

How not to invent a religion

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Date: 22 November 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you very much for joining us today. Good morning. My name is Vijay. I'm one of the pastors here at the church. Thanks a lot for tuning in. I do keep that passage, which Andrew read, open from Luke's Gospel.

And as he said, we're beginning our Advent series in Luke. And my aim this morning is to give you an appetite to read it more for yourselves.

I want you to really dive in after we finish speaking and read it in your own time. To do this, to help you, what I need to do is tell you about my job, mine and Andrew Price's job.

There's a lot of things we do, but our job is quite simple, actually. It boils down to this. We shepherd Jesus' sheep using Jesus' words. It's from John chapter 10.

We shepherd the flock using the words of the great shepherd, Jesus. Pretty simple stuff. Put another way, we provide you with spiritual guidance.

[1 : 00] Spiritual guidance and advice. But just for a moment, can we pretend that I'm actually here to provide you financial advice? How would you feel about that, me, as your financial advisor?

Imagine I started up a company called Dodgy Brothers Finance. And as your advisor, I would tell you that now is the time to buy a house. I'd tell you that interest rates are at a record low and that now is the time to get a mortgage and buy.

I'd also tell you that recently the stock market took a huge hit when COVID struck. But now it's starting to recover and recover. And so now is the time to buy, to invest.

So buy a house now. Buy some shares now. You can't lose. It's a certainty. And sure, I cobble together some facts.

But then you take a good look at me. You consider my business name. You size up my credibility. And you realize what's at stake. And suddenly you get very skeptical.

[2 : 04] Say, nah, I need more certainty. And that is right. That is perfectly reasonable because when it comes to your cash, skepticism is healthy. And certainty is everything.

But if I switch back to spiritual matters, imagine I kept using words like certainty and sure thing. If I did that, you'd be even more skeptical.

Because how can anyone claim anything for certain when it comes to God? What's more, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, they're much more important than bricks and mortar.

Skepticism and doubt are the right or is the right attitude. But right from the outset, Luke tells us that his aim is to provide certainty.

You can see that in verse 4. So that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught. It's a bold claim because every Sunday there are gurus and imams, even other priests, all spruiking their own brand of spirituality.

[3 : 11] You see, the imam, he claims that Allah spoke to the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century in a cave. The Buddhists, they claim that their truth is the only way out of suffering.

The Hindu claims that the better your karma, the better your reincarnation. And the Christian minister claims that a virgin gave birth at Christmas.

The atheist, of course, he thinks we're all stupid. He thinks we all should have slept in this morning instead. All we have is our version of things, perhaps a couple of facts cobbled together, buried under centuries of human tradition and dogma.

How can anyone claim certainty when it comes to spiritual matters? But I think Luke wants us to consider his gospel ahead of all of that, ahead of the pack, first in the competition.

And over the course of this series, he will continually invite us to take a good look at his account, to size up his credibility and put our skepticism to the test.

[4 : 19] Today, it's the first four verses that Andrew read. They underpin a book full of the most outrageous, but if true, important claims in human history.

You see, Luke claims to give us certainty about eternal life through Jesus, to rescue us from the certain death that came through Adam. That's what we heard in that first Genesis reading. See, in a manner of speaking, Luke is sort of starting a religion. Now, obviously, the whole Bible points to Jesus. Obviously, he is the beginning of everything.

And there are other gospels, too. But Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, those two volumes, they will be foundational to Christianity forever.

And so, actually, yes, he is starting a religion. And so let's see how he begins it. Look at verse one. Many have undertaken a drop and 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.

[5 : 26] With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I, too, decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you've been taught.

We can see that this is written for a man named Theophilus by another man named Luke. It's an account of Jesus that he says many have undertaken to write.

That means Luke's gospel needed to corroborate and be consistent with the many other accounts in circulation back in the first century to have credibility.

He tells us that his information was handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses. Now, some people might sort of disparage, you know, eyewitness claims.

They might say, unless I was there to witness, to see and hear and touch, I won't believe it. But we need to be very careful before disparaging secondhand eyewitness testimony, because it's a level of evidence still in use in our courts today.

[6 : 36] Our car was broken into overnight just when I woke up this morning. I found, you know, things on the nature strip. They stole Rachel's sunglasses. But I can't just drag a random bloke off the street and point the police to him and say, see him? He was the one that did it.

Unless, of course, I can produce an eyewitness who saw and heard what had happened. In lots of countries, we care about reliable eyewitness testimony.

And Luke tells us that that is what he has gathered too. And already before we begin, all of this is quite surprising, because so far the gospel has nothing to do with organized religion or denominations.

What we have here is a narrative account, not someone's vision. This is a record about Jesus, a record that people saw and heard and touched.

It's a book of history. And that is different to all other religions in the world. Because Luke's Christianity, it's not about whether we find some particular worldview appealing.

