

Proposition: The best thing we can do for a friend is to do what Luke did with his friend Theophilus, to present the truth about two subjects.

- I. We need to know the truth about Christ.
 - That’s why Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke...
 - A. Luke explained his investigation (1:1-2).
 - 1. It involved human resources.
 - 2. It involved divine inspiration.
 - B. Luke explained his instruction (1:3).
 - 1. It’s thorough.
 - 2. It’s accurate.
 - 3. It’s orderly.
 - C. Luke explained his intention (1:4).
 - 1. God’s Word doesn’t offer us speculation.
 - 2. God’s Word offers us certainty.
 - II. We need to know the truth about the Church.
 - That’s why Luke wrote the Book of Acts...
 - A. We have a history.
 - 1. The Church began in Jerusalem (Acts 1).
 - 2. The Church spread to Rome and beyond (Acts 28).
 - B. We have a mission.
 - 1. We need to know Christ.
 - 2. We need to make Christ known to others.
 - C. We have a certain hope.
 - 1. The Church is not the work of man.
 - 2. The Church is the work of God.
- The Necessary Response: We need to make two commitments...
- 1. We need to take Christ seriously.
 - 2. We need to take the Church seriously.

Suppose you had a friend who approached you with this question, “What can you tell me about the life of Jesus? I’ve heard a lot about Him. Most people say He was a great person. Some people say they live for Him and love Him. But others hate Him. Who was He really? What makes Jesus so unique? I want to know about Jesus.”

What would you say? Has anyone here ever seen Jesus? Did anyone here have the privilege of watching Jesus heal a leper, or raise a corpse from the tomb? Did anyone here listen firsthand to the Master Teacher proclaim divine truth on the hillsides of Galilee? No.

In fact, none of us have ever seen or heard Jesus. The reason is obvious. Nearly 2000 years ago, from a hill outside the city of Jerusalem, He vanished from human eyes, and ascended to His Father’s right hand in heaven.

So what will you tell your friend? Actually, a very similar situation faced another man many years ago. This man was a follower of Christ, although he himself had never personally seen Jesus. What’s more, he had a friend who had questions about Jesus. And he was burdened for him.

What man am I describing? His name was Luke.

This morning we are beginning the new year with what I believe will be a very significant series for us as a church. We’re going to begin an expository study of a book penned by Luke, the book of Acts.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

But who was Luke? Why did he write Acts anyway? And just who was this “friend” for whom he was burdened? These are important questions. This morning, before we actually begin our trek through Acts, I want to take a “big picture” look at Acts—at why it was written, and why we desperately need it.

Luke was a “second generation” Christian—a term I’ll explain later. By birth, he was a Gentile, not a Jew. He had a Greek name (lit. “Loukios”). By occupation, Luke was a physician (Col 4:14). But then Christ saved him, and by divine commission Luke became a ministry associate of Paul.

In fact, in Philemon 24 Paul called Luke “my fellow worker.” At the end of Paul’s life, writing from a Roman prison the apostle told Timothy, “Only Luke is with me (2 Tim 4:11).”

What’s the best thing you can do for a friend? We’re going to find out today that the best thing any Christian can do for a friend is to do what Luke did with his friend, to present the truth about two essential subjects. Here’s the first...

I. We need to know the truth about Christ.

You see, Luke had a friend by the name of Theophilus. Out of his love for his friend, Luke wrote two books for Theophilus. These are “must read” books for anyone who wants to know what life’s all about.

You’ll find these two books in the biblical record. They are called “the Gospel of Luke” and “the Acts of the Apostles.” Luke wrote this two-volume set somewhere between the years A.D. 59-63. And interestingly, the original recipient was a friend of his named Theophilus. We’re going to take an overview of both books today in preparation for our journey through Acts.

Who was Theophilus? In Luke 1:3, Luke refers to him as “most excellent Theophilus.” The phrase could be translated, “Your Excellency Theophilus.” Some feel that Luke at one time was a slave, his patron being none other than Theophilus. Theophilus became his lifelong friend when he graciously granted Luke his freedom.

We can’t prove Luke’s prior connection with Theophilus. What we do know is he cared deeply for him, and wanted him to know the truth about two subjects. First of all, he wanted him to know the truth about *Christ*.

