



A word on the Word

What are the Gospels?

A monthly series on the Bible by Carrie Boren, Missioner for Evangelism

Around A.D. 30, a group of people could not stop sharing the good news that would change the face of history forever. With great energy and enthusiasm, they reported — not simply some good news — but THE good news! It burst onto the scene in Palestine and then spread like wildfire to the far corners of the world. Its proclamation has never stopped, and today, one third of the world's population — some two billion people — dedicate their lives to this good news. Every day, 70,000 – 110,000 new people come to hear and know this gospel.

The good news that shook Palestine was the exuberant announcement that Almighty God had sent the long awaited Messiah to rescue and redeem a messed up world. Hebrew prophets had pointed to a day when the true, eternal King of Israel would come from the line of David (2 Sam. 7:5-16). He would forgive our sins and restore our communion with God (Jer. 31:31-34). Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection confirmed that He was that long awaited redeemer. He was and is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." This is not only good news — it is GREAT news for all of us.

The Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell about this great news! Christians, Jews, agnostics, and atheists have analyzed them and agreed universally that they are not biography or history but a new literary genre. The first Christians preached the Good News, and others wrote down what they heard. From the Gospels we gain insight into how the apostles preached.

Who wrote the Gospels and when?

Most scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel, written in the A.D. 60s. John Mark was a close companion of Peter and Paul. Early Christians tell us he was the one who wrote down Peter's eyewitness accounts. Gentile Christians in Rome composed his audience.

A few years later, Matthew's composed his Gospel for Jews who were becoming Jesus' followers. His book contained many of Jesus' sayings that do not appear in Mark. Matthew frequently used Old Testament scripture to show that Jesus fulfilled its Messianic expectation — that He was the true heir of David's kingdom.

Scholars think Luke wrote his Gospel in the early eighties (although some believe he penned it 20 years earlier). A Gentile, Luke wrote for a non-Jewish audience. He was not one of Jesus' original disciples, but he researched extensively those who were. Luke's Gospel contains details of Jesus' conception and birth that do not occur in the other Gospels. As a historian, Luke

made it clear that he desired to write an "orderly account" of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. His story about Jesus' birth very likely came from Mary, herself, and he based his resurrection account on eyewitness testimony.

John recorded his Gospel in the early eighties. Known for resting his head on Jesus' bosom during the Last Supper, he was Jesus' most intimate friend. John's fresh perspective on Jesus' ministry is quite mystical in some ways, and yet he writes with great detail as an eyewitness of Jesus' words and deeds.

Why did they write the Gospels so late?

1. The Ancient Near East was an oral culture. Early Christians were so busy preaching the good news, they did not immediately write it down. They were part of a movement that was spreading at a fast pace. Oral tradition is foreign to Western society, but it is quite compelling. The culture in Jesus' time trained individuals to remember events in detail. Otherwise, history would have been lost. Incidentally, Paul wrote the first of his epistles as early as A.D. 49 – 50.

2. Ancient people preferred the spoken word to the written word. Before the printing press, book production was laborious and expensive. However, by the A.D. 60s, the generation of eyewitnesses was beginning to die off, and Christians believed they had to write down their stories.

Has anyone tampered with the text?

In short, NO. No ancient document in history has as great a wealth of manuscript tradition as the Gospels. Scholars have scrutinized copies that go back to well within a century of their composition. Compared with classic authors of the period, that is persuasive.

1) We have 24,000 manuscripts of the New Testament. The document from antiquity that comes closest to this record is Homer's *Iliad* with 634 manuscripts.

2) Homer wrote his *Iliad* in 900 B.C. The earliest copy we have is from 500 years later.

3) Caesar penned his *Gallie Wars* sometime between 100 and 44 B.C. We have 10 copies, the earliest of which was discovered 900 years after he wrote it.

4) Plato composed the *Tetralogies* between 427 and 347 B.C. The earliest of the seven copies we have comes from 1,200 years after its composition.

Compare this to the Gospels. The earliest copies are within 25 years of the date they were written, and we have manuscripts from all over the world in many languages.

How do I know they didn't invent the whole thing?

Many people have the mistaken notion that Jesus' disciples were beaten down and depressed after His death and wanted to make up a new religion to carry on His memory. Nothing could be farther from the truth. They saw and touched the risen Christ and were convinced of His divinity. They wrote what they witnessed and then tried to make sense of it.

1) No book in world literature has been scrutinized over as long a period as the Gospels and withstood the test. Today, they are as credible as ever.

2) A remarkable harmony extends throughout the Bible. Forty different authors wrote its text beginning about 1446 B.C. and ending A.D. 95. It covers a period of 1,600 years and all of it portrays almighty God's eternal design to redeem a wrecked and ruined world. Most religious texts have one author and many discrepancies. The Bible bears one chronicle of one God whose plan and nature are consistent from Genesis to Revelation, and Jesus Christ is at the center of it all. All history before Him was in preparation of His coming, and all history afterward spread and established His Kingdom!

3) Paul wrote a decade before the earliest Gospels and referred to their accounts casually and with ease. His purpose was not to prove anything to his readers but to remind them of what they had already heard.

4) Numerous eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry were still alive who could refute the apostles if they were telling untruths about Jesus. We have no record of any such disclaimers. The Gospels would not have gained such universal circulation and credibility if the apostles' accounts were fictitious.

5) If the church had made up the Gospels, it would have left out the controversies and unflattering stories. The Bible does not gloss over people who doubted. For example, at first, Joseph did not believe in the virgin birth.

Why would Peter have admitted he denied Jesus? Why does so much of the New Testament warn about the cost of following Jesus? If early Christians conjured up this whole thing, one would think they would have written about themselves in more glorious terms. If they wanted converts at any cost, wouldn't they have made the Christian life more palatable? Why would they die for teaching what they knew was false? By the end of the first century, 11 out of the 12 apostles had been executed, and the twelfth was in exile on an island.

6) It is hard to imagine that anyone could make up Jesus' parables. They are unique. No one has been able to teach like He did. He spoke in Aramaic, which was Palestine's primary language. Aramaic experts have discovered that when they translate Jesus' teachings from Greek back to Aramaic, they fall into rhyming cadences. Jesus wanted His hearers to remember His teaching.

7) Secular history, such as Josephus' *History of the Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jewish People*, corroborates the Gospel accounts, as do also the works of other historians — Thallus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plinius Secundus.

We can have confidence in the Gospel accounts. Read them, meditate on them, and share them with others this Easter season! We have such good news to share!