[7 : 47] It's not how attractive a certain philosophy is to us. The question is whether these events are real or not. The question for you, the reader, for Theophilus back then, do you think these events really happened?

And you might say, well, yeah, sure, but why should I trust Luke's gospel? Well, what I want to do in the remainder of our time is show you why you couldn't have invented Luke's gospel.

And secondly, why you wouldn't have invented it. Two points, why you wouldn't have invented Luke's gospel. And secondly, why you wouldn't invent it. There are two points today.

So firstly, why you couldn't make this stuff up. And the main reason, there are lots of reasons, but the main reason, which I'll go through today, is that Luke's gospel is just too checkable.

It's too checkable. Turn the page to Luke chapter 2 and I'll show you what I mean. I think it's on your screen. No, turn to Luke chapter 2.

[8 : 52] Actually, before I get there, I just want to say this. One of the things that makes a checkable story versus something that isn't is the difference between fact and fantasy. See, fantasy stories all begin with once upon a time or a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

So imagine if I wanted to start my own religion and my religion is this. Let's say, well, because, you know, to be honest, I need the cash. Let's say I claim that one day Andrew Price levitated off the ground.

And if you put your trust in him, you too can levitate and, you know, fly around the room. And you say to me, well, when did it happen? And I say, well, a long time ago.

Well, where did it happen? Well, I don't know. It just happened. That's as good as saying in a galaxy far, far away. Luke's account is much more checkable.

Turn to Luke chapter 2 now and I'll show you what I mean. It's on your screen in front of you. So in those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

[9 : 56] This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria and everyone went to their own town to register. At first, these verses seem quite boring. But notice how precisely Luke locates us.

We're at the time when Caesar Augustus was ruling the empire. It was overlapping the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria. He talks about an international event, the first census of the Roman Empire.

It's recognizable for Theophilus and other first century hearers. Nothing like a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

And all the way through the Gospels, Luke includes details you couldn't get away with. Names and places, prominent people. In fact, even when talking about miracles, Luke says the things you just shouldn't say if you wanted to perpetrate a fraud.

Chapter 7, there's a miraculous healing of a centurion's servant. It's in the town of Capernaum. Luke, don't use prominent people. Don't give us place names.

[11 : 07] Why don't you just use a random soldier in a random location? You see, there weren't many centurions back there. It would have been very easy to go to Capernaum and verify his story.

A centurion's servant was miraculously healed. Are you sure? I'm certain. In chapter 7, he claims that Jesus went to a funeral in a town called Nain.

And while he was at the funeral, he raised a widow's son who was on the funeral pile. All he had to do was go to Nain and ask for the widow whose son was raised from the dead.

The whole town was at the funeral. It would be very easy to debunk this claim as mere fantasy. Jesus brought someone back from the dead? Are you sure?

I'm certain. And maybe you might say, well, back then they were all peasants and they're very primitive in their thinking. And look at us 2,000 years later, how much we've progressed in our scientific understanding of things.

[12 : 10] But you don't have to be a scientist to recognize when someone was dead. All you had to be was a mother who lost her only son. Luke includes precise details about public events so that you may know with certainty the things about Jesus.

His writing is just too checkable. And as far as I can tell, that's just not something on offer in other religions in the world. Point one, you couldn't make up Luke's gospel.

Point number two, you wouldn't make it up either. But you wouldn't make it up, by which I mean, if you wanted to invent a religion, Christianity, at least Luke's version of it, Christianity is not the one you would invent.

He keeps including all sorts of things that would just put people off. He does a bad job of persuading people or attracting them. For example, I'll give you a few examples here.

Jesus was Jewish, living under Roman occupation. But instead of leading a revolution on a white horse, he says, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

[13 : 23] Pay your taxes. You wouldn't say that to people who are desperate for revolution. If you want to get your religion off the ground, maybe you should have your hero born in a palace.

But Luke claims that Jesus was born in a stable, laid in a manger. You wouldn't weaken your own story right out of the gate by claiming that his mother was a virgin.

Something regularly impossible. Unless, of course, that that is what happened. Similarly, when it comes to heroes, you wouldn't claim that your hero was God's Messiah, but then he was killed on a cross.

But that is where Luke's gospel, in fact, all the gospels climax. Jesus' death on the cross. Luke, don't say that. Because Jewish people know that the only ones to die on crosses are God's enemies.

The Jewish Old Testament says cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole, hung on a tree. Don't invent a religion about a Messiah who is cursed by God.

[14 : 29] That will never get off the ground. You'll just put everyone off. Similarly, make sure your good guys are always seen in a good light. But Luke includes Peter.

Peter's the main man in the gospels, right behind Jesus. Luke includes Peter at his most shameful moments. While Jesus was being brave, interrogated by the elite, Peter was so scared he couldn't even acknowledge him in front of a servant girl.

