

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1–4

Dr. George O. Wood

I was at the conference on the Holy Spirit several weeks ago. One of the speakers, in the course of making some announcements, said to the ministers that were there, “We need to do more bragging on Jesus.” I thought that was a beautiful way to say what’s been welling up on my own part as I have wanted to spend some time with the Gospel of Luke.

We’re going to do that. All through the next number of months, however long it takes, I want us to let this Gospel speak to us and I want to brag on Jesus.

Luke really writes two volumes—the Gospel and Acts. In those two volumes, he travels through sixty-five years showing us the progress of Jesus’ presence, from an obscure manger in Bethlehem to His being worshipped, adored and known in Caesar’s administration.

When Luke picks up his pen to write, it’s thirty-five years after the resurrection and the ascension. Thirty-five years is a good space of time. It’s not overly long. Thirty-five years before 1984, the year was 1949. I remember that time well because my family was fleeing northwest China. That was the year Mao came to rule all of China. Thirty-five years have come and gone, and Mao is now gone. I got to thinking about the difference between ‘84 and ‘49 and the difference between the time when Luke writes, thirty-five years after Christ’s last days on earth, looking back on that period of time.

You know, there are some striking comparisons between Mao and Jesus. You get the feeling, when you’re in China today, that Mao is not coming back. His power is broken. But when you pick up this Gospel, Jesus is coming back and His power is just getting underway. When you’re in China, you get the feeling, and you know, whether you’re in China or not, that Mao’s

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1–4

accomplishments were based upon the shedding of others' blood. He exercised his administration through naked power and force. When you read this Gospel, you find that Jesus exercised His power solely by means of love. His administration was based also on the shedding of blood, but it was His own blood and not another's. When you look at Mao, you find that when he left, he left his followers divided. They were in a competitive condition for control. But Jesus left His followers united in a powerful condition to carry His news to the entire world. When Mao left, there was nothing more. There was no hope for anything beyond this life. How different from the story of Jesus.

When we open to Luke's prologue or introduction, verses 1–4, we find something unique in the Gospel and something unique in the New Testament. The writer has given a formal statement as to the procedures that he used in penning his Gospel. It is a sentence in the Greek language that is modeled along the lines of classical Greek. In fact, although in our modern English translations the words are broken up into two sentences, they were actually a very well structured sentence—one sentence in the Greek language. He adopts the formal style of classical writers of the ancient world, whether it be Josephus writing the history of the Jewish people, or the Greek medical men such as Hippocrates, or historians like Herodias or even the biographer Plutarch. He begins like that. Setting out this story in the style which would address it as a serious historical work, worthy of consideration by all.

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who, from the first, were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, my most excellent

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1–4

Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught” (Luke 1:1–4, NIV).

It is obvious from Luke’s prologue that the intent of Luke’s writing is to assure us that the story of Jesus is real. That’s why I have entitled this message today “Jesus is Real”. But in order for communication to be effective, three things must be present. There must be someone, first of all, to receive the communication. It does no good to shout in an empty room. Secondly, there must be someone to give the communication. No message can be received unless it is given. And third, for communication to be effective there must be a message itself. There must be content within that message. From Luke’s prologue I want us to see how this bridge of communication is made to us.

I. First, there is the receiver of the communication.

His name is Theophilus. The letter is written to him. Theophilus simply means “God’s friend.” And both Luke and Acts were addressed to him. We really know nothing about who he was. Some guess that he was a Jew wearing a Greek name. Others have said, “No, he was Greek.” Some have suggested that he was a patron of Luke and made his work financially possible by supporting him so he could do his research and writing and publish his Gospel. Others have suggested that he may be a governmental official or simply a citizen of some standing. We do not really know whether he was a Christian or a non-Christian. There are people who think he was Christian. There are people who suggest that he was not. We only know that his name means “God’s friend.” That his title is “most excellent,” suggesting that he was a person of standing in the society. And that the Gospel was directed to him personally.

It’s not as though Luke was only writing to him. Luke certainly was aware that a great readership would come to know the Gospel that he writes. But he writes it first to Theophilus. While he may

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1–4

be writing for the whole world to read, he has sense enough to speak to one person. If there is anything that I have learned about watching great communicators, is that they have always spoken to one person. I was at a conference some time ago where I came up against that idea again that preaching is the idea of reaching for a mic and screaming into it, as though you have to yell if there's a crowd. Luke has the wisdom to know that if you're going to communicate, you reach the heart of one person and you'll reach everybody's heart.

