A Guide to Interpreting the Gospels
Parallels for Interpretation?

• Epistles are similar in many ways to modern letters
• Gospels are different from many modern writings
  – Not modern history books
  – Not novels
  – Not newspaper articles
  – Not letters or memoranda
Fables?

Do we merely interpret the Gospels by searching for the “moral of the story”?
Keys to Interpretation

• Genres within the Gospel genre
  – Didactic (teaching) material
    • should be interpreted using the same principles applied in the interpretation of epistles
    • seek to discover the meaning intended for the original audience
    • bridge the gap between the first century social context and our context (e.g. John 13:14; Luke 9:23)
  – Parables
    • to be discussed later
  – Narrative
    • key is to interpret the pericope in light of the purpose of the book as a whole
Practical Steps toward Correct Interpretation: Reading Vertically

• Read the entire book without an extended break asking the questions typical of an investigative reporter:

• Seek to understand how individual pericopes relate to the purposes of the Gospel as a whole
  – Testimonies to Jesus (who is Jesus?)
  – Manuals of discipleship (what should a disciple be like?)
Primary Purpose of Gospels

- John: “believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31)
- Mark: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God” (Mark 1:1)
- Matthew: “Son of David, Son of Abraham, Immanuel” (Matthew 1:1-25)
- Luke: Virgin born Son of the Most High who will reign from the throne of David over an eternal kingdom
Secondary Purpose of the Gospels

• “Follow me” (Matt 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21)

• Jewish notions of discipleship

• “Imitators of us and the Lord” (1 Thess 1:6)

• “Christ . . . Left you an example, so that you should follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2:21)
Steps in Vertical Reading

• Examine themes in the Heading, Introduction, Conclusion, and Programmatic Statement (Mark 1:1; Matt 1:1; Mark 1:1-13; John 1:1-18; Matt 1:21-23)

• Examine repeated themes, titles, phrases, and theological emphases (Mark 1:22,27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 11:28,29,33; 13:34)

• Examine editorial comments that interpret the significance of the event (John 2:11; 13:1-3)
• Note the response of the original witnesses to an event

• Look for possible connections between narrative and discourse material in the immediate context (John 9; Mark 7:31-37; 8:18, 22-26)

• Carefully examine all OT quotations and allusions (Matt 2:20; 17:5)

• Consider the significance of events against the background of OT theology and first-century Jewish theology (Mark 6:45-52; Job 9; Mark 1:40-45)
• Look for possible connections between events and didactic material in the immediate context (e.g. John 9:1-35 + 35-41)

• Carefully examine all OT allusions recognizing that brief OT allusions often refer to the broader context of the passage

• Consider the significance of events against the background of OT teaching and first-century Jewish theology (Mark 6:45-52; Job 9:8; compare Mt. 2:20b & Ex. 4:19; Mt. 5:1 & Ex. 19:3)
• Consider the possible “parabolic significance” of events (Mark 11:12-21)

• Consider the arrangement of the pericope in the movement of the narrative
  – Does the arrangement suggest that one narrative is to be interpreted in light of the other?
  – does the narrative bear a thematic connection to what precedes or follows
  – is the narrative “bracketed” by two descriptions of the same event? (Mark 5:21-43; 11:12-21)
Practical Steps toward a Correct Interpretation: *Reading Horizontally*

- Locate parallel accounts in the Gospels
- Examine similarities and differences and mark differences with a highlighter
- Consider whether the unique elements of a particular Gospel highlight theological emphases of that Gospel
- Test the hypothesis regarding theological emphases by determining whether that same emphasis is reflected in other passages in that particular Gospel