Irvington Presbyterian Church

PO Box 1336 4181 Irvington Avenue, Fremont, CA 94538 510-657-3133

[www.irvingtonpres.org](http://www.irvingtonpres.org)

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***Can We Trust the Gospels?***

Dr. Larry Thorson  
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**Luke 1:1-4**

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

***Today’s New International Version***

Can we trust the Gospels even though a lot of years passed before they were actually written? This is an especially important topic because the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the first four books of the New Testament, reveal some of the most important information we have about Jesus Christ. If they aren’t trustworthy then what do we really know about Jesus?

I wonder how many of you keep a diary. I do and every morning or evening I write down everything in my laptop I did in the last twenty four hours. I’ve discovered that I have very few problems with my memory over a twenty four hour period. Where I have a problem is when I miss one, two or more days updating my diary. Then my memory becomes fuzzy about some of the things I did. That’s why I rarely miss a day writing in it. So now imagine the gospel writers who didn’t have laptops. They also didn’t have a lot of paper or easy access to pens for writing down their account of what happened with Jesus.

Have you ever played the game “telephone”? The object of the game is to pass a message around a room one by one and see how close to the original message the last person gets. For example you’re in a group of a dozen or so people and you tell the first person next to you that your dream car is a red 65 Mustang convertible and he tells the person next to him what he thought he heard. By the time the message gets to the last person the message is that you had a dream where 65 tomatoes were used to make Tang.

In the 1980’s and 90’s there was a group of scholars who embarked on a journey to try to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels. This group was called the Jesus Seminar and their research has been somewhat popular among those considered theologically progressive students of the Bible.

They concluded that the Jesus of history was different than the Jesus of the Gospels. For them the real Jesus of history was a traveling Jewish sage. He was also a faith healer who preached a message of liberation from injustice using startling parables. They say Jesus depicted God as a loving father who socialized with outsiders and criticized insiders. They also say he was a mortal man born of two human parents, who didn’t perform nature miracles, didn’t die as a substitute for sinners and didn’t rise bodily from the dead. And you know those sightings of a risen Jesus we read in the Gospels, they were nothing more than the visionary experiences of some of his disciples rather than actual physical encounters.

I have a great amount of respect for the Jesus Seminar authors, especially the two most well known, John Crossan and Marcus Borg. I do not consider myself smarter than they are or more studied but at this point in my life I don’t come to the same conclusion about who Jesus was and is. But my conclusion is not even important for you today. My intention today is not to prove anyone right or wrong. **My intention is to help you find some reliability in the Gospels that will help you in further becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.**

Our Scripture today is Luke 1:1-4: *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

The writer of this Gospel admits to not being the first one to write an account of Jesus. He said “many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.” If you’ve decided to read through the New Testament this year, you’ll notice that the Gospels, the first four books, have a lot of similarities. In fact it may even feel like you’re running in place reading the same story over and over. That often seems to bog down readers of the Bible who try to read the book like a novel.

Unfortunately for us but obviously in the plan of God, the disciples of Jesus didn’t sit down in a quiet room and all write out their version of what they experienced as soon as Jesus was resurrected. That would have been neat and clean but very 21st century, not first century.

Instead, historians believe the author of the Gospel of Mark was the first of the apostles to pen his account. It’s also the shortest of the Gospels. The authors of Matthew and Luke appear to have copied and embellished Mark’s version as they saw it. Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because they’re very similar. If you read it, the Gospel of John is obviously very different. It’s the same basic story, but placing emphases in different places.

Here’s the issue in a nutshell; were the Gospels that were named after Matthew, Mark, Luke and John actually written by these men as has been traditionally held or were there other, later authors who weren’t actually with Jesus and who may have embellished who he was? If they were written later by others than Jesus’ disciples, the Jesus they write about may have been more a figment of their desires than the historical Jesus himself. In other words were the Gospels written by the men whose names are on them or are they forgeries?

Within a hundred years of Christ’s death, forgery was unfortunately flourishing in the church. A lot of times people who weren’t well known would attempt to bolster their ideas and beliefs by attaching another person’s name to their writing.

