Take a Hint!

the Inspiration and Independence of the Gospels

# Intro

Last year, I read a translation of the New Testament edited by Alexander Campbell called, *The Living Oracles*. Now, Campbell did not produce any of the translation of the NT text (that was three others), but he did write a short book’s worth of preface and appendix material. Among the introductory notes, I came across a general *Preface to the Narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*, and one titled, *Hints to Readers*. After finishing them, I jotted down the idea to use them for a lesson someday. Well, the other day in the business meeting we decide to begin an exploration of the harmony of the gospels for our Sunday afternoon chapter studies, now that we have finished the Book of Revelation, and it just so happens I have the last lesson of the month before we begin that series, so, here we are!

✠ Tonight (on the eve of our gospel harmony chapter studies), I’d like to run through the five hints he gives to readers of the gospel narratives. Then, for the second part of my time, we’ll notice how many have gone astray by not heeding these hints and other principles of sound reasoning when studying the Bible. You see, mainstream study of the origin and authorship of the gospels has adopted a sort of Theory of Evolution applied to Scripture, called the Two-Source Theory. This has chipped away at the bedrock of the gospels, that they are the inspired Word of God. Of course, the gospels teach us about Jesus Christ, our salvation, so if their authorship is called into question, then what does that mean for our faith in their message?

We won’t get technical (this is a Wednesday night lesson, after all), but in discussing the state of biblical scholarship, I’m going to have to drop some dates and names and terminology we don’t normally use in the day-to-day. Now, it’s a certain type of deranged criminal who takes interesting topics like the Bible, history, etc. and makes them boring when presenting to an audience, so I hope I don’t end up guilty of that by the end of my time up here tonight. Furthermore, these prevailing ideas about the gospels put forth by divinity schools, seminaries, and bible colleges are quite foreign to the way we would think about things. Halfway through studying for this lesson, I questioned if all this was worth bringing it to your attention. You know, “is this going to be dry and academic?” “Who cares what a bunch of self-annointed intellectuals are saying to each other about the Bible?” ✠ Then I came across the knowledge that A.T. Robertson held to the Two-Source Theory of gospel authorship, and advances it in the background material of his *Harmony of the Gospels* (I promise to better explain the Two-Source Theory later on, but for now just know that it isn’t what we would think of as divine inspiration). Many like his commentary, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, so they would be inclined to pick up his gospel harmony. It’s probably a fine book in how it treats the gospels and how they relate to one another, but this shows you don’t have to go very far out of your way to come into contact with these ideas.

✠ It’s good to be prepared, so my goal tonight is to link the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries of wayward thought regarding the gospels, and ultimately reinforce the faith you already have in the inspiration of the gospels. Natürlich, our motto will prove to be “trust no book but the Bible!” ✠

# Five *Hints to Readers* of the Gospels

**1800**s | the **19th** Century

1. *Not one of these four historians, wrote with any design of improving upon the others, of detailing the things omitted by them, or of supplying any defects, which he observed in their statements.*

✠ Each gospel is independent. None are “defective.” Not one should be made out to be “picking up the slack” of another. However, they work as a team when examined together. These statements are fundamental to New Testament studies, but are denied by modern biblical scholarship. Be wary of any commentary which suggests the idea that one gospel writer sought to make up for the deficiencies of another. This is a hot idea among seminarians, as we will see, and it should be contrasted with the sort of thing I did the time before last I was in the pulpit. (If you remember, I gave a presentation on the *Interlocking Gospels*.) In those cases, the deficiency is proven to be in our understanding of events, when one book happens to “leave out” a detail that another “includes”. (I even hesitate to speak in terms of “leaving out” and “including,” because that type of talk could be misused in opposition to the idea that the authors were inspired.)

✠ Luke wasn’t discounting Matthew, *an apostle*!

