

The Gospel Writers

There were eight known New Testament writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Paul, James, and Jude (the writer of Hebrews is unknown). Let us look carefully at these men.

Peter, John, and Matthew were in the original apostolic company; they were with Jesus during his ministry for three and one-half years. They were by his side virtually day by day, hence they wrote as eyewitnesses of the things they saw and heard.

James (not the brother of John; cf. Acts 12:2) was a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13; cf. Galatians 2:9), and a half-brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19; cf. Acts 1:14).

At first he and his brothers did not believe on Christ (John 7:5; cf. Matthew 13:57), but later he happily acknowledged himself as “a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). James’ credibility is extremely high, because something overcame his natural reticence to endorse his brother’s claims. Only the Savior’s resurrection explains that turn-around.

Too, since Jude was a brother of James, and thus also a half-brother of Jesus, he too overcame an initial disbelief and acknowledged Christ as Lord (Jude 1).

Mark was the son of Mary of Jerusalem, and the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). She must have had a close relationship with the apostles, because Peter went immediately to her house when he was released from prison (Acts 12:12ff).

The familiarity of this family with the apostles is confirmed by Peter’s reference to Mark as his “son” (1 Peter 5:13), suggesting a spiritual relationship (cf. 1 Timothy 1:2). Thus, Mark himself would have been a witness of many of Jesus’ deeds. Several ancient writers (e.g., Papias, Irenaeus, and Tertullian) testify that Mark’s Gospel reflects Peter’s influence.

Luke was a Greek whose Gospel narrative was grounded in the eyewitness testimony of those familiar with Christ “from the beginning” (Luke 1:1-4). After studying Luke’s writings carefully, Sir William Ramsay, once a skeptic himself, declared that “Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness”.

Saul of Tarsus (Paul), of course, was a scholar of no meager ability. He was contemporary with Christ and became acquainted with at least some of the apostles (cf. Galatians 1:18). His defenses of Christianity are classic (see Acts 22; 26). Though there is no evidence that Paul saw Christ face-to-face before that encounter on the Jerusalem-to-Damascus road, he had ample opportunity to know the facts regarding Jesus’ miracles, teachings, and influence.

Of course, all of these eight men were inspired of God, but in this brief piece, we have examined their credibility only in the light of recognized historical principles. Their writings pass the test superbly.

- by Wayne Jackson

The Meaning of Obedience

Those who question the values of Old Testament study should consider the fact that no place in the word of God defines obedience with greater precision and clarity than the book of Deuteronomy. Special attention should be focused upon three passages:

- “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you” (Deut. 4:2).
- “Ye shall observe to do therefore as Jehovah your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.” (Deut. 5:32).
- “What thing soever I command you, that shall ye observe to do: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it” (Deut. 12:32).

What is suggested is that obedience requires doing exactly what God commands without modification. Israel was warned against adding to or diminishing from God’s commandment, and in the first of the three verses the purpose of such strict adherence to the divine command is assigned — “that (i.e., in order that) ye may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God.” This is simply saying that the only way to keep the commandments of God is to do exactly as God says, without addition or subtraction.

When one adds to or diminishes from the divine commandment, and then fulfills the modified version, he has not kept the commandment of God at all; he has done as he pleases. That is a lesson worth remembering. The commandments of God that are in force today are not the same commandments which God gave in an earlier age. But the meaning of obedience does not change, no matter what commandments God gives.

- by **L.A. Mott, Jr.**

How to Evaluate a Congregation

How do you evaluate a congregation? We all do it. We decide that a particular church is "good", another is "so-so", and yet another is not what we like at all. While we understand that such judgments are natural and necessary, our concern is about the basis upon which we make these choices. We have heard Christians who make comments like:

- a. "That church is not friendly."
- b. "The preacher preaches too long."
- c. "They keep the building too hot/cold."

Or, on the positive side:

1. "They have activities for young folks"
2. "They have a lot of get-togethers."
3. "We like to hear that song leader."

Would you like to know the true basis for determining a "good" church? Let Jesus show you. Read the letters to the seven church of Asia (Revelation 2 & 3). Two of those seven churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia) receive high praise and no rebuke. Both of those churches were commended for their dedicated stand for the truth, even in the face of persecution. There's no hint of the superficial social activity that so many people are looking for. These were simply congregations that took a strong stand for the truth and demonstrated a die-hard conviction for what was right.

Would you have been happy as a member at Smyrna or Philadelphia? We can't guarantee that the folks there were overtly "friendly" or that there were lots of "get-togethers" or that the singing was topnotch. They were just dedicated Christians doing their spiritual work. Would this be enough for you? It was for Jesus!

- by **Greg Gwin**