A few years back Pauline Phillips died. You probably don’t recognize the name but I can’t imagine there are many Americans aged fifty and over who haven’t heard of this woman. Pauline Esther Phillips was an advice columnist and radio show host who went by the name Abigail Van Buren when she began writing the "[Dear Abby](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dear_Abby)" column in 1956.

During her decades writing the column, it became the most widely-syndicated newspaper column in the world, syndicated in hundreds of newspapers around the world with tens of millions of readers. Her sister was the second Ann Landers who also wrote a similar syndicated column. Pauline Phillips had Alzheimer’s in her later years and hadn’t written a column for years. Yet Dear Abby “Abigail Van Buren” lives on today as her daughter has taken over the writing responsibilities.

Pauline and her sister used pseudonyms when they wrote which is different than forgeries. They never claimed to be Abigail Van Buren and Ann Landers. Forgeries are when we claim to write as someone we are not. That’s not so easy to do now days with the internet. Word and phrase searches will quickly reveal the similarities of style.

Probably the most famous case of forgery in the twentieth century took place in 1983 with the "discovery" of the Hitler diaries. The diaries supposedly contained passages written by German dictator [Adolf Hitler](http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Adolf+Hitler) between 1932 and 1945. Gerd Heidemann, a German reporter for *Stern* magazine, had claimed the writings as genuine and sold them as such. He had gotten them from Konrad Kujau, a Stuttgart dealer in military memorabilia and documents. The magazines *Newsweek* and *Paris Match*, along with other media, paid more than $5 million for the documents. Major news sources around the world quickly published major stories detailing the historical information that the diaries allegedly contained.

Investigative experts from around the world later conducted forensic examinations on the diaries and found the documents to be fake. Kujau then admitted forging the diaries, and news sources immediately retracted their coverage. Both Kujau and Heidemann were sentenced to four and a half years in a German prison—but not before Kujau embarrassed the media even further by forging Hitler autographs for spectators at his circuslike trial.

This practice was fairly common by the second century after Christ. Among the earliest known forgeries is the Gospel of Thomas which never made it into the Bible. The unknown author of this work claimed it was written by Thomas, one of Jesus’ original disciples. It began with these words: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded.” The general consensus of both conservative and progressive scholarship is that Thomas couldn’t have written this work. It probably doesn’t date before A.D. 100, many years after Thomas died.

But this isn’t the only work which claimed the name of an apostle. We actually have dozens that sprang to life over the next few hundred years: *The Gospel of Peter*, *The Acts of John*, *The Acts of* *Paul*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Gospel of Judas*, and *The Infancy Gospel of James* are just a few that we could name. We even have a *Gospel of Mary*. Why? Well, who would be more credible than the mother of Christ?

The common characteristic of all of these works that didn’t make it into the Bible is that they attempted to solidify their testimony by tagging it with the name of a credible eyewitness, an apostle of Jesus. After all, if someone in the third century after Christ wanted to teach some new idea about what Jesus did or said, it wouldn’t sell in the church unless he could show it was at least dictated by an original eyewitness apostle of Jesus. But if they were to say that this was a “lost” or “secret” teaching that originated with one of the eyewitnesses, then so long as they could pull off the deception, their ideas might have a chance.

Tradition, going back to the earliest days of the church, holds that all four Gospels were written either by eyewitnesses (Matthew and John) or by writers who received their information from eyewitnesses (Luke and Mark). But here’s an interesting tidbit. These Gospels never claim to be written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. They’re nameless. Go ahead. Check it for yourself.

These authors had every reason to include their names, since their names would have provided immediate value . . . but they didn’t. They left a lot of clues as to who they were. When Tom Clancey, one of the best known military thriller writers writes, he signs his name to everything because his name has established value and credibility. But the Gospel writers, at the very least, demonstrated that their story didn’t need the credibility of an apostle’s name.

Luke and Mark weren’t even apostles of Jesus. Luke was a convert and companion of Paul who was an apostle of Jesus. If his book needed extra credibility calling it the Gospel of Paul would have done it. Mark, as early traditions claim, was a sort of biographer for the Apostle Peter but no one in the subsequent early years attempted to call the Gospel of Mark, “The Gospel According to Peter”.

