

The Cast | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

The Witnesses

Luke 1.1-4; Acts 1.1-12

April 5, 2015 – Easter Sunday

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; ⁴ so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. ³ To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. ⁴ Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶ So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." ⁹ And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹ They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." ¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

I once heard that the great football coach Vince Lombardi would sometimes enter the locker-room of his team (The Green Bay Packers) reach into his bag and say, "Gentlemen, THIS is a football".

Well, this is Easter...and maybe I'm having a Lombardi moment...but it does seem like a good moment to say, "Gentlemen, this is Christianity."

It's the foundational DAY and so THIS is it – this is what it's all about...this is the football, the Big Idea. I want to look at three BIG TRUTHS from these passages – INTRO to Luke's Gospel, Luke volume ONE and INTRO to The Acts, Luke volume two – in these two introductions WE get introduced to THE Biggest Ideas in Christianity: #1) You learn something about the FLOW of the Whole Bible #2) You learn something of the about the MAIN EVENT at the stormy center of the Bible and #3) You learn something about the nature of FAITH and REASON.

#1: What we learn about the whole Bible: This is the writer who wrote MORE of the NT than any other writer; he was a man of science, Luke the physician. His contribution to the NT was history – two volumes and we just read the INTRO TO BOTH VOL 1 & 2.

From these two introductions we infer that the Bible is basically the record of God's orchestrating history. History unfolds in Creation-Fall-Redemption and Restoration. One way to think of it is as a SIDEWAYS hourglass: Whirlpool that meets a Sprinkler. On the Hebrew side everything moves INWARD to a point (centripetal force) and then on the other side of that point everything moves OUTWARD (Centrifugal force) like a sprinkler or centrifuge (spinning OUTWARD).

The Hebrew part of the Bible (before the Gospels) moves inward – it narrows down to God's chosen nation, the Israelites. And as it progresses it narrows, God focusing on the people of Abraham...on the remnant of those Israelites who actually believe...narrowing down to their land, to their City (Jerusalem) and to the Temple and at the Center of the Temple... the Holy Place and the Mercy Seat...the symbol of God's presence and the CENTER OF THEIR FAITH that testified– “I, God, will provide a sacrifice, a substitute, to take upon Myself the JUSTICE you deserve – I will save YOU NOT IN RESPONSE TO YOUR EFFORTS but solely on the basis of MY initiative and grace.”

And IF we can picture the History of the National Jewish church (before the coming of Jesus Christ) as a sideways whirlpool...all moving to the Middle, to Jerusalem, to the Temple, then Jesus Christ is the Center of it all. He personifies Israel; He IS the Temple. He IS the dwelling place of God. He IS the Mercy Seat and the embodiment of grace... The first paragraph presents the POINT, pinnacle, vortex, the final NARROWING stage of Jewish Church.

The SECOND introduction is the very point and beginning of the CENTRIFUGAL part of the Bible ...when everything begins to spin OUTWARD: v. 8 “from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria and TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH” – outward – contraction and expansion. Luke ONE (first paragraph) is the final point of the contraction. Acts ONE, intro to Luke's 2nd volume, is the point of the EXPANSION...the great reversal...outward.

So there ya' have it: the basic flow of the whole Bible – the whole Bible BROAD-BRUSH, BIG IDEA.

#2 - What we learn about the Main Event at the violent, turbulent center of the Bible:

How do think it might BE at the INTERSECTION of a whirlpool and a centrifuge? You would IMAGINE it would be... stormy ... tumultuous... like a great crisis... like an atomic bomb ... like a Black Hole... a physics anomaly!

And such it was...here... the One who fulfilled the failed Mission of Abraham's people came ... Jesus Christ, the Personification of Israel... the Representative of a New Humanity, a New Adam who would succeed where the Old Adam failed...Jesus Christ came at this Grand Intersection, Crossroads. All the LAW of God was on His back and unlike any other human being who had ever lived, HE KEPT the Law...He delighted to obey like it was His food...His passion...He was elegant in His righteousness...not smug or condescending...but humble...the Lover of God and the friend of sinners.

He's baptized into our sin...He's covered in obligation and in BLAME. My guilt was transferred to Him...and at the Great Intersection (where everything is reversed, the Crossroads of history and the point when God came down) THERE, He was crucified for sinners...He took the condemnation I deserved ON HIMSELF...the Hell MY sin deserved fell on Him. My guilt was attributed to Him... the Truth at the Center of the Temple was now achieved ... all the symbols and types are NOW FULFILLED and He says it with His dying breath: "It is finished!"

And then...as He'd claimed... He rose... He was reconstituted ...somehow the same body but new...changed. Able to eat fish, like His old Body, but also able to pass through the grave clothes and leave it all intact...Somehow physical and touchable and yet also able to enter locked rooms and appear in places...He entered the TOMB dead...falls into the earth like a seed and emerges (with the same DNA) but now different – like an acorn becomes an oak tree...and He's seen over a period of 40 days...many witnesses saw him ...at one time 500 were gathered and looked at him ...and were all convinced that it was HE... not an impersonator but actually HIM who had been born of Mary and been a Carpenter and a Rabbi...and been crucified.