It pleased the Holy Spirit to not let us know more about Theophilus so that the Gospel would fit us better. Maybe Theophilus was like some of you... a new believer who had begun to struggle with whether or not his decision to follow Christ had been the right decision. Theophilus needs to know whether or not he had made the right choice. Maybe you need to know that.

Perhaps Theophilus had already encountered some of the false Christian sects that were in existence then. There are many cults and groups that are in existence today. Maybe Theophilus knew that in some of the communications about Jesus that were circulating there was a lack of credibility in the account—there are well-intentioned but mindless Christians who tell stories that seem good but aren't really true. We've had many stories recently in charismatic circles that were somewhat far-out on the ministry of angels. In my opinion, far-out. Nondocumented stories; hearsay that simply grows with the telling.

Maybe he had experienced disillusionment with other believers. He came to find out that born again Christians can be people who have real failures and missteps.

Maybe he was just discouraged with himself or was going through a great battle in his own life that was testing him to his very core and he was wondering, "Did I make a right choice?"

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1-4

Maybe he had begun to encounter the cost of serving Christ, or opposition directed against him, or tragedy that had struck his life for which there was no ready answer. As a new believer, he is grappling with these things.

Maybe you are like that: a new Christian or even an old Christian who needs grounding, a floor upon which your faith can stand.

Perhaps Theophilus was not yet a Christian. Maybe he had the perspective that “Christianity is interesting, but I’m not really ready to grant that it’s the truth.” Maybe he came from the assumptions that all religions are the same, they’re all taking us down the same road of finding God. And that the one God stands over and above them all. Maybe he was saying, “Religious truth, if it’s real at all, is only subjectively real. It will never be objectively real.” When something is subjectively real, its reality can only be measured within your own experience, and therefore, the test of that religion becomes, how sincerely do you practice it? And if you practice it sincerely, then what could be wrong with that?

Maybe Theophilus wondered if a thinking person could be a Christian. He may have been influenced by the kinds of attitudes that are seen in George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.

Remember *Porgy and Bess*, where the character who was eventually responsible for breaking up *Porgy and Bess* himself breaks up a Sunday School picnic by singing, “It ain’t necessarily so. It ain’t necessarily so. The things you are liable to read in the Bible...it ain’t necessarily so.”

Maybe Theophilus had that kind of idea about Jesus, “It ain’t necessarily so.”

Maybe you are like Theophilus, an inquiring non-Christian who looks for evidence that will convince him. Whether Christian or non-Christian, this book will speak to you with certainty about Jesus.

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1-4

II. The second thing that is needed for communication: Not only does there need to be one who receives the communication which now is us but there is a second part, the giver of communication.

What do we know about the writer of this Gospel, just from the first four verses? We know several things about him.

A. We know, first of all, that he does not name himself. We could do a detective story here and kind of identify him by looking at other parts of Scripture. Let me do that for just a moment. It's why we call it the Gospel of Luke. Whoever wrote this Gospel also wrote the Book of Acts. This person was an unnamed companion of Paul. Four times in the Book of Acts (16,20,21,27) he uses the personal pronoun "we". If you want to find the author, you take all of Paul's companions that are named in Acts and immediately exclude them, since the writer never names himself in either Luke or Acts. All the names of the companions of Paul can be excluded as candidates. Go then through the epistles of Paul and find all the names of Paul's coworkers not found in Acts and you have your possible list. But then exclude any persons in Paul's letters that were with Paul when he wrote letters during the second and third missionary journeys. Then look at Paul's prison letters of persons associated with him in his imprisonment not found in his earlier letters or in Acts. The only person that emerges is Luke.

That's how we get there, plus church tradition. What's intriguing to me is, he doesn't name himself. Not only does he not name himself but Mark doesn't name himself and Matthew doesn't name himself and John doesn't name himself. What is with these Gospel writers that they never name themselves? If I were writing a Gospel, I would put my name there. I'd want the recognition. I'd get on all kinds of guest shows and I want the royalties.

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1–4

But none of the Gospel writers named themselves. I think there are two good reasons why they don't. They have a sense, first of all, that the story they're writing doesn't belong to them. It belongs to all the people of God, and they have no right to personally appropriate it as though it was something they wrote. It was a truth believed on in the world by the church.

But, secondly, I think they didn't name themselves because it was not their story they were telling. It was His story. He must increase. So after reading the first four verses, we find a person who doesn't name himself.

