

How not to invent a religion

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Andrew. Thanks, Ron, for reading and good morning, everybody. Thanks for joining us here today. As Andrew said, we're beginning our Advent series in Luke's Gospel.

And my aim today is to give you an appetite to dive in and read it for yourself. And to do that, I'm going to tell you about our jobs, mine and Andrew's. There's lots of things we do, but our job is very simple.

It is this. Our job is to shepherd Jesus' sheep using Jesus' words. Shepherd his sheep using Jesus' words. Put another way, we provide you spiritual guidance and advice.

But just for a moment, can we pretend that instead I'm here to provide you with financial advice? Imagine I started a company called Dodgy Brothers Finance. And as your financial advisor, I would tell you that now is the time to buy a house.

I would say, look, interest rates are at an all-time low. There's never been a cheaper time to get into the market. And so buy a house. I'd also tell you that the share market took a massive hit when COVID struck at the beginning of the year.

[1 : 1 1] But now the market is recovering. And so now is the time to get in as it rises and rises. So buy a house now. Buy some shares now.

You can't lose. It's a certainty. And sure, I can cobble together some facts here and there. But then you have a good look at me.

You consider my business name, Dodgy Brothers Finance. You size up my credibility and consider what's at stake. And suddenly you get very sceptical and you say, nah, nah.

I need more certainty. Thank you. And that is perfectly reasonable. Because when it comes to your money, scepticism is healthy. And certainty is everything. But switching back to spiritual matters, if we can, if I keep using words like certainty and sure thing, you should be even more sceptical.

Because how can anyone claim anything for certain when it comes to God? Forgiveness of sins, eternal life. How can anyone claim anything?

[2 : 2 0] What's more, how could anyone know for certain, given there are so many other religious claims in the world? But that's exactly what Luke says in his gospel.

Andrew read the first four verses. And in verse four, he says this from the outset. He writes, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. It's a bold claim because every Sunday there are gurus and imams and even other priests all spruiking their own brands of spirituality.

Certainty? Are you sure? You see, the imam, he claims that Allah spoke to the prophet Muhammad in a cave in the 7th century. The Buddhist claims that their truth is the way out of suffering.

The Hindu, he claims that the better your karma, the better your reincarnation. The minister, he claims that a virgin gave birth at Christmas. And the atheist, he thinks we're all stupid and that we all should have slept in instead.

All we have is our version of things, perhaps a couple of facts cobbled together, buried under centuries of human tradition and dogma.

[3 : 32] How can anyone claim any certainty? But I think Luke wants us to consider his gospel ahead of the pack, ahead of the competition.

And over the course of this series, he will constantly be asking us to have a good look at his writing, to size up his credibility, to put our skepticism to the test.

Today, it's the first four verses, but they underpin a book full of the most outrageous, but if true, important claims in human history.

In that Genesis passage, which Ron read for us, because of our sin, God said you will certainly die. And there's no skepticism at all when it comes to death in our world.

But then Luke makes unique claims about God's salvation. You will certainly be saved if you put your hope in Jesus. That is Luke's claim.

[4 : 37] You see, in a manner of speaking, Luke is sort of inventing a religion. Now, obviously, you know, the whole Bible points to Jesus. There are other gospels too.

But Luke's gospel and his Acts of the Apostle, those two volumes, they will be foundational to Christianity forever. And so, in a sense, he is starting a religion.

So, let's see how he begins. Can you look at verse 1? 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 were from the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything, 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.

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

[5 : 43] That means Luke's gospel needed to be validated against other similar accounts in the first century to have credibility.

He tells us that his information was handed down to us by those who were from the first eyewitnesses. And some people might sort of knock that and say, well, I'll only believe it if I was the witness, if I was the one who saw and heard and touched Jesus for myself.

But we should be very careful about disparaging secondhand eyewitness testimony, because it's a level of evidence still used in our courts today.

Our car was broken into overnight and someone nicked my wife's sunglasses. But I can't just drag a random bloke off the street and point and say it was him. Unless, of course, there were eyewitnesses who saw and heard what happened.

