

An Announcement to Theophilus

Luke 1:1-4

Advent 2016 #1

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HERE we go again. Every year around this time all the tv stations and all the websites trot out their old and worn out scholars to try and tell us how inaccurate the New Testament is and therefore that we can know next to nothing about a so-called man “Jesus.”¹ Add this to the incessant ads for Black Friday and Cyber Monday, which began even before their big days this year, and you have a recipe for a self-centered, narcissistic, unsatisfied, and vacuous culture that sucks the life right out of people’s souls.

This is why we utilize the ancient Christian season of Advent to focus our hearts and minds on what is true, lasting, and satisfying—the earth-altering event of the Son of God himself entering our world as a human being to save sinners like us. Amen? I typically lead us through a minor prophet but this year I thought it would be better to go straight to the source and listen to the Gospels. So that’s what we’ll do. This morning I want us to look at Luke 1:1-4 and *an announcement to Theophilus*. Tonight we’ll look at Luke 1:5-23 and the announcement to Zechariah. And so on.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/18/did-historical-jesus-exist-the-traditional-evidence-doesnt-hold-up/?utm_term=.1bc53dafabb6

Christianity is a Factual Religion (vv. 1–2)

As Luke writes to Theophilus, who is most likely a Roman official, he opens with this wonderful prologue to his Gospel. And the first thing I want you to see here is that *Christianity is a factual religion*. J.C. Ryle said, “Christianity is a religion built upon facts.”² And we see that here in verses 1–2.

Inasmuch as (v. 1). The word Luke uses speaks of well-known facts that are the basis for action. What are the well-known facts? He says **many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us** (v. 1). The well-known facts are not that others have written accounts of Jesus. When Luke speaks of **a narrative of the things** (*pragma*) he doesn’t say a narrative of the words (*rhema*) because he wants to emphasize that what he is writing is not merely his own words but the deeds of Jesus himself. That’s why he speaks of **the things...accomplished among us**. The ancient promises have now been performed by Jesus! And what Luke records as being fulfilled from the Old Testament prophecies **those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us**. So there’s Old Testaments prophets, New Testament apostles who lived with Jesus, heard

² Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke 1–10* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 2:1:2.

Jesus, and were sent out to preach by Jesus (Acts 1), and then there was Luke and the second generation of Christians...and now there's us.

Christianity is a factual religion. But our society isn't into facts. We feel, we emote regardless of what is true. We've seen that now with the rise of so-called "fake news" stories during this past election. If you're not online, God bless you and consider yourselves doubly blessed! A fake news story is what you see all over Facebook and Twitter with some catchy headline: "Obama to move to Canada if Trump wins," and there's an image of the President in front of the official seal of the U.S. speaking, then the story itself cuts and pastes from other stories about people who said they'd leave the country, and if they support Obama then that must mean... The whole point is to generate traffic, which generates ad revenue. And it gets people riled up! The Gospel of Luke's prologue is no fake news headline!

Christianity is a Faithful Recounting (v. 1–3)

Let's take a look again at verses 1–2 and add in verse 3 to see a second point here: *Christianity is a faithful recounting*. Children, I have a game for you to play sometime. It used to be called "telephone" but you can call it "smartphone." Get a few brothers, sisters, and friends together, make up a story, then whisper it to one person, then they whisper it to another, and

another, until finally you ask the past person what the story is. I guarantee you that the story has changed! Why? Because we're human. Luke was too and so were all those who saw and heard Jesus. The difference is the Holy Spirit, who guided Luke along to record faithfully who Jesus is, what he said, and what he did.

Notice how *thorough* Luke was in his investigation and research. He says he went back to those who knew Jesus from the beginning of his life and ministry: **just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us** (v. 2). That was so important that when the twelfth apostle Judas committed suicide because he betrayed the Lord, the other eleven needed a replacement to fill out their number. In Acts 1 we read Peter saying that the replacement must be from among “the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from among us” (Acts 1:21–22). You couldn't be an apostle unless you were there from the beginning of his ministry.

Notice how *accurate* Luke was in his investigation and research. He says **it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely, for some time past** (v. 3). The verb he uses here for “follow” is a verb that it is

used metaphorically of following tracks. Our Lord's life and ministry left metaphorical tracks on this earth and Luke followed them wherever they led. He interviewed eyewitnesses and went to the places so that he could record for a new generation the mighty deeds of Jesus.

Notice how *orderly* Luke was in his investigation and research. He addresses **Theophilus** by saying he desired **to write an orderly account for you** (v. 3). What does that mean? It means he was not merely taking notes like you do for sermons or as you may have done in school—you scribble down what seems important to you. Luke was not recording a collection of sayings and events but was putting together an arranged account of who Jesus is. This is one of the differences between the Gospels and the *Qu'ran*. The *Qu'ran's* chapters are accounts of individual sayings and events that are unrelated and oftentimes contradictory. We might also say that while the *Qu'ran* are the private revelations one man claimed to have from God, which we cannot verify, Luke shows us how the Christian faith is public, and therefore subject to falsification. Have you ever wondered why scholars attack Christianity's factual foundation so often but you hear nothing of Islam's factuality? This is why. Christianity as illustrated here in Luke's prologue is a faithful recounting.

Application: What Does this Have to Do With Me? (v. 4)

“Okay, so there are all these facts that were faithfully recounted. But *what does this have to do with me?*” One ancient writer explained the significance of Luke’s Gospel by pointing out that Luke wrote to **Theophilus**, which means either one who loves God or one who is loved by God. Then this ancient author said this: “Whoever then loves God, or desires to be loved by Him, let him think this Gospel to have been written to him, and preserve it as a gift presented to him.”³ What does this prologue to Luke have to do with you? You’re here today. You’re hearing the voice of God today. And he says, “Stop disbelieving; believe! Believe in my Son, Jesus, whom I sent from heaven to earth! Believe he came because you cannot go to heaven on your own! Believe he lived the life I require in your place! Believe he died in your place the death you deserve as a sinner! Believe!”

“*What does this have to do with me?*” Believing needs assuring. And note verse 4 where Luke explains the purpose of his Gospel to Theophilus: **that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.** And this assurance, this boldness, this confidence is not your feelings; it’s the facts of what Jesus did. Your faith is build on the firm foundation of the factual and faithful historical record of the Gospels.

³ Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: St. Luke, Vol. III, Part I*, 8 vols. (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), 8:8.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
You, who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?