That’s why Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke...

In your hands, you hold a twenty-four chapter portrait of Jesus. We call it the “gospel” of Luke.

This gospel record is significant. It’s distinct. Luke is unlike the other gospel writers. Matthew, Mark, and John were all Jews. Luke was a Gentile. They had all seen and heard Jesus. But Luke, as a second generation Christian, had not. The others viewed life from the Hebrew way of thinking. But Luke viewed life through analytical Greek glasses.

Most of us have a lot in common with Luke. We can relate to Luke. Like Luke, we believe in a Messiah we have never seen. And we have friends who have never seen Christ, yet desperately need to know the truth about Him.

I want you to know right up front what Luke is going to do for us. Luke wants to show us something. In his gospel, Luke wants to help us to get to know the truth about Christ in such a way that we’ll gladly place our complete confidence and trust in Him.

How do I know? Because in his introduction in Luke 1:1-4, Dr. Luke explains three things about his gospel.

A. Luke explained his investigation (1:1-2). “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.”

Luke was living thirty years after Christ had left the earth, sixty years after the God-man was born to peasant parents in the village of Bethlehem. The news of Jesus Christ had spread world-wide through the efforts of His followers.

Luke acknowledged to his friend Theophilus that "many" in his day had undertaken a similar project. What kind of project? “To draw up an account,” he says. “To set forth in order a declaration,” as the KJV puts it.

What kind of account? Luke says, an account of the things that had been “fulfilled among us.”

It was only natural. The proclamation of Jesus was revolutionizing the Roman world. In but one generation, the verbal proclamation had gone far and wide. The truth about Christ is world-changing.

But things passed on solely by word of mouth can soon be twisted. So it was in the first century. Some people began to misrepresent Jesus by spreading false ideas.

So certain individuals began to write down biographical sketches of Jesus. God preserved four inspired accounts that remain to this day—Matthew's account, Mark's account, John's account (which came last), and the one before us, Luke's account.

Luke himself, according to his own admission, set out on an investigation. He investigated the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

What sources did he use? He mentions that he utilized two types in his investigation. First...

1. *It involved human resources.* Notice verse 2 again. Where did Luke get the details for his biographical sketch of Jesus' life? “They were handed down to us by those who were from the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word.”

Since Luke never saw Jesus, he couldn't depend upon personal experience in his writing. Unlike the other gospel writers, he'd never seen the Savior. So he interviewed people. He talked with people. He took notes from people. What people? He describes them with two words.

He says they were "eyewitnesses." It's the Greek word *autoptai*, from which we get our word "autopsy." What's an autopsy? It's involves a personal, first-hand investigation. Autopsy means seeing for yourself. Today this medical term is used to describe post-mortem examinations. Here Dr. Luke uses the word to show us that he interviewed people who had first-hand confrontations with Jesus. Don't miss this. In writing this gospel, Luke obtained first-hand stories.

Luke uses a second term to describe the people he interviewed. He calls them “servants [ministers] of the word.” This also is a medical word, one that literally means "under-rower". In Luke's day the term was used of the doctors who helped the chief physician in a case. We call them interns today. Luke says he actually interviewed the "under-rowers," the "interns" of the "word".

Unfortunately, in our English Bibles the word "word" in verse 2 begins with a small case letter. The Greek word is *logos*. It's the same term used in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the *Word*." Who was John describing there? In verse 14 John elaborates, "And the Word became flesh." The Word, then, was Jesus.

Luke says he interviewed the "interns" of the "Word", that is, the interns of Jesus. Just who were these interns? They were the apostles for sure, and perhaps others that served Jesus. So Luke tracked down the people that had lived with Jesus for three years, the ones who had watched Him everywhere He went, and hung on every word He spoke.

Know this, dear friend. You can trust your Bible. It's historical. It's accurate.

Luke says his investigation involved human sources. His gospel undoubtedly was the fruit of countless months of research. He collected writings. He talked to anyone who had first-hand stories to tell him.

G. Campbell Morgan suggests that Luke quite possibly had met and interviewed the mother of Jesus, Mary. Why would he suggest that? Because his gospel reveals information presented in none of the other gospels about our Lord's birth.