**Luke 1:1-4**  
1 Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, ✠ 3 it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

Evangelist >/> Apostle. Some may mistake his words to mean Luke is intending to write a better gospel, but I don’t think that can be assumed, and it’s not right to give him that attitude. ✠

1. *Not one of these historians relates all that he knew of Jesus, nor do they all relate as much as any one of them could have related concerning him.*

The gospel writers, themselves admitted as much. ✠

**John 20:30**  
30 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;

The point of these books is not to give as detailed a biography of the Life of Christ as possible. What is the point? Verse 31 has the reason: ✠

**John 20:31**  
31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Of course, the more famous statement along these lines is ✠

**John 21:25**  
25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.

“This collides squarely with the fundamental assumption of the modernists that the Gospel writers copied from one another because they had only very scanty information available and that they wrote everything they knew.” (Foster) ✠

**John 21:24**  
24 This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true.

No, these four accounts were written by men closely acquainted with the events they contain, who chose what to include with the aid of the Holy Spirit so that others might read, be informed, and ultimately be saved by coming to know Christ. ✠

1. *These historians do not always aim, at giving the precise words of those they quote, nor even of the Saviour himself; but only the full and precise sense of what was uttered or written.*

“Not always the precise words, but only the full and precise sense of what was said.” You might bristle at this as I did, because we tend to think that you can’t have the right sense of what somebody said without knowing their words verbatim. However, Campbell gives two instances to explain what he means. The first is a difference between Matthew 3:17 and Mark 1:11. ✠

**Matthew 3:17**  
17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” ✠

**Mark 1:11**  
11 And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

The second difference is between two places in Acts 10: Verses 4 and 31. First, Acts 10:4 is the narration. ✠

**Acts 10:4**  
4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked. The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.” ✠

**Acts 10:31**  
31 and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.

✠ I think the caution here is against a kind of strict literalism that begins to work against reason. It’s not wrong, for example, to quote the sense of what someone said, the fault only comes when you get the sense wrong. Scholars are now consumed with determining which gospel copied from which and where do they differ based on matching things word-for-word, when the same sense may be shared across the books. Comparative wording doesn’t indicate the primacy of one narrative over the others, but the unity of their message is evidence of their cohesion. ✠

1. *The Saviour often delivered the same maxims, parables, and discourses, during his public labors, and many of his miracles were accompanied with many of the same circumstances, though exhibited in times and places far remote.*

✠ The fourth hint is like unto the third. It is a reminder that similar situations and conversations often arise when engaged in the work Christ did. In fact, it would be hard not to repeat yourself as you went about blessing the faithful Israelites, telling about the Kingdom, healing the sick, and arguing against the scribes and Pharisees. People in his audience would have similar reactions, questions, and accusations though years and miles apart. I won’t read them, but one example of this is when Jesus commissioned the 12 and then at another time the 70 to evangelize. That He gave them similar instructions is no cause for suspicion regarding the text. Finally, our fifth hint from Alexander Campbell, writing in the 1820s: ✠

1. *The order of narration in these histories is similar to the Jewish and other ancient histories, and is not conducted according to the modern plan of historic writings.*

✠ In a way, the gospels are biographies of Jesus Christ, however they are not quite like modern biography. Really, they aren’t aping the style of Greco-Roman historical writings, either. I would suggest we view them as Jewish accounts that have more in common with the Old Testament lives of the prophets than the secular narratives of their day. They tend to resemble books from the Old Testament, because there is a shared purpose in revealing and fulfilling prophecy from God. When reading the gospels, we can’t assume events following each other in close succession in the narrative immediately followed one other in actual occurrence. In the gospels, importance is placed on the events, not the timeline. The ultimate goal is to guide the reader to repent and obey by introducing them to Jesus and convincing them that He is the Son of God.

✠ Those were the five *Hints to Readers* of the gospel narratives (as I said) written by Alexander Campbell in the preface to *The Living Oracles* translation of the New Testament published in 1826.

