

## The Gospels are Historical

Christians have always maintained that the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) provide accurate historical accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. The early historians all agreed that the Apostle Matthew wrote first and John last. Both had lived with Jesus. Mark and Luke were close assistants of the Apostles. It was obvious that some copying had taken place between Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Bible scholars asked themselves why there were grammatical errors in Mark's Gospel? Why does his Gospel end at chapter 16, verse 8? Why does it then continue in a different style? Did someone add these extra verses? Why did some historical authors list Luke before Mark, while others listed Mark before Luke?

Used as a basis for prayer, these questions do not matter but, when an enquirer is looking to see if Christianity is true, these questions may cause problems. Critics of Christianity say that if Mark copied verses from Matthew he would not have changed good grammatical Greek into Greek containing errors.

So these critics claim Mark must have written prior to Matthew and, therefore, all the ancient historians are unreliable. Critics claim the unanswered questions throw doubt on the Gospels. They claim the Gospels were written by people who didn't live at the time of Jesus.

I was interested in these questions before I met the renowned Scripture scholar Fr. Bernard Orchard osb. He claimed to have

found the answer to the questions. He held that Matthew wrote for the Jews and then Luke wrote for the Gentiles. Luke, not having lived with Jesus, asked the Apostle Peter to show his approval of his Gospel.

Peter did so by giving a talk in which he quoted alternatively from Matthew and Luke. Peter's secretary, Mark, recorded the talk in Greek shorthand. Peter, a Jewish fisherman, didn't know and speak Greek well, so Mark's shorthand record included Peter's errors of pronunciation and grammar. This explains how Mark's Gospel came to include 'poor' Greek.



Orchard's theory is supported by the ancient historians. When Peter was killed, Mark left Rome. Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons tells us:

**“Mark went to Egypt to preach the Gospel which he had written down”.**

He became bishop of Alexandria. Years later, Clement of Alexandria became head of the Alexandrian Catechetical School.

So he was then able to refer to the diocesan archives when he wrote his books.

Most of Clement's books have perished. But when bishop Eusebius of Caesaria wrote: *The History of the Church*, he was able to copy detailed information from Clement's works.

This included the details of a special crowded meeting. The audience at the meeting were not satisfied with hearing Peter's talk once only. So they persuaded Mark to leave them a written version. **“And so became the cause of the Scripture called the Gospel according to Mark”.**

Later, **“Peter was pleased by the zeal of the audience, so ratified the scripture for study in the churches. The bishop of Hierapolis named Papias confirms him”.** [Papias, a child when Peter was martyred, knew the early Christians]. Clement also said that the earliest priests reported that: **“those Gospels were first written which include the genealogies”.** [I.e. Those by Matthew and Luke].

So Clement's historical account agrees with Orchard's theory. We can see that Mark published quickly. The author of a later Preface tells us that Luke didn't published until he was back in Achaia. So Luke **wrote** prior to Mark, but **published** after him.

This was the reason for variations in the listings. Jerome, in his *Vulgate*, placed them in the Matthew-Mark-Luke-John order. Yet in his: *On Illustrious Men* treats Luke before Mark.

Augustine, in his first book gives the order in which he received the gospels (Luke's after Mark's). But in his forth book, he writes: **“Mark ...appears rather as one who goes with Mathew ... or, ... more probably goes in step with both. ... he agrees with Matthew in many things, yet in some things he agrees with Luke”**. So Augustine judged Mark as writing after the other two. Today many churches in the East use the Matthew-Luke-Mark order in their liturgies.

Peter's talk stimulated questions and his answers were recorded in Mark's chapter 16: 9 onwards. Clement reports that two editions of Mark's Gospel were published. Archaeologists confirm this. They say the editions can be distinguished by one edition omitting from 16: 9 onwards. Peter would have spoken in a different style when answering questions, so another 'problem' is solved. The answers can be linked to the pre-16:9 wording.

**Fr. Orchard** died before he could fully promote his ideas. So I collected them and, with extra supporting evidence, they can be read on the website

[www.churchinhistory.org](http://www.churchinhistory.org)  
Section 3, **The Clementine Gospel Tradition**

**The Church, in Dei Verbum,**  
sections 7, 18 and 19 states:

“ ... Christ the Lord ... commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth ... This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, ... handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, ... The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who ... committed the message of salvation to writing.

... the Gospels are the principal witness for the life and teaching of our saviour. The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in fulfilment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, ... handed on to us in writing ... the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.(1)

Holy Mother Church ... continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, really did and taught ...”

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# History of the Gospels