So Luke's investigation involved human resources. But if that was all, then Luke's writing would be no more than a great literary masterpiece. A second element is vital.

2. *It involved divine inspiration.* 2 Timothy 3:16 indicates, "All Scripture is God-breathed [i.e. given by the inspiration of God]." Peter elaborated in 2 Peter 1:20-21, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

It's possible that Luke himself attests to this divine leading by use of the phrase "from the beginning" ["from the very first" in the KJV] in verse 3. This important word is translated differently elsewhere, such as in John 3:31, "He that cometh *from above* is above all." It appears in James 1:17, "Every good and perfect gift is *from above*." And in James 3:17 in a reference to "wisdom *from above*."

Whether Luke had this in mind in his choice of the word or not, we know this to be true. The fruit of his investigation was directed *from above*. That is, his scientific work was under the guidance of heaven. The Holy Spirit led him as he interviewed, as he collected sources, and then as he wrote. And the product before us, the gospel he wrote, is not merely the work of his hand. It is indeed the inspired product of God Himself.

How do we know that the message of Christ is more than a fictitious story? It's because the record we hold involved a careful, God-directed investigation.

But what did Luke do with his findings? Luke told Theophilus in verse 3.

B. Luke explained his instruction (1:3). "Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus."

What kind of document did Luke write to his friend? We discover here three features about Luke's gospel.

1. *It's thorough.* Luke says he "investigated" everything from the beginning. Luke did his homework, and it was thorough. He probed "everything" in the life of his Lord. He traced Jesus' life back to his very birth, and even before.

It's significant to note where Luke began in his gospel. He devoted extensive material to the events surrounding Jesus' birth (1:5-2:52). Why was Luke so thorough in recording the details of our Lord's birth? Because of this. If you misunderstand Jesus' birth, you'll misunderstand who He is, and what He came to do.

2. *It's accurate.* Luke didn't say he merely investigated, but "carefully" investigated. The King James' translators used the phrase, "having had *perfect* understanding."

The word carries the idea of "exactness." Undoubtedly Luke checked and rechecked his findings. And of course the Holy Spirit superintended so that the finished product was perfect. Totally accurate.

Ponder this. You can read the gospel of Luke and see Jesus exactly as He was. There is no misrepresentation. It's totally reliable.

3. *It's orderly.* Luke says it seemed good to him to write an "orderly" account of Jesus' life. Is he saying that his gospel follows a chronological order? It does that. But

Luke seems to be saying that he has arranged the various episodes and events from Jesus' life with a purpose in mind. He wants Theophilus to see the parts in relation to the whole.

Herein lies a great problem. A lot of people celebrate the birth of Christ, yet fail to see His relevance the rest of the year. And many people know that Jesus did miracles, but they don't know why. And the majority of people we rub shoulders with know that He died on a Cross, but they don't grasp what that has to do with them.

What do they need? They need Luke's *orderly* account. They need to grasp not just the parts, but the whole. It's not enough merely to know some things *about* Jesus. We need to know Jesus!

Beloved, there's nothing more important than knowing Jesus and knowing Him well. That's why Luke wrote this first book for his friend, with instruction that is thorough, accurate, and orderly. Then in verse 4...

C. Luke explained his intention (1:4). "So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Luke did not give us this gospel to entertain us. This is not intended to be a good biography to read by the fireplace at night to put you to sleep! Luke had a specific purpose in mind when he wrote this for Theophilus (and us).

What was his intention? To give us something. What? One word—*certainty*. "So that you may know the *certainty* of the things you have been taught."

Don't miss that. What did Luke want his friend to find? *Certainty*. That involves intellectual conviction, but more than that. It has to do with security.

It's not clear whether Theophilus was a believer. Undoubtedly, he had heard about Jesus. But apparently he had doubts. Maybe he couldn't buy the part he heard about Jesus being born of a virgin. Or maybe he had questions about Jesus' resurrection. Maybe it all sounded far-fetched to him.

This much we know. Luke was burdened for his friend. He wanted Theophilus to come to know personally the security that comes to a person who meets the historical Jesus.