B. We also find that this communicator has read other written accounts of Jesus. He indicates that many had already undertaken to draw up an account of the things that had been fulfilled among them. He makes no criticism of what has previously been drawn up. Perhaps there were some things. Perhaps someone wrote down the Sermon on the Mount. Maybe someone wrote the time Jesus was traveling in the Transjordan area. Perhaps Luke had before him—and most scholars think he did—the complete Gospel of Mark as he wrote. Perhaps before him was the story written by Mary of the birth of Jesus. We just know that he had a number of different accounts.

These earlier writings were not off-the-cuff kind of remarks. They were things that had been fulfilled and were handed down. The idea of “handed down” indicates that they had already become formalized sufficiently that they were regarded as truth embodied in words that were being passed on, word-for-word, to others.

These written accounts had come from persons who were called “eyewitnesses and servants of the Word” (Luke 1:2, NIV). The word “eyewitnesses” is a very instructive word. The Greek word is *autoptai*. In English, it is the word we derive “autopsy” from. *Autoptai* is the Greek word. “Autopsy” is the English word. Both are medical terms. It literally means “to see for one's

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1–4

self.” That’s what a coroner does when he makes an autopsy. He sees for himself. It’s to place under thorough self-examination. So those who had already written of Jesus were ones who had first-hand knowledge, they had examined for themselves; not people who had believed in a bunch of fables or old wife’s tales or mythology.

And they were servants of the Lord, *huperetes*. Also used in a medical sense. That could be a clue we’ve got a doctor for a writer. *Huperetes* literally means “under rowers.” And in the medical language of Luke’s day, it could stand for interns who served under a physician.

Someone has said that a minister sees people at their best, a lawyer sees people at their worst, and a doctor sees people as they are. And Luke got his information from those who had served as “under-rowers” to Jesus—interns of the Great Physician.

C. The third thing we learn about the giver of this communication: Not only does he not name himself and has he examined other written accounts of Jesus, but thirdly, we know that he has personally and carefully investigated everything from the beginning. He says this in verse 3. “From the beginning” simply means that his Gospel goes back to the infancy. Mark’s Gospel begins with the baptism, the ministry of John the Baptist, and Jesus’ baptism and temptation. But Luke’s Gospel reaches back to the announcement of His birth. Matthew’s Gospel takes his genealogy back to Abraham. But Luke’s Gospel reaches the genealogy back to Adam. Luke is concerned with telling the whole story from the beginning and he has interviewed eyewitnesses. He has not made a superficial investigation. By the way, Luke’s prologue, saying he had interviewed eyewitnesses and he himself had carefully reviewed everything before he wrote, blows to smithereens the notion that the inspiration of Scripture is something magical, mysterious, or hocus-pocus, or spooky, that somebody sat in a dark room with the shades drawn and waited for the Spirit of God to dictate their pen would automatically move across the page.

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1-4

Here we have an understanding of Scripture that holy men spoke as they were moved, inwardly moved and motivated by the Spirit. And as they moved, the Holy Spirit uniquely fitted His anointing to their own personality.

Luke's ability to interview eyewitnesses is an intriguing kind of thing to me in the Scripture; because, when you read Acts and Paul's epistles, there's only one time in Luke's life that we can identify where he would have had the kind of time he needed to do the Palestinian background research and interview the eyewitnesses like Mary and others who knew John and Zachariah and the like. That one period of time came when Paul spent two years in prison in Caesarea on the coast in Palestine. And how Luke got to that moment was, up in Greece, Paul had finished his three missionary journeys, he was collecting an offering for the saints in Jerusalem; he had his team all ready to go with him to take the offering down to Jerusalem. At the last minute, while he was still in Corinth, in Acts 20, he hears of an assassination plot against his life. So he sends all of his co-workers, puts them on ships, says goodbye to them because he understands the attack is going to occur while he's at sea. And by land he goes up north to Philippi and there, at Philippi, he picks up Luke. Suddenly, Luke is with him. Luke then finds himself with Paul when Paul's arrested in Jerusalem. And then, while Paul is in jail, Luke has two years free to roam the countryside, interviewing the witnesses and coming up with the documents that would form the basis for his Gospel and his history in Acts. Isn't that incredible that the Holy Spirit would use the circumstance of a thwarted assassination attempt to propel into motion the writer who would give us more of the New Testament than any other writer? Talk about God working through coincidences in our life!

Maybe something happened in your life that seemed so crazy when it happened. There just seemed to be no reason for it. You thought it was delaying or deterring you. God can work

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1–4

through those delays and detours to put us in the exact place that He wants us. We owe Luke and Acts to a misguided assassin.

