



Someone I talked to said the Bible isn't reliable, because even the Gospel writers couldn't agree on the details of Jesus' life. Is that true?

That's a common objection I hear from people who are looking for excuses not to believe the Bible. (And people seem to be constantly looking for those excuses because in the Bible God often tells us things we don't want to hear - like "Repent.")

It's an objection that really doesn't "hold water" so to speak. A little background may be in order before I answer why:

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all wrote what we know as the "gospels." The word "gospel" simply means "good news." They wrote the Good News about Jesus Christ: His life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Thus, the Gospels could be considered as biographies about Jesus.

It is true that they didn't record exactly the same things about the same events. For example in recording Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5000 John tells us that the disciple Philip told Jesus it would take eight months wages to buy food for all the people. Matthew and Luke don't mention Philip or any comment about how much it would cost. Mark simply says that "the disciples" said it would take eight months' wages. Matthew, Mark and Luke also simply record that they only found five loaves of bread and two fish, but John tells us that the disciple Andrew found a small boy who had five barley loaves and two small fish.

In this example the differences among the gospels is simply a case of John being more specific in his details of the situation. The others are relaying just the general facts of the situation. There's no discrepancy there, just different perspectives.

Different perspectives explains much of the differences between the Gospels. For example, lets say that you and three other people witness the same event or hear the same sermon and are asked to tell about what you saw or heard. How many of you are going to give the same word-for-word description of what you saw? Probably none. You would tell about different aspects of the event than the other three (and each of their accounts would contain differences too). You would also quite likely remember different things about the sermon than the others (and vice versa). So it should be no surprise that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John don't give us the exact same information about the events they witnessed or the sermons they heard. In fact, we should expect that they wouldn't.

A further reason for the differences comes from the fact that each of the writers had different audiences. For example, Matthew was writing primarily to people of Jewish background. So he makes a point to highlight many more Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled by Jesus. Mark, on the other hand, wrote primarily to a Gentile audience, so he frequently had to explain Jewish customs and words. Again, it makes perfect sense that you are going to write different things and in different ways to readers that are totally different.

So, instead of the differences in the Gospels being a sign of the unreliability of the Scriptures, the differences are actually indication that the gospels are not made up stories. If Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had set out to convince people of something they knew wasn't true, they would have made sure all their details matched. (One way professional investigators have of telling if people are lying is if their stories match *too* closely.) That's not the case with the gospels, because they weren't making anything up. They didn't have to make sure all their details matched in order to deceive people.

Finally, we have to remember here that we do not just have the words of men. We have the words of men as they were prompted by God. God uses their different personalities, perspectives and audiences to make sure everything He wants revealed gets told.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to <mailto:pastor@livingwordlutheran.net>