Apparently Theophilus lacked such security. How do we know? Notice at the end of verse 4 that Luke says his friend needed certainty, "of the things you have been *taught*." The word "taught" [in the KJV, "instructed"] means "instructed by word of mouth." We actually get the word "catechism" from the Greek term Luke used. Apparently, Theophilus had learned of Jesus only through word of mouth. He didn't possess any written document to tell him of Jesus.

Luke wrote so that his friend might have a certain and secure record of Jesus Christ. He didn't want his comrade to flounder any longer. He wanted him to *know*. He wanted him to come face to face with the risen Christ.

Ponder the implications, dear friends...

1. *God's Word doesn't offer us speculation.* Rather...
2. *God's Word offers us certainty.*

Are you certain today about the truth of Christ? Do you know Him personally? Is He the Savior and Lord of your life?

If not, why not? Are you struggling with the notion that God became a man in order to save you? Does that not make sense to you?

Luke would say, "Look at the record! I've investigated the facts. I've interviewed the eyewitnesses. The gospel is true. You can believe it. And you can find security in your life if you will place the confidence of your hope in Jesus Christ!"

You might be thinking, “I’d believe in Jesus, but I can’t see Him. I can’t feel Him.” And Luke would say, “Look at the facts! Read the record I’ve given you about Jesus. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ.”

*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,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

What’s the best thing you can do for a friend? Do what Luke did. Introduce your friend to Christ. And if he knows Christ, help him to grow in Christ. Have you been doing that recently? We need to tell people the truth about Christ.

But that’s not all. There’s a second critical—although often neglected—subject that we need to discuss with our friends. Luke did with Theophilus. It’s what volume two is all about.

II. We need to know the truth about the Church.

In volume one, which is the gospel of Luke, Luke told his friend the truth about *Christ*. But he didn’t stop there. He quickly moved to a second subject, *the Church*.

That’s why Luke wrote the Book of Acts...

Notice Luke’s introductory remarks in Acts 1:1-2, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.”

Luke refers to his “former book.” What book is that? His gospel account. What was the subject matter of the first book? He reminds Theophilus that his first volume was about the life of Jesus up until the day He returned to heaven.

Yes, Theophilus needed to know about that critical first subject. He needed to know the truth about *Christ*. But that’s not all he needed. And so the Spirit directed Luke to write a second volume, the one we call “Acts,” about the wonderful subject of the *Church*.

There’s an unfortunate break in the order of the New Testament books that prevents us from seeing the connection between Luke’s two volumes. Did you realize that Luke devoted just as much (if not more) ink to the second subject as he did to the first?

There’s a modern day tragedy that was unheard of in the early days of Christianity. Many people in our day know the truth about *Christ*—and may even know Christ—but have no meaningful relationship with the *Church*.

Why? Some have bought the American notion of rugged individualism: “I don’t need anybody else. It’s just me and God.”

Others have been burned by bad church experiences. And so they’ve chucked the church.

And still others, in fact many who sit in church from week to week, fail to see the importance of the church. Belonging to the church is kind of like belonging to the *Rotary Club*. “If you’ve got some extra time on your hands, fine. But you don’t really need it, do you? Who really needs the *church*?”

To which Luke would shout, “You do!”

In fact, we need the *church* just as much as we need *Christ*. Don’t misunderstand me. We are saved by placing our faith in *Christ*, not by joining a church. But to love Christ and not love His Church is unthinkable. Why? Because the Church of Christ *is* the Body of Christ.

What's the best thing you can do for a friend? Help him to appreciate *Christ*, but don't stop there—as we often do with new believers. Do what Luke did. Help your friend learn to appreciate the *Church*.

I'm convinced we need the book of Acts just like Theophilus did. We need to know the truth about the *Church*. In the months ahead, we're going to take a walk through the book, verse by verse. But right now, I want to “fly” over the book and whet your appetite with the big picture. Luke gave us three treasures in his second volume.

A. We have a history. The book of Acts tells us what happened during the first thirty years of the Church's existence. As we scan the book we discover that...

1. *The Church began in Jerusalem (Acts 1)*. It began with the small band of Jesus' followers having a prayer meeting in an upper room. But then, as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit came and transformed this timid group into a bold army. The transformation was so drastic that within one generation...

