

Why is the order of Jesus' calling His disciples different in some of the gospels?

Each of the four gospels includes the calling of Jesus' first disciples; the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) also provide lists of the Twelve, whereas John simply mentions them as a group (Matthew 4:18-22; 10:2-4; Mark 1:16-20; 3:16-19; Luke 5:4-11; 6:13-16; John 1:35-51). The order in which the disciples were called and the order in which their names are given in the lists vary by account.

In Matthew 4:18-22, the first disciples to be called are listed like this:

Simon Peter and Andrew

James and John

Mark 1:16-20, lists the first disciples in the same order:

Simon and Andrew

James and John

Luke 5:4-11 lists the first disciples as

Simon Peter

James and John

John 1:35-51 relates Jesus' early encounters with these men:

Andrew and an unnamed man—almost certainly John, who never names himself in his own gospel

Simon Peter

Philip

Nathanael (also called Bartholomew)

The first six disciples, then, were Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Bartholomew. The differences between John's account and the Synoptics' account are easily explained. John relates the first, introductory meeting of Jesus with Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. The Synoptics describe the actual calling of these men to follow Jesus. When Jesus told Peter in the fishing boat to "follow Me," and Peter immediately left his nets and obeyed, Peter was not following a total stranger. He had met Jesus previously and had spent time with Him. The same is true for Andrew, James, and John.

Matthew (also called Levi) was called separately, sometime after the first six (Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32).

The Bible does not describe the calling of the other five disciples. Jesus had many people following Him early on in His ministry. Luke 6:12-16 tells us that, after a night of solitary prayer, Jesus officially named His twelve disciples, whom He also called apostles:

Simon Peter

Andrew

James

John

Philip

Bartholomew (Nathanael)

Matthew

Thomas

James son of Alphaeus

Simon who was called the Zealot

Judas son of James (elsewhere called Thaddaeus)

Judas Iscariot

The order in which the apostles were called is not the primary focus in the accounts of their calling. Rather, the emphasis is on the fact that they were called at all. None of them were worthy of Jesus' calling. Few, if any, were of noble background, and none of them had religious clout. At least four of the disciples were fishermen. Simon was a Zealot, part of a political group that sought to overthrow the Roman government. Matthew worked for the Roman government as a tax collector and would have been viewed essentially as a traitor to the Israelites. Judas Iscariot eventually betrayed Jesus.

Despite the diversity of backgrounds and education levels among these men, they had an important calling as the original twelve disciples of Jesus. Theirs was an honorable work. They became eyewitnesses of Jesus' works on earth as well as His resurrection. It was these men (excluding Judas Iscariot) who laid the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). It was through their Spirit-empowered witness that the church began (Acts 2). Their work helped provide the New Testament writings we have today. The twelve foundations of the wall of the future New Jerusalem will have engraved on them the names of the twelve apostles (Revelation 21:14).