# R.C. (Rupert Clinton) Foster

**1900**s | the **20th** Century

✠ When he was young, another man named John William McGarvey (you may have heard of him) went to study under Alexander Campbell at Bethany College. Then, when that young man had grown old around the turn of the (20th) century, another young man came to study under him. ✠ His name was Rupert Clinton (R.C.) Foster, and he went on to write a tome called *Studies in the Life of Christ* in 1936. This is now 110 years later we’re talking. ✠ In the first quarter of that textbook(*SitLoC*), he has a chapter on the “Two-Source Theory”, and another on “Form Criticism”. The world of biblical scholarship had not taken these five hints to heart (if they read them, in the first place), and had become hostile to the simple truth that the gospels were written by the men whose names are on them, and more importantly that they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. I’m not sure if this was considered controversial by most people in the 19th century when Alexander Campbell was writing, but it had become out of fashion by the early 20th century. By the 1930s, an idea known as the Two-Source Theory had become the mainstream opinion of theologians at the most prestigious English- and German-speaking universities.

## the Two-Source Theory

✠ The Two-Source Theory has to do with how the four gospels were written. Simply stated, it suggests that the reason the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all share so much in common is because they got all their information from two places: The sermons of the Apostle Peter (Ur-Mark), and phantom document known by the mysterious label “Q” (from the German word for “source,” supposed to be a collection of Christ’s sayings by Matthew). These are the **two sources** that give the **theory** its name—material from Peter’s sermons recorded by Mark, and a collection of Jesus’ words made by Matthew. It is basically the Theory of Evolution applied to the gospels. At bottom, it rejects the idea that these books were inspired by God.

✠ The comparison to Evolution (R.C. Foster even calls it a child of the Theory of Evolution) is a way of emphasizing how the Two-Source Theory uses strictly naturalistic thinking. Everything concerning where the gospels came from must have a natural, physical, earthly origin. The gospel writers could only rely on the faded memories of themselves or eyewitness interview subjects, and that is assuming the gospels were written within a few decades of Christ! Originally, the Two-Source Theory assumed the gospels to be written in the late second century, [which would be like 2020 to 1870… end of Civil War / Reconstruction Era, AC had gone on, RC not yet, but JW McGarvey] The skeptical scholars believed enough time separated the Life of Christ from the gospel record for many erroneous and fantastical traditions to form. And can you guess the type of thing they cast doubt on? Are they ordinary things like “Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in Bethany,” or that Peter was married? No! This theory is invoked only to argue against the miraculous, the amazing, and anything that attests to the divinity of Christ, such as the genealogies or the existence of the wise men of the east who came after Jesus’ birth. Truly, they embodied the saying of Romans 1:22&25. ✠

**Romans 1:22&25**  
Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools . . . for that they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

## Form Criticism

✠ Thirty years after writing about the Two-Source Theory, R.C. Foster again reported on the state of biblical scholarship in 1966. In that time, a development of the Two-Source Theory had arisen called, Form Criticism. This new development had the same basic method and objective as the old theory, and again, the reason I bring all this to your attention is that the names of these theories may change over decades and even a century now to today, but the method and objective is the same. Naturalism, anti-inspiration regarding authorship, no miracles, and a rejection of the divinity of Christ at the end of the day. Quoting R.C. Foster directly, “The Two-source Theory and Form Criticism … make malicious attacks upon the deity of Christ. They charge the Gospel writers with deliberate falsification … The succession of failures does not seem to have daunted the theorists who rush on to new fields of speculation.”

Form Criticism remained an effort to suggest that the connected account of Jesus’ life and ministry had been distorted between its occurrence and recording. That multiple strands of oral tradition, written drafts, and eyewitness testimony coalesced or were compiled to form the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Since this strictly-naturalistic view of gospel authorship was first floated, all discoveries of ancient manuscripts have indicated that the Word of God we have today is the same as what was written and handed down long ago. There have even been discoveries of NT manuscript fragments dating back to the 100s AD (2nd century). Through the ages, the Bible remains the same. The only differences the critics have found among copies of the Scriptures have been where some will say, “the Lord,” and others will say, “Jesus Christ.” ✠ Obviously, this is not devastating to our cause.

