

January 2006 Q & A
Why do the gospels contradict each other
and how do we deal with it?

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Worship

Introduction:

I have recently been in an e-mail discussion with a friend of one of our members who questions the reliability of the Bible. It has been an enlightening study. One of his most recent questions has essentially been how do I deal with all the contradictions in the gospels (specifically he asked about contradictions regarding the post-resurrection issues). For instance, **Matthew 28:1** says Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the grave of Jesus. **Mark 16:1** says it was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome. **Luke 24:10** says it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James. **John 20:1** only tells about Mary Magdalene. On the surface it seems the gospels do not agree. Why the difference? What do we do about it? Some strongly assert the gospels contradict one another. Is that true? How do we deal with that?

Discussion:

- I. We must understand what the gospels are.
 - A. Many people mistakenly believe the gospels are the biography of Jesus. That is not the case. John provides the most succinct definition of what the gospels are. "Many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (**John 20:31**).
 - B. The gospels were not written to provide a detailed moment by moment chronicle of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Each author was pursuing this same goal—demonstrate Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God that we might believe and have life. Therefore, we must not expect the gospels or any part of them to be absolute, chronological, detailed accounts of the events of Jesus' life, death, burial or resurrection. Rather, we must see these as thematic presentations, grouping together events and expounding specific details because each author, guided by the Holy Spirit, thought the details and events he included most helped him accomplish his purpose with the particular audience he was striving to reach. Depending on their purpose, theme and audience each author includes different events and details and even places them in different orders. If these books were written to be day by day and moment by moment biographies, the critics might have a point. But that is not so.
 - C. Considering the above, we make a mistake when we believe the most important question we can ask is how these accounts harmonize, trying to develop some kind of chronological biography of Jesus. That is not the purpose of any one of the gospels, nor is it the purpose of the gospels taken together. While answering that question may be beneficial, the more important question in understanding the gospels is not how they coincide, but why each author chose the events, details and perspective he included. The reality is we want some kind of super-gospel with every detail in chronological order so we can know what and how things really happened. The gospels provide us the necessary details in the necessary order so we can know who Jesus really is.
- II. We must further understand the nature of storytelling.
 - A. People often hold the gospels to unreasonable standards, standards different than those that govern any set of stories. Think for a moment about when you tell a story, when you describe your day to someone, when you describe a movie or a book or when you are telling about a series of events in your life. There are three devices used in storytelling that especially come into play in the gospels.
 - B. **Telescoping:** This is covering huge events or lengthy periods of time with summary statements. According to **Acts 1:3**, we know Jesus appeared to the disciples over a 40 day period after His resurrection. Therefore, when we read **Matthew 28**, **Mark 16**, **Luke 24** and **John 20-21** they are summarizing the important parts of 40 days. Many wonder how Jesus can see His disciples in Jerusalem (**Luke 24:33-36**) and Galilee (**Matthew 28:16**) in one day. We have to understand it wasn't just one day. While implementing this device, storytellers, including the writers of the gospels, will often summarize what someone has said. Haven't you ever done that? Have you

ever told a story and just summarized someone's words but still said, "So and so said..." No one believes you are lying, why should we believe the gospels are? The statements of Jesus in some of these stories are not necessarily direct quotes but summaries of what He taught over that entire period. At the same time, Telescoping is a device which often simplifies the story providing the highlights and not every detail. For instance, **Matthew, Mark and Luke** just talk about what happened regarding the women following the resurrection in general and do not get into the details of when Mary Magdalene left the women before they entered the tomb.

- C. **Selection:** In telling any story, a person has to select which events and details he is going to actually include in the story. We should not be surprised that four different authors selected different events and different details. After all, if they were all going to say just the same thing, we would only need one of them. These events and details will be selected based on the author's perspective, the purpose of the story and the audience receiving the story. Matthew was writing as an eye-witness to convince Jews Jesus was their promised Messiah. Mark, who is traditionally considered to be writing on behalf of Peter, is writing to convince the Romans Jesus is God. Luke, who investigated the details by talking to numerous witnesses and is considered to be writing on behalf of Paul, was writing to convince the Greeks that Jesus is the Son of God. John, an apostle, writing as an eye-witness, was writing a more philosophical approach to Jesus' life to combat Gnosticism and convince Christians of all races that Jesus was the Word of God who actually came in the flesh. With their different perspectives, different audiences and distinct purposes, each author selected different events and details to include in their story. For instance, John included the details of Mary Magdalene's first sighting of Jesus—after all, from his perspective Mary was the one who first let him know of the empty tomb and the risen Savior.
- D. **Meanwhile, back at the ranch:** This is a device in story telling that will follow one series of events or one series of thoughts to a chronological or logical end and then back up and tell what else happened at the same time. Have you ever told a story and then got a point where you had to say, "Alright now before I tell you the next part you have to know what was happening over here at the same time." That is the *meanwhile, back at the ranch* principle. **Matthew 28:11** is an example of this.