In lots of countries, we care about reliable eyewitness testimony. And Luke tells us that that is what he has gathered as well. And already, before we go any further, already this is quite surprising, because so far his gospel has nothing to do with organized religions or denominations.

[7 : 01] What we have here is a narrative account, not someone's vision. We have a record about Jesus that people saw and heard and touched.

It is a book of history. And that is different to all other religions in the world, because Luke's Christianity is not whether we like a particular ideology or whether certain worldviews are attractive to us.

This is about whether these events are real or not. And Luke invites the reader to ask, do you think this really happened?

And, of course, lots of people might say, yeah, but why should I trust Luke's gospel? Because it's very bold to claim certainty about spiritual matters. It's very bold when Christianity is just one of many religions in the world.

And so for the rest of our time, what I want to do is show you why you couldn't invent Luke's gospel and why you wouldn't invent Luke's gospel.

[8 : 10] So two points for the rest of our time. Why you couldn't invent Luke's gospel. And secondly, why you wouldn't invent Luke's gospel. There are two points. Firstly, point one.

The main reason is that Luke's gospel is too checkable. You see, a fantasy story usually begins like this. Once upon a time, or my favorite Star Wars, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

So imagine if I wanted to start my own religion, because let's be honest, I could do with the cash. Imagine I wanted to start a religion, and I claimed that Andrew Price levitated off the ground.

And I said, look, if you put your trust in Andrew, you too can levitate and fly around the room. And you say, well, when did it happen? I say, oh, well, just once upon a time.

Oh, where did it happen? Oh, just somewhere. You know, a galaxy far, far away. It's as good as saying that. But Luke's account is much more checkable.

[9 : 13] And you can see this over the page. Turn to chapter two. It's on your screen as well if you need it. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to their own town to register. Now, at first, these verses seem pretty boring.

But notice how precisely we are located. We know when this was during the reign of Caesar Augustus. It overlaps during the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke mentions an international event, the census of the Roman Empire. It's recognizable for Theophilus and other first century hearers.

It's nothing like a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. And all the way through Luke's gospel, he includes details you couldn't get away with.

[10 : 16] Names, places, prominent people. In fact, even when talking about miracles, Luke says the things you shouldn't say if your goal is to perpetrate a fraud.

In chapter seven, there's the miraculous healing of a centurion servant in the town of Capernaum. Luke, don't use a prominent person. Just use a random foot soldier instead.

You see, there weren't many centurions. It would be easy to go to Capernaum and verify the story. A centurion servant was miraculously healed.

Are you sure? Yes, I'm certain. Later in chapter seven, Luke claims that Jesus went to a funeral in a town called Nain and he healed a widow's son who was dead there.

All you 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 easy to debunk his writing.

[11 : 18] A young man was brought back to life at his own funeral. Well, are you sure? I'm certain. And people might scoff at this and say, well, you know, 2,000 years ago they were peasants.

They weren't very advanced like us. Look how much more progressive we are in our science and our thinking. But you don't need a scientist to recognize death. You just need to be a mother who's lost her only son.

See, Luke includes precise details about public events so that you may know with certainty what has happened.

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

But secondly, you wouldn't make it up either. By which I mean, if you wanted to invent a religion, you wouldn't invent Christianity or at least Luke's version of it.

[12 : 20] He includes all kinds of things that would put people off. If you want to persuade people, Luke does a terrible job of it. For example, Jesus was Jewish, but living under Roman occupation.

Instead of leading a revolution, Jesus says, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. 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 have your hero born in a palace to a royal family. You wouldn't claim that he was born in a stable, that he was laid in a manger.

You wouldn't weaken your own story right out of the gate by claiming that his mother was just a virgin. Something regularly impossible. Unless, of course, that is just what happened.

Similarly, when it comes to heroes, you wouldn't have your hero who you claim is God's Messiah killed on a cross. But that is where all the Gospels climax, with Jesus' death on the cross.

[13 : 27] Luke, don't do that because Jewish people know that the only ones who are killed on crosses are those cursed by God. The Jewish Old Testament, it says, cursed is everyone who's hung on a tree.