# the Search for the “Historical Jesus”

**2000**s | the **21st** Century

Ah, but is Jesus the Lord Christ, or a mere man from Nazareth? That question brings us into the 21st century! ✠ Where R.C. Foster, writing in the early 1900s was two generations removed from Alexander Campbell, we are now two generations after him. What is the state of (formal) biblical scholarship in the early 2020s? If you had to guess, would it be better or the same as it was in the previous two centuries? As ever, speculation about how we got the text of the gospels abounds in divinity schools, theological seminaries, and bible colleges throughout the world. Almost all of it takes a naturalistic point of view as the Two-Source Theory and Form Criticism did, and the notion that the New Testament was written by divinely-inspired men may only be found on the fringe minority of academics. ✠ Even those who believe in inspiration are now saying we need to divide up the gospels by passage, and label each as either POSSIBLE, PROBABLE, or JUDGMENT WITHHELD. Judgment withheld? Can anyone build their faith on that? ✠

**Acts 2:36**  
Let all the house of Israel therefore know that God *probably* made him both Lord and Christ ..? NO! ✠  
Let all the house of Israel therefore know *for certain* that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Unfortunately, says one professor of the New Testament (Dr. David Farnell), “your reputation as a scholar is inversely proportional to your defense of God’s Word.” A new diversion among theologians at present is the search for the “Historical Jesus.” ✠ Do not confuse this as I did with “historical proof that Jesus dwelt among us and we beheld His glory.” Also do not think that scholars who embark on the search for the "Historical Jesus" will find anything like the real Jesus. That is, the biblical Jesus. Especially not the biblical Jesus, because the main conceit of the search for the "Historical Jesus" is to try to find Jesus without using the Bible. Literally, they exclude the New Testament in their search and only use secular sources to reconstruct an image of Christ. Sadly, some will claim we have only the impression or the leftover “footprints” of Jesus in the gospels, not the man. Those who have this thinking are lost, and they can’t but stay lost, because the Son of God will not be found in the Roman and Jewish historical records. Jesus of Nazareth might be in there, but the Son of God is in the gospels, so you have to read them to know Him and to be saved. (Luckily, you *can* have it both ways! Jesus is the Son of God, just as the gospels are history!) It appears that “the Bible is safer in the hands of the people in the pew than it is in the classrooms of critically-trained scholars,” because the people in the pews read II Peter 1:16 and took it to heart: ✠

**II Peter 1:16**  
For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.

Trust the Apostle Peter on this, and you can know Christ, too.

# Conclusion

✠ Our study of the gospels in harmony beginning next month will reveal the actual Jesus, not a flimsy “Historical Jesus” mined from alternative views forwarded to bring an academic fame or sell his books. Viewing these narratives as a whole, and taking them together will better show their simplicity, beauty, and divinity. Contrasting them will tease out the specialty of each gospel in presenting the same good news to differing audiences. In spite of the temptation to assimilate and flatten these four narratives together, examining the four-fold nature of the gospel will help us understand the unique methods each of the four used to reach Jews, Romans, Greeks, and all people for all time.

✠ As we conclude, I have one last quote from R.C. Foster: “A plain choice is demanded between a theory which has as its objective the denial of the fundamental claims of Christianity and which has as its foundation a heap of assumptions, and a faith which stands firm upon the promises and proof which Christ offers.” Upon which foundation will you build your faith? Romans 10:17 says, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” That same Word, just a few verses earlier promised, “if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Finally, we are commanded to “repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” in Acts 2:38. If you need to answer this call or wish to repent of any public sins, we bid you come as we stand and sing…