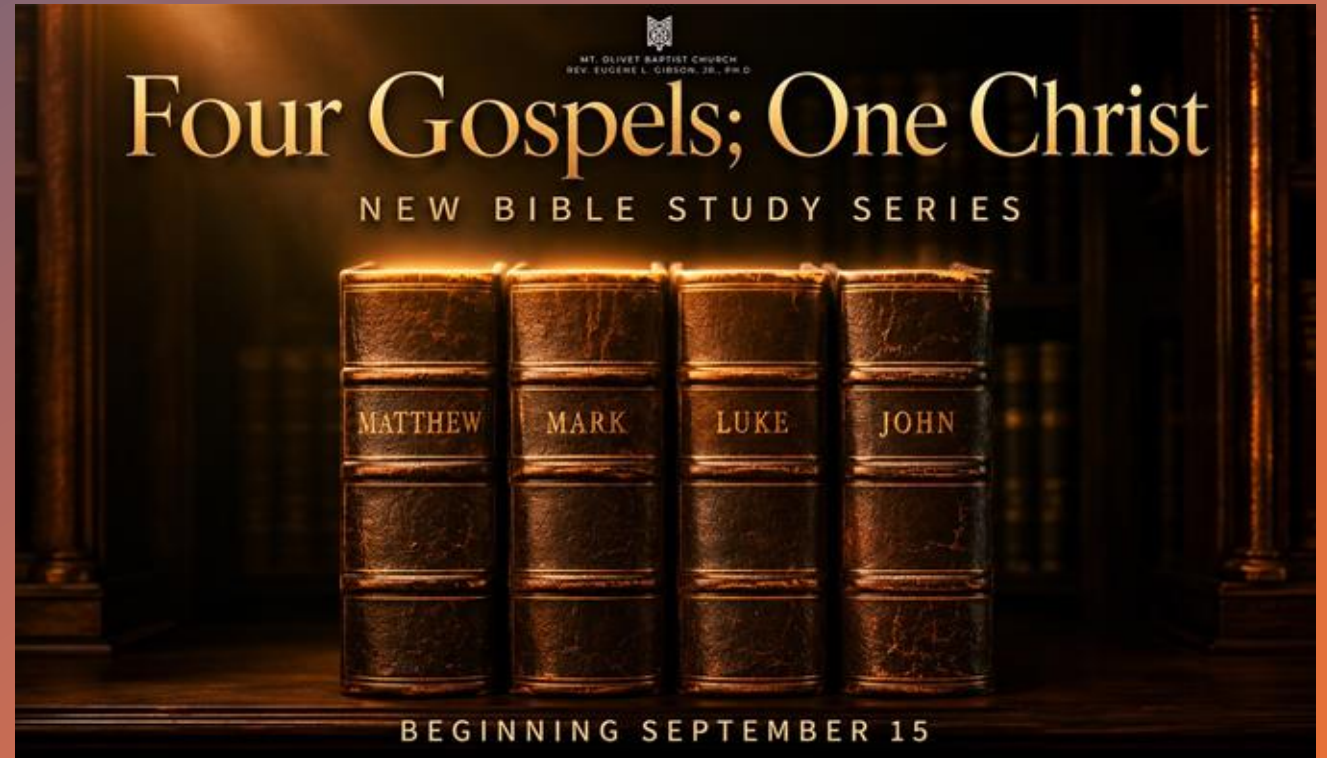
Four Gospels; One Christ

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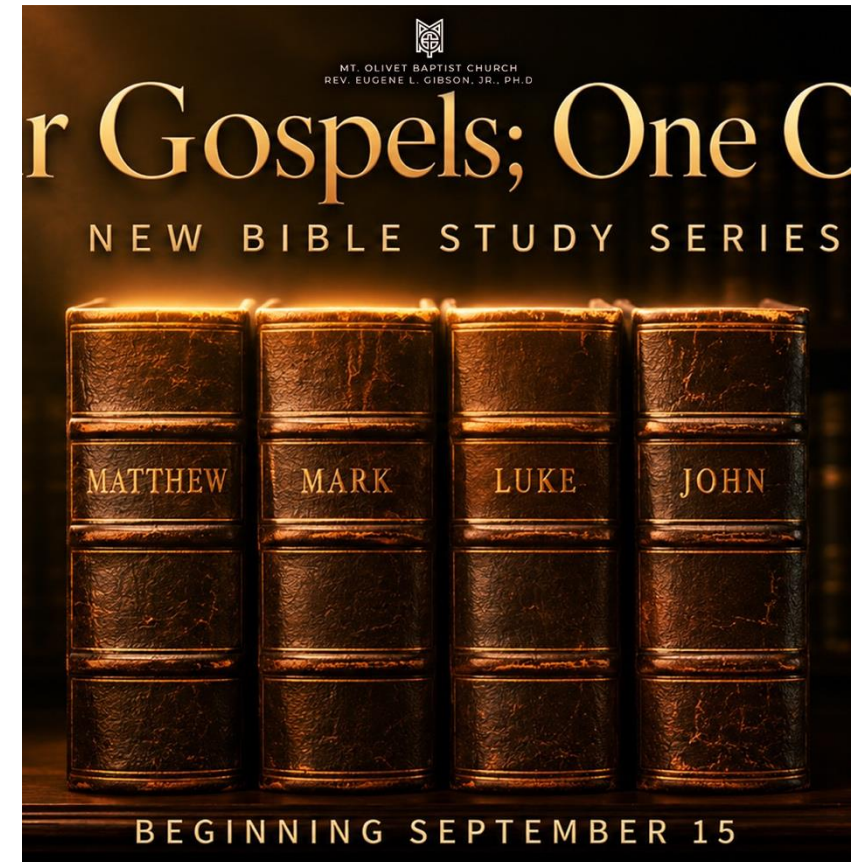
BEGINNING SEPTEMBER 15

