

The Disciples Dilemma

Every Christian knows Jesus had twelve disciples in his inner circle, and some Christians can name them from memory. Most would have to look it up, but that would be easy enough. They'd turn to the New Testament (or more likely, Wikipedia). But if they took a close look at the gospels, they'd find that even something this basic and simple isn't. The infallible Word of God manages to even screw that up.

Let's start with Mark, since it is widely accepted as the first gospel written. In 3:13-19 he lists the 12 apostles for us. The list includes Simon (called Peter), and his brother Andrew (sons of John); James and John (brothers, sons of Zebedee; Jesus nicknamed them "sons of thunder"); Philip (from Bethsaida); Thomas (aka "the twin" or "Didymus"); and Judas Iscariot. Those disciples are specifically named in all four gospels, so they are the most reliable.

Seven down, five to go. These disciples are specifically mentioned in all three synoptic gospels: James (son of Alphaeus); Bartholomew; Matthew (a tax collector); and Simon (the Cananaean; aka "the zealot"). Although they aren't specifically mentioned in John, that does not indicate a conflict, because John doesn't give us a consolidated list like we find in the synoptics.

So, that's eleven down, one to go. But now it gets a bit more complicated. We find something strange going on in the synoptics. Both Mark and Luke tell us about another disciple named Levi. (See Mark 2:13-17, Luke 5:27-32). We find the same story in Matthew (9:9-13), but in his version the tax collector's name is Matthew, not Levi. Clearly, all three gospels are talking about the same person, but there is a discrepancy in the name.

Which version is correct? Matthew. How do we know? Because Mark and Luke include Matthew in their consolidated list of the twelve, but they don't include Levi. It appears that Mark and Luke forgot that when they included Matthew in their consolidated list, they had called him Levi

just a few verses before that. Is it possible that they are the same person? I think that's pretty certain, given the story of the feast found in all three gospels. Is it possible that this tax collector went by both names? It's possible, I suppose, but not likely. It might be plausible that Matthew the gospel author knew him as Matthew the tax collector, while Mark and Luke knew him as Levi the tax collector. But it is extremely unlikely that those two authors would call him one name and then call him by another name just a few verses later. This is clearly a mistake. Luke, copying Mark, simply adopted the same mistake Mark had made. The author of Matthew was alert enough to notice the error and fix it.

For Mark and Matthew the 12th disciple is Thaddeus. But for Luke it is Judas (son of James). Are they the same person known by different names? Possible, of course, but very unlikely. Given the level of detail about the other disciples to nail down their identity, it is not plausible that this is anything other than another mistake. Why would there be no explanation of different names for this disciple when we get such colorful information about others, such as James and John being nicknamed by Jesus as "sons of thunder"?

By the way, I can't help wondering what prompted that interesting nickname. Several possible theories come to mind. One is that these were big, burly men with loud booming voices and powerful personalities. Or maybe they had a reputation for loud and powerful flatulence. Maybe that's what caused the boat to be tossed about on the Sea of Galilee. Maybe that's why Jesus decided to walk across rather than ride with those guys. Just a hunch.

Anyway, back at the disciples. For Matthew, that completes the list of 12. Matthew is the only reliable source for the names of the disciples, because Mark and Luke actually provide 13 names, not 12. That's because they both include both Levi and Matthew, who are clearly the same person, the tax collector. Also, Mark names Thaddeus (like Matthew), while Luke names Judas (son of James). And, as mentioned earlier, John doesn't even try to list the 12, although he throws a few names out there, including a couple of mysterious characters not mentioned in the synoptics.

There we hear about a disciple named Nathanael (of Cana in Galilee). John also refers to “the disciple whom Jesus loved”, or something similar, six times. It seems that everybody has a different idea about who that refers to. It is either an additional disciple, or it is one of the following: Levi / Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Bartholomew, Thaddeus, Simon (the Cananaean, the zealot), or Judas (son of James). I’m not aware of any reason why any of them would have an especially close bond with Jesus. At any rate, that phrase suggests that Jesus didn’t love the other disciples. Strange.

It isn’t Simon Peter, because John calls him Simon Peter. Same scenario for Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Thomas. We can also be sure it didn’t refer to Judas Iscariot. I don’t think it refers to any of the disciples we are aware of.

That would mean there were 16 original apostle names, not 12 (or 15, given that Matthew and Levi are really the same person).

Here it is, gospel by gospel:

Mark

Simon (called Peter, son of John), Andrew (brother of Simon, son of John), James (brother of John, son of Zebedee), John (brother of James, son of Zebedee), Levi (tax collector, son of Alphaeus), James (son of Alphaeus), Philip (from Bethsaida), Bartholomew, Matthew (tax collector), Thomas (aka the twin, aka Didymus), Thaddeus, Judas Iscariot, Simon (the Canaanaean, aka the Zealot). (13)

Luke

Simon (called Peter, son of John), Andrew (brother of Simon, son of John), James (brother of John, son of Zebedee), John (brother of James, son of Zebedee), Levi (tax collector, son of Alphaeus), James (son of Alphaeus), Philip (from Bethsaida), Bartholomew, Matthew (tax collector), Thomas (aka the twin, aka Didymus), Judas Iscariot, Simon (the Canaanaean, aka the Zealot), Judas (son of James). (13)

Matthew

Simon (called Peter, son of John), Andrew (brother of Simon, son of John), James (brother of John, son of Zebedee), John (brother of James, son of Zebedee), James (son of Alphaeus), Philip (from Bethsaida), Bartholomew, Matthew (tax collector), Thomas (aka the twin, aka Didymus), Thaddeus, Judas Iscariot, Simon (the Canaanaean, aka the Zealot). (12)

John

Simon (called Peter, son of John), Andrew (brother of Simon, son of John), James (brother of John, son of Zebedee), John (brother of James, son of Zebedee), Philip (from Bethsaida), Thomas (aka the twin, aka Didymus), Judas Iscariot, Nathanael (of Cana in Galilee), the disciple whom Jesus loved.