You wouldn't invent a religion about a Messiah who dies cursed by God. That would put everyone off. Similarly, make sure your good guys have no flaws.

Peter, he's the main man behind Jesus. He's in all the Gospels. But Luke records him at his most shameful moments. When Jesus is brave, being interrogated by the high priests, Peter is so scared, he can't even acknowledge him in front of a servant girl.

You wouldn't include details like that in a story. And they're just events, but think about Jesus' teaching. You see, people are happy with loving your neighbour, but just as long as your neighbour doesn't even include or doesn't also include your enemies.

We're happy with forgiveness of sins, but less happy with as we forgive those who sin against us. We're happy with Jesus' death as an example of love, but not so much that he died because I'm sinful.

[14 : 45] We're happy with a loving God who gets us to heaven, but not a fearful one who after the body has been killed has authority to throw us into hell.

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 just what happened.

And now, obviously, what we're saying can be applied to all the Gospels. Obviously, I'm speaking 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're going to invent a religion.

Unless, of course, you're actually writing history. Unless, of course, you're writing a carefully investigated, orderly, eyewitness account so that your reader can have certainty about Jesus.

And if you're not a Christian here listening today, I think that's worth, I think Luke's Gospel is worth two hours of your time to read this Christmas season.

[15 : 56] I'm not sure if you've ever bothered to check whether Christianity is true or did you make up your mind years ago when you were young because you were so bored in church.

Luke invites you to test out his claims about Jesus, to ask yourself, who was this man? Was he just clever and charismatic? Was he evil and manipulative?

Luke's claim is that first Christmas God himself broke into the world in the form of a baby born to a virgin. And his carefully investigated eyewitness account claims that that is the case.

For you, you have to ask yourself, did it really happen? What is your explanation for the things Jesus says and does and teaches as you read Luke's Gospel?

You see, this seems like a great book to convince a non-Christian. But actually, I think Luke's Gospel is even better for people who are Christians already.

[17:02] You see, I think we're right alongside Theophilus from verse 4 because we too have been taught things about Jesus. It's Theophilus' own name. It means someone loved by God or loved of God.

And that means Luke is primarily writing to Christians. It's Christians who need to be certain. Certain about things they've already been taught. And we're not exactly sure what Theophilus' doubts were.

Maybe he was starting to invest in this world rather than God's kingdom. 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 by little.

We're alongside Theophilus as believers but maybe we're alongside Theophilus in our doubts as well. Our fellowship has taken a hit.

As Andrew said, we're coming back next week but not fully. I'm not even allowed to sing as he just told us this week. Maybe our Christian joy has been affected this year.

[18:10] Perhaps we need to rediscover Jesus after a pretty rubbish time. And yeah, Christians, you've all read the gospel before. In churches, we're never very far away from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

But yesterday I was at lunch with my Bible study group and one of my friends there, she said, just keep telling us about Jesus. Even if we've heard it already, just keep reminding us.

She said, we need to be reminded all the time even if we know it already. See, Luke 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 to use Luke's gospel as a way to recharge your relationship with Jesus?

Every week from now until the new year, we're going to be reading his accounts. My prayer is that our convictions about Jesus will move several floors deeper in our hearts so that we will keep living for him, keep in the battle with sin and keep speaking about him with our loved ones.

[19:26] I'm not sure where you're at in your walk with Jesus after a pretty rubbish year, but dealing with our doubts honestly, dealing with our issues honestly is the way to make our faith strong.

And I think Luke's offer of certainty to people who are pretty battered and bruised is invaluable. 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 have been taught.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that you are interested in certainty. We thank you that you have preserved Luke's gospel for us. Father, thank you that we don't have to be in the dark, that we can know for certain the things about Jesus.

And thank you Father, that even though we've read the gospels many times, that we can always learn something new, that seeing Jesus fresh will help our doubts and make our faith strong.

Please bless us in this time as we pick it up again as we lead into Christmas. In Jesus' name. Amen.