2. *The Church spread to Rome and beyond (Acts 28)*. The book ends in chapter 28 with the apostle Paul under house arrest in the capital city of the Roman Empire. It's quite possible that Luke wrote this work while his mentor, Paul, was awaiting his trial in Rome. Someone has observed, “If his case came to court, what better court brief could Paul have had than a life of Jesus [the gospel of Luke], a history of the beginnings of the church (including the activity of Paul) and an early collection of Paul's letters?”¹

Beloved, God wants us to know why we are here. That's why He gave us Acts. When we become a Christian, we join ranks with countless others who've gone before us. We become part of something that is eternally significant! We have a history.

B. We have a mission. Luke sums up the theme of the book at the very beginning. He quotes the final words of Jesus in verse 8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Let there be no misunderstanding. That is our mission. Jesus' final words must be our first concern. Simply put...

1. *We need to know Christ.* And then...

2. *We need to make Christ known to others.* That's the mission of the Church.

And Acts makes it clear that such was the *passion* of the Church.

Church is not what they did on Sunday. Church is what they were 24-7. Next to Christ Himself, there was nothing more important in their lives than the Church. Nothing.

I'm not exaggerating. Look through the book of Acts and what do you find? You find the followers of Christ banding together in their effort to proclaim Christ to the world. They started in Jerusalem and Judea (chapters 1-7). Then they took the good news to Samaria (chapter 8). Then to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (chapters 9-12). And finally to Asia Minor and Europe—all the way to Rome (chapters 13-28).

In one generation, they proclaimed the gospel to the world as they knew it. Did it cost them? Did it ever! Many Christians actually sold property to fund the mission of the Church, a mission that cost Stephen and James and countless others their lives.

What kept them going? A third treasure contained in Acts...

C. We have a certain hope. When Jesus was on the earth He said, “I will build My Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt 16:18).” He meant what He said. And if Acts makes anything clear, it's this. He meant what He said!

¹ *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1644.

When Jesus told His followers, “You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth,” He was giving them a *promise* as much as a responsibility. You *will* be My witnesses. And they were.

Was it easy? No. Wherever the Church went, it met stiff opposition. The persecution was often fierce, the antagonism great. But the promise of the Savior was greater. You *will* be My witnesses.

In Acts we see the triumph of Christianity in the face of constant persecution. In fact, Acts provides a living color demonstration of two certainties regarding the Church.

1. *The Church is not the work of man.* Rather...

2. *The Church is the work of God.* And no man, even the emperor of Rome himself, can stand against God. This is our certain hope.

Indeed, the final verse of the book calls attention to the certain hope of the Church. Ironically, Paul is under house arrest in Rome as the book concludes, yet Luke says, “*Boldly and without hindrance* he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:31).” Even prison cannot thwart the mission of the Church!

Have you come to grips with the truth about the Church? We have a history, a mission, and a certain hope.

Let the implications sink in. If you are a Christian, you need the Church and the Church needs you. It’s a privilege to be a part of the Church. It’s also a great sin to minimize the importance of the Church.

His understanding of this prompted Martin Luther to say, “Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.” It’s not that the church provides salvation. Only God can save a sinner. But once saved, God commands that person to function as part of His Church.

Calvin wrote, “So highly does the Lord esteem the communion of His church that He considers everyone a traitor and apostate from religion who perversely withdraws himself from any Christian society which preserves the true ministry of the word and sacraments.”²

If those words sound harsh to our ears, perhaps it’s because our view of Church is more influenced by culture than Scripture.

What’s the best thing you can do for a friend? It’s to do what Luke did with Theophilus. Help him to come to grips with the truth about Christ and Christ’s Church.

I’d like to help you do that right now. In light of what we’ve just heard...

The Necessary Response: We need to make two commitments...

1. *We need to take Christ seriously.* Have you taken Christ seriously? Have you received Him as your Savior and Lord? Have you obeyed His command to be baptized? Are you living your life in obedience to Him in every area?

2. *We need to take the Church seriously.* If you are a Christian, it’s your privilege and obligation to be an active, contributing member of a local church. And to take that local church *seriously*. Commit yourself today to Christ and His Church.

² Charles W. Colson, *The Body*, 1992, Word Publishing, p. 70.