While the early church is not without its imperfections, this is one place where it shows great integrity. If the early church fabricated the Christ story found in the Four Gospels, why use people such as Mark and Luke to do so? It would have been easy enough to upgrade the value of the testimony to Peter and Paul.

Dan Wallace, and Jim Sawyer in their book, [*Reinventing Jesus*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/082542982X/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=reclaimingthe-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=082542982X) write concerning the Gospel of Mark: *The treatment of the Gospel of Mark in the ancient church ought to serve as a bold reminder that the early Christians took seriously the question of authorship. Especially when a particular book was anonymous, it allowed any influential person to fill in the blank with his favorite apostle. But this was not done with the Gospel of Mark. Surely the impulse to claim that one of the Gospels was written by Peter was especially strong. That the church refrained from this, claiming only that Mark got his Gospel from Peter, shows remarkable restraint. In fact, the claim has all the earmarks of authenticity.* (p. 139)

That the Gospel writers did not claim their own names in their writings is beyond extraordinary to me. In an incredibly unforeseen and ironic way, their act of humility (leaving out their names) gives us even more cause today to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, saying, “It is *really* true.” Who wrote the Gospels? Those who were confident enough in their testimony to leave their names out.

Each of the Gospel writers had a purpose for writing. As we saw earlier, Dr. Luke was writing a comprehensive account of what he observed about what Jesus did. Matthew wrote to prove that Jesus was the promised Jewish messiah. Mark wrote to convey that Jesus is the good news from God of our salvation. John wrote the purpose of his Gospel at the end in John 20:30-31 *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

More than anything in the world my desire is for us is to have life in Jesus’ name. I want him to be a real person who directs your day to day life. If you have come to take the supernatural nature of Jesus as a concoction of plagiarizing second and third century authors I challenge you to read some alternative materials. The following are some recent books I recommend:

*The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* – Craig Blomberg

*Can We Trust the Gospels?* – Mark Roberts

*The Jesus Legend* – Paul Eddy and Greg Boyd

If you would like to find out more about the Jesus Seminar and how they interpret Jesus I recommend *The Gospel of Jesus According to the Jesus Seminar* by Robert Walter Funk. All of these books are in print and available to purchase.

Someone may say to you that Jesus was a fine, upstanding, moral teacher but he wasn’t God. I want you to respect their opinion that could be based on what they’ve read and studied. The Gospels do say Jesus was a fine, upstanding, moral teacher, but the Gospels say he was more. Someone may say to you that Jesus dying on a cross was the greatest example of love ever shown but not the forgiveness of your sins. Don’t be outraged. They have a right to their opinion. The Gospels do say Jesus willingly dying on the cross as an innocent man was the greatest example of love ever shown, but it was more.

I believe the Gospel writers were not forgers but conveyed what they saw and experienced. The story of the gospel is that we’re sinners separated from God but Jesus died on the cross so there would be no barrier between us and God. I trust Christ to forgive my sins against God. But if that belief of mine doesn’t translate into a changed life for me because of a daily relationship with the supernatural Jesus then the Gospels might as well be a forgery.

Today as a result of the National Football League I will change my schedule and go quickly home to watch the playoff game after this service because I believe the game will be fun to watch. If our belief doesn’t produce a closer daily relationship with God that includes reading his Word, praying, and talking to others about him then I believe we’re a forgery regardless of what we think of the Gospels. God is calling us and giving us the opportunity to have a deep and full relationship with Jesus Christ.

The daily question for you this week is: in what ways have I shaped my decisions because of my relationship with God today?

**NEXT WEEK**

Next week, God willing, we will address the questions of what is a New Testament definition of a miracle and do they still happen today. Miracles were a bit part of Jesus’ ministry and they were very specific. Are they happening today, why or why not? Stay tuned.

**TO LEARN MORE**

**Join a Small Group – call the church office for times and location 510/657-3133**

**To learn and encourage one another**

**IF YOU’D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO**

**GET STARTED IN FAITH**

**1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s ideal**

**Romans 3:23-24**

**2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death**

**Romans 6:23**

**3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us**

**Romans 8:5**

**4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to become the master of our life**

**Romans 10:13**

**Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below…**

*“Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me.”*