You wouldn't include events like that in a story if you were trying to get a religion off the ground. And think about Jesus teaching as well.

You see, people are happy with loving your neighbor as long as your neighbor doesn't also include your enemies. But that's what Jesus says. We're happy with forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Prayer.

But the bit about as we forgive those who sin against us, that's much more difficult. We're happy with Jesus' death as an example of love.

[15 : 36] But not so much if he died because I am sinful. We're happy with a loving God who gets us to heaven. Who wouldn't be? But we're not happy with a fearful one who says, After our body has been killed, has authority to throw us into hell.

But these are all the aspects of Jesus' teaching that Luke includes in his story. You wouldn't make up Luke's gospel. It's just too unpalatable.

You couldn't make up Luke's gospel. It's just too checkable. Unless, of course, that this is all that happened. Now, obviously, what we're saying can be applied to the other gospels.

Obviously, I'm speaking more broadly about Bible reliability. And again and again, on every page, Luke does the thing you couldn't do, you wouldn't do, if you were going to invent a religion and perpetrate a fraud.

Unless, of course, you're writing about actual history. Unless, of course, you're preparing carefully investigated, orderly, eyewitness testimony, so that your reader can have certainty.

[16 : 50] And if you're not a Christian here today, I reckon all of that means that Luke's gospel is worth two hours of your time this Christmas.

I'm not sure if you've ever bothered to check where Christianity originated from. Maybe you already made up your mind years ago when you were young, when you found church to be really boring. Luke invites you to test his claims about Jesus, to ask yourself, who was this man? What is your explanation for the things Jesus does and teaches?

Was he just clever and charismatic? Was he evil and a deceiver? Or is it possible that God broke into the world in the person of Jesus that very first Christmas?

You see, Luke's gospel seems like the perfect place to take someone who's not a Christian. And it is. It's full of evidence. But actually, I think it's a better book for those of us who are already believers.

[17 : 57] You see, Luke's target audience is Theophilus from verse 4. He was someone who'd already been taught things about Jesus. His own name, Theophilus, means someone loved by God or loved of God.

And that means Luke thinks it's the Christian who needs certainty. Luke thinks Christians are the ones with doubts that need to have them addressed.

And we're not exactly sure what Theophilus' doubts were. Maybe he was starting to think about this world only instead of the kingdom of God.

That's a strong theme in Luke's gospel. Maybe the worries of this life stopped him being a good and faithful servant. Maybe his view of Jesus has diminished over the years, just a little bit year on year. Maybe his view of Jesus is the Christian who's not a Christian who's not a Christian. Maybe his view of Jesus is the Christian who's not a Christian who's not a Christian. But maybe we are alongside him in those doubts too. What about this?

[19 : 01] Our fellowship has taken a real hit this year. Perhaps your Christian joy has been completely affected. Perhaps because of all this online services, we've reduced church to being just something we do, something we just tune into rather than an aspect of who we are.

Luke's gospel would be a great way to rediscover Jesus after a pretty rubbish year. And I realize that many of you have read Luke's gospel before.

As Christians, we're never really that far away from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They're always being taught in the church at some point. But I was having lunch with one of my Bible groups yesterday, and a lady from the Bible group, one of my friends, she said, just keep teaching us about Jesus.

She said, she really got stuck into me when I was really grateful. She said, just keep reminding us the same things we need to be told. Don't try and make it new and jazzy. Just keep telling us about Jesus. That's what we need to hear. You see, Luke agrees. He thinks it's good for Christians to be taught about Jesus again and again.

[20 : 14] He thinks it's good for our faith to have our doubts dealt with honestly, to have our skepticism meet with his certainty. Can I encourage you this Christmas as a chance to, to use this Christmas as a chance to recharge your relationship with Jesus, to pick up Luke's gospel as part of your daily reading.

Every week from now until well into the new year, we're going to be looking at his account, the eyewitness account of Jesus. My prayer as we go through Luke's gospel is that our, mine and yours, our convictions will sink deeper into our hearts so that we will live for Jesus more, so that we'll battle sin, so that we'll keep wanting to talk about him with our family and friends.

I'm not sure where you're at in your walk with the Lord or what doubts you have that might be leading you into temptation. But dealing with doubts honestly is the way to make your faith strong. And after a year like this one, I think Luke's offer of certainty is invaluable. He says, With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught.

Let's pray that we would be certain. Father God, we are so grateful for your word, so grateful for your spirit that worked in Luke to preserve this account of Jesus.

[22 : 07] Thank you, Father, that when it comes to spiritual matters about Jesus, about eternal life, we can be certain. Thank you, Father, that you speak to us by your spirit and through your word.

Would we treasure Luke's gospel, would we bring our doubts to meet the real Jesus so that our faith would be strong? And we ask it in his name.

Amen.