D. The fourth thing we know about this writer is that he is going to write an orderly account.

That is, there is going to be logic and artistry to his arrangement.

Luke indeed is an artist with words. He is forever painting wonderful pictures. In fact, one of the earliest traditions of Luke is that he was an artist. He certainly gives us the Gospel that the little folks will always love best—the story of the shepherds and the angels and of Mary and Elizabeth and Zachariah and little John.

III. For communication, you need the recipients and you need a sender, and thirdly, you need the message itself.

The message itself is the focus of Luke’s entire Gospel but he states his objective right up front in the prologue, “When you finish this Gospel you will be certain of the things you have been taught.”

The Greek word “certainly” is used a number of different ways in the New Testament. Let me illustrate some ways that it’s used.

Acts 5:23, “We found the jail securely locked.” The same word, but this time it’s translated as “securely.” Securely locked.

Acts 2:36, “Therefore, let all the house of Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Acts 22:30, “The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul is being accused.”

Acts 25:26, “But I have nothing definite to write.”

1 Thessalonians 5:3, “When people are saying peace and safety...”

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1-4

So this one Greek word is translated in English as “certain,” “secure,” “assured,” “exactly,” “definite” and “safety.” When you get done with this Gospel, Theophilus or anyone else, you will be certain, you will be secure, you will be assured, you will know exactly, you will be definite, you will be safe. That is what Luke is getting across. Luke is saying that you can absolutely rely upon the gospel. Jesus is real.

Lloyd Douglas tells about a man who went to visit his old violin teacher. When he came to him, he asked this question, “What’s new?” The teacher thought for a moment and said, “I’ll tell you what’s new.” He grabbed his tuning fork and banged it. Out comes the “A”. I understand from our musicians that the tuning fork vibrates at four hundred and forty cycles per second and that’s what produces the A. When the A had been struck, he said to his visiting friend, “Did you hear that? That’s the A. Upstairs a soprano rehearses endlessly and she is always off key. Next door, I have a cello player who plays his instrument very poorly. There is an out-of-tune piano on the other side of me. I’m surrounded by terrible noise night and day.” He picked up the tuning fork again and plunked it. He said, “Do you hear that? That’s an A. That’s an A today. That was an A yesterday. And that will be an A tomorrow. It will always be an A. It will never change. That’s what’s new!”

All around you, life may be out of tune. Maybe your family’s out of tune. Maybe your work is out of tune. Maybe your circumstances are out of tune. Maybe everything just feels dislocated in your life. If you ask Luke what’s new, he’d say “Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.” If you’re out of tune, if you’ll come to Him, He’ll get your life back in tune. He’ll give you the certainty of His presence. The gospel is not a theory, it is not an idea. It is not a philosophy. It is not even a religion. It is a story of that which really happened; everything in life can go wrong

JESUS IS REAL

Luke 1:1-4

and everything can be broken, but this one thing I must have as certain. If Jesus is real, which He is, it really doesn't matter what happens. It matters, but it doesn't!

The English Book of Common Prayer of 1662 gives this as a prayer for the reading of the Gospel of Luke. "Almighty God, who called Saint Luke, the physician, whose praise is in the Gospel to be an evangelist and physician of the soul, may it please thee that by the doctrine delivered by Him all the diseases of our soul may be healed through the merits of the Son Christ our Lord. Amen."

Closing Prayer

Our Father we pray that same prayer entering into this study of Luke; that by the merits of thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, all the diseases of our soul may be healed. When we're in Your presence, we can sense any out-of-tuneness that is in our life. We can sense doctrinal out-of-tuneness and moral out-of-tuneness. Failure. Discouragement. So we pick up Your Word today and Your Spirit ministers Jesus as very really to us. We ask, Lord, that all of our hearts would be tuned to that of Jesus. As for people that are here today, that are going through struggle in their life, maybe feel like they're in the middle of some vast swimming pool and they don't have the strength to swim anymore and are going down, wondering if there's any lifeline, any hope in life, anything that's certain, You are the one that's certain. Teach us that, Lord. Teach us, too, to respect the individuality that You've given us. There may be persons here that may be bitter with You about the way they are, that they're not like somebody else. How You use individuals! Even Luke, so unique in his gifts, You used him. You didn't make him be somebody else. Deep in our heart, O Lord God, tune us into You. Let a holy fire and purity and love and devotion be in our depths, the deep of us that makes the core of us, that You fill that place. May You be real in that place to us. We ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.