III. There are no contradictions.

- A. While each gospel includes different details regarding the events of the trial, crucifixion, burial, resurrection and post-resurrection, there are no exclusive contradictions. None of the gospels makes a statement which denies a statement in one of the other gospels. Allow me to illustrate the concept. Last Sunday when I traveled to our Bible classes and worship assemblies, Max and Lee Dawson road with my family and me. Let's pretend for a moment that both Max and I were journaling the day's events and 2000 years later someone came across our memoirs. He saw my journal entry for January 1, 2006 said, "I drove Max and Lee Dawson and my wife and three children to the Franklin church's assembly today." Then he came across Max's journal that said, "I rode with Edwin Crozier to worship today." By the standards of modern Bible critics, those two statements are contradictory. My journal claimed there were seven people riding together, Max's only revealed two. However, does Max's statement deny mine? Does mine deny his? No. These statements are not exclusively contradictory of each other. Rather, they explain what each of us thought was important about the day's events.
- B. Many modern critics try to make hay asking what Jesus' last statement on the cross was. They read **Matthew 27:46-50; Mark 15:34-37; Luke 23:44-46** and **John 19:29-30** and say, "See, these guys can't even agree what Jesus' last words were." Which one of the gospels said, "Here were Jesus' last words"? None of them did. There certainly weren't two accounts saying "Here are Jesus' last words" that contradict each other. In our modern fascination with last words, these critics assume each gospel writer would record what those last words were. But remember, the gospels were not written to provide those kinds of details. They were written to demonstrate that Jesus was the Christ to different audiences. As such, each author included the statements on the cross that they felt best suited their purposes.

IV. Keep in mind when these gospels were written.

- A. While modern liberal critics disagree with this and there is no accounting for their dishonest bias, these gospels were written within the lifetimes of people who witnessed the events de-

scribed within them. When these were first read and readers came across differences they thought might be contradictions, they could actually ask the authors or witnesses of the events. We are not able to do this. The fact that those who could question accepted the books is strong evidence in favor of them.

- B. What this means is even when we can only provide reasonable possibilities and not absolute answers to a dilemma, we can rest assured the people who were able to question the authors were able to get their answers. We must not assume that it took more than a thousand years for someone to come along and say, "Hey, wait a minute, I see some differences here." That is modern arrogance at its highest.
- C. By way of illustration consider the two journals I mentioned a moment ago. If any of you found those two journals from Max and myself about how we made it to the assembly last Sunday and thought there was a contradiction, you could talk to me, call Max or both. You could find out the right solution to the seeming contradiction. On the other hand, a hundred years from now if someone came across that they could make a stab at possibilities. They could think, "One possibility is there were seven people in the car but Max only mentioned two of them." Another might think, "One possibility is that we know they had two assemblies on each Sunday, perhaps these refer to the different assemblies." Another might think, "How do we know these are talking about the same Edwin Crozier and Max Dawson." (although I know you hope there is only one Edwin Crozier in the world). The point is, today's readers could ask the authors and find the exact answer to the question. Future readers could consider plausible possibilities and yet not be able to pinpoint which one is that actual fact. That doesn't make the accounts false. It is just the nature of studying historical documents.

Conclusion:

As we conclude, some may still wonder why God chose this approach. I believe two passages help us understand why. The first is **II Timothy 2:15**: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed..." God expects us to be workmen, not spoon fed children. He wants us to work at knowing Him and understanding His will. The second is **Matthew 13:1-17**. While this passage deals with parables, it demonstrates a principle of teaching which God follows. He does not teach just to explain. He teaches to divide. He wants to divide between those who will see and hear, questioning and learning and those who are satisfied discounting and ignoring. The conclusion of this matter then is not to throw up our hands and quit our faith. The conclusion is that we need to see with our eyes, hear with our ears and be workmen who are unashamed.