Week 3 Canonization Finale, Exploration of the Gospels



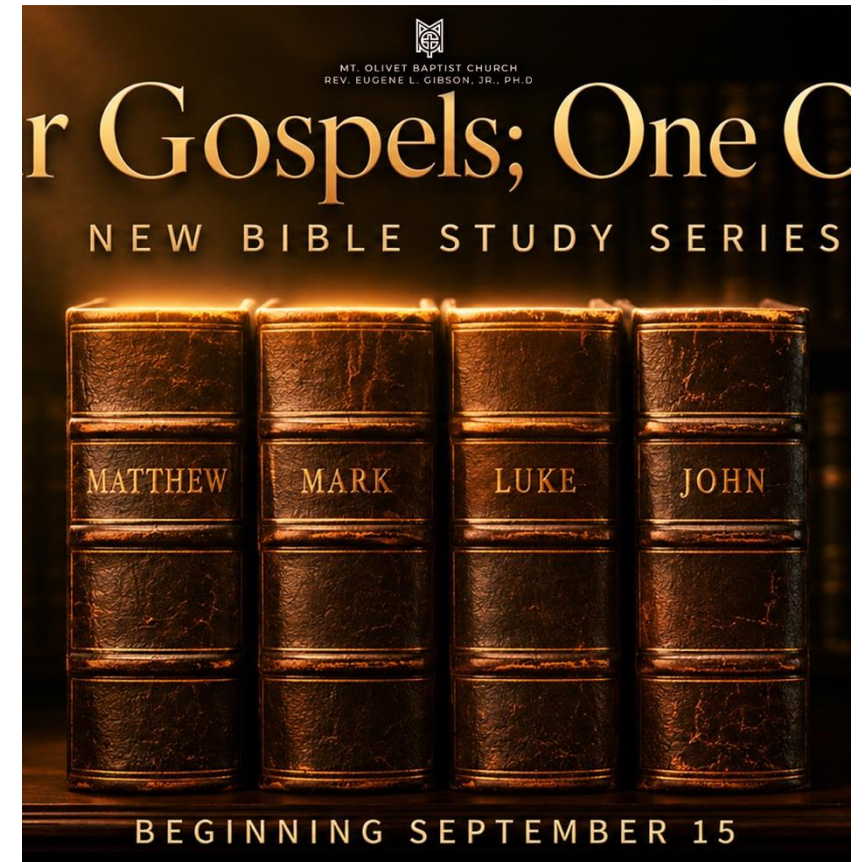
7. Early Lists and the Muratorian Fragment

- One important witness to this developing process is the document commonly called the **Muratorian Fragment**.
- It is generally dated to the late second century.
- Although the manuscript is fragmentary, it demonstrates that Christians were already thinking seriously about which writings should be included among authoritative Christian Scriptures.



7. Early Lists and the Muratorian Fragment

- It recognizes many books associated with the New Testament.
- This is important because it demonstrates that the process of identifying authoritative Christian writings was already well underway long before the fourth century.
- We therefore should not picture the fourth century as the moment when Christians suddenly began thinking about the canon.
- The discussion had been happening for generations.





8. Nicaea: Separating Fact from Tradition

- This brings us to one of the most common misconceptions about biblical canonization.
- Many people have heard the claim:
- **"The Council of Nicaea decided which books would be in the Bible."**
- That is not historically accurate.
- The Council of Nicaea met in **AD 325**.
- It is one of the most famous councils in Christian history.
- But its primary concern was theological controversy surrounding the identity and nature of Christ, particularly the controversy associated with Arius.
- The council produced what became the foundation of the Nicene Creed.
- **It did not establish the complete biblical canon.**



8. Nicaea: Separating Fact from Tradition

- This is worth emphasizing because popular versions of church history sometimes portray Constantine and the Council of Nicaea as the people who selected the books of the Bible.
- That is not what happened.
- Constantine did not sit down with the bishops and decide which books were inspired.
- Nicaea did not create the New Testament.
- The process was already centuries old.



Main Takeaways from Nicaea

- **Condemned Arianism:** The council rejected the teachings of Arius, a priest from Alexandria who argued that Jesus was a created being and not co-eternal with God the Father.
- **Affirmed Christ's Deity:** The bishops declared that Jesus is fully divine and equal to God.
- **Used the word *Homoousios*:** They added the Greek term *homoousios* to the statement of faith, meaning "of one substance" or "of the same being" with the Father.



Main Takeaways from Nicaea

- **Created a Unified Statement:** The council wrote the original Nicene Creed as a clear summary of core Christian beliefs.
- **Established Orthodoxy:** The creed served as a standard to define orthodox (accepted) Christian faith and to exclude heretical teachings.
- **Standardized Celebration:** The leaders agreed that all Christians should celebrate Easter on the same Sunday, moving away from following the Jewish calendar date for Passover.



Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, visible and invisible. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven



Nicene Creed

And is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living
and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver
of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the
Son],* who with the Father and the Son
is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken
through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic
Church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the
forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection
of the dead, and the life of the world to come.
Amen

9. Athanasius and the Twenty-Seven Books

- One of the most important dates in the history of the New Testament canon is **AD 367**.
- In that year, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote his Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter.
- In that letter, he gave a list of twenty-seven books that corresponds exactly to the New Testament used today by most major Christian traditions.



What is a Festal Letter?

- A festal letter is an annual pastoral message written by the bishop of Alexandria in the early Christian church to announce the correct date of Easter and the beginning of Lent.
- **Purpose:** The First Council of Nicaea gave Alexandria the duty of calculating Easter because the city had a famous school of astronomy.
- **Content:** Along with the date of Easter, bishops used these letters to give spiritual guidance, encourage fasting and charity, and address church news or theological issues



9. Athanasius and the Twenty-Seven Books

- This is an extremely important historical milestone.
- But we should be careful with how we describe it.
- **Athanasius did not invent the twenty-seven books.**
- His list is evidence that the twenty-seven-book collection had reached a significant level of recognition.
- There had been debate concerning several books, especially Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.
- But by the fourth century, the trajectory toward the twenty-seven-book New Testament had become increasingly strong.





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Issues with the NT Books that almost did not make the Canon

- Hebrews
 - *The Issue:* Unknown authorship. Its anonymous nature and distinct style caused hesitation until its high theological value led to eventual acceptance.
- James
 - *The Issue:* Omission and legalism concerns. 2 Peter
 - *The Issue:* Stylistic differences. Its vocabulary and style differ significantly from 1 Peter, leading many early scholars to question whether Peter actually wrote it or if it was pseudepigraphal (written under his name later).



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Issues with the NT Books that almost did not make the Canon

- 2 and 3 John
 - *Too short...* brevity and private nature.**
Because these letters are very short, addressed to individuals ("the elect lady" and Gaius),
- Jude
 - Use of non-canonical sources. Jude explicitly quotes and references apocryphal apocalyptic literature, specifically *1 Enoch* and the *Assumption of Moses*,
- Revelation
 - *The Issue:* Bizarre imagery and some doubted it shared the same authorship as the Gospel of John.



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10. Hippo and Carthage

- Additional confirmation came from regional councils in North Africa.
- The Council of Hippo met in **AD 393**.
- Councils at Carthage met in **AD 397** and again in **AD 419**.
- These councils recognized collections of biblical books corresponding broadly to the canon that became standard in the Latin Catholic tradition.
- Again, we need to use the correct language.
- These councils did not "create" Scripture.
- They formally affirmed a collection that had developed through centuries of Christian use and recognition.
- This illustrates an important principle:
- **Councils were part of the recognition process; they were not the beginning of the process.**

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11. REFORMATION

- The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century brought renewed attention to questions concerning biblical authority
- Martin Luther and other Reformers strongly emphasized Scripture's authority.
- They translated the Bible into vernacular languages so that ordinary Christians could read it.
- Luther's German Bible played an important role in this movement.

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- The Deuterocanonical books were retained in some Protestant editions but generally placed in a separate category rather than being treated as equal in canonical authority.
- The Roman Catholic Church responded to the controversies of the Reformation.
- In **1546**, the Council of Trent formally defined the Catholic biblical canon, including the Deuterocanonical books.
- Trent did not suddenly discover these books.
- They had been used in the Western Christian tradition for centuries.
- Rather, Trent formally defined the Catholic position in the context of the Reformation controversies.

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Examining the Four Gospels: Opening Portrait of Jesus

Matthew:

Genealogy, Birth Narrative; Jesus as Messiah and King

Matt. 1-2

Mark:

No Genealogy, No Birth Narrative; Jesus as Son of God/Servant

Mark 1:1-13

Luke

Genealogy, Birth Narrative; Jesus as Savior

Luke 1-2

John

No Genealogy, No Birth Narrative; Jesus as Word/Son of God

Jn. 1:1-18



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Why Do the Gospels Begin Like They Do?

Matthew- because he wanted the Jewish readers to know

Mark- starts with John the Baptist presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecies and the long-awaited King. Mark opens by quoting the prophets Isaiah and Malachi.

Luke- begins his book with a formal greeting that was common in sophisticated Greek communications. He elevated his work by doing so.

John- John starts his Gospel with "In the beginning" (John 1:1) to deliberately echo the creation account in [Genesis 1:1](#) and establish that Jesus is the eternal God and co-Creator of the universe.



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