This happening is the center of the Bible's teaching – God MADE a way for sinners. This person is the Incarnation of God...He is God coming to LIVE the LIFE that we failed to LIVE and die the death that WE DESERVED to die...He is taking the blame... He is condemned so that I could be forgiven and have NEW LIFE... and His resurrection in time and space shows that it's NOT a doctrine or a theory – it's an event.

AND THIS is what Christians believe – not that all Christians would explain it that way...there are some skeptics without the facts and some believers without the facts...but these ARE the facts that Christians believe.

"A N D..." says someone... sitting in the congregation today, "that's where I get off the boat..." You may be...ya know ...ok ...with Christianity... and you agreed to come to Church

today...’cause...ya know it’s Easter and it’s nice to be in church but...T.J.: did you hear what YOU just said? Are you even listening to yourself? You said, God became a Man (and I’m not even sure there is a God) and YOU said, this Man (God-Man) died and then rose again (like an acorn...a seed) and THAT NOT ONLY SOUNDS like a fairy tale but THAT IS THE VERY REASON I CAN’T take Christianity seriously!”

“How can you expect modern people to believe that miracles are happening all the time and that a dead man...came to life...was seen for 40 days and then...what? floated up into heaven ...on clouds...? you expect me to BELIEVE that?”

And that brings us to the next point – what DO Christians mean when we talk about believing ...about faith and reason? And IS it possible to be a Christian and still be a thinking person? Can faith and reason co-exist?

What we find AT this cross-roads of HISTORY, this spiritual-physical nexus when God stepped INTO human history like never before – at this point, God provided witnesses.

Luke the chronicler takes very seriously his role as a historian. He’s patently opposing any kind of “it’s true because I said it’s true and you just have to believe it” kind of approach.

He tells this friend to whom he sort of dedicates the two-volume book, the Most Excellent Theophilus, he tells him that he did his research. He carefully consulted the eyewitnesses and put together an orderly account of what happened and the first readers could have verified the account. That’s one reason Luke and the other writers included names and locations – “Go check it out yourselves...” The first readers could access the witnesses.

The men and women Jesus Christ called to be his first disciples were chosen NOT because they were good people but (at least in part) because they would be good witnesses.

The people who first heard about these happenings weren’t the superstitious Neanderthals that modern people think they were. St Paul said, “but our message is Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness”. (1Cor 1.23) In other words, people in the first century didn’t find this easy to believe. They didn’t think miracles happened all the time. The two dominant worldviews that first heard the Christian message were programmed against it. Jewish people were offended by the idea of a suffering Messiah and Greeks thought it was philosophically stupid.

The point is – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John record their accounts with the greatest care. They’re not some kind of primitive historians unconcerned with facts – no!

Look at the words, (v.1) “many have undertaken similar investigations”: (2) “from the beginning, eyewitnesses”, (3) “investigated everything”, (3) “consecutive order”, (4) “that you

may know the exact truth about what you were taught” – see this is totally different from “just believe it because we said so!” No! It’s: “check it out for yourselves.”

Look – if you are NOT a Christian, I don’t think I’m going to give you enough facts to prove Christianity is true and COMPEL you to believe. Probably FEW people become Christians that way... though being in dialogue with people is hugely beneficial.

If however, you have discounted the Christian faith because you think it’s anti-intellectual or irrational or unscientific...I DO want to push back against that. Some of the greatest thinkers and scientists in all of human history were (and ARE) Christians who celebrated the life of the mind... and the Gospel message stands up to scrutiny. It’s grounded in historical fact and it invites honest investigation.

It’s NOT the leap into the existential abyss many people think it is. Something has to explain the whole flow of the Bible... the history of this ancient people (the Israelites, the Hebrew/Jewish people). And something had to have happened to that Body... and something has to explain why these WITNESSES stuck to their story even when it cost them everything...

If it was a group hallucination ...eventually you wake up (like when they’re throwing you to the lions and all you have to say to spare your life is “Uh, just kidding...we were all on mushrooms...or just kidding! We stole the body and I can take you there!”) But that’s not what happened.

The original witnesses...stayed with the story ...because they were witnesses not inventors... It wasn’t easy for them to believe - it cost them everything!

I’ve mentioned a book before and if you want some good scholarship on the historical recording on which Christianity is built get it – it’s called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* by Richard Bauckham – not an easy read but worth it.

The episode today ends with the disciples NOT really getting it even after all Jesus taught them both before and after the resurrection (they were still hoping the bad Romans were gonna get out of Jerusalem and leave them alone...)

They would get it though... the Day of Pentecost would change the flow from inward to outward...and they WOULD become the witnesses He promised they would be. Another fact of HISTORY to explain – how did it spread, OUT and eventually survived the Roman Empire?

For YOU and ME, the question is: DO WE GET IT?

Are you a believer without the facts or struggling with doubt? If so, I hope what I said will feed and inform your faith and send you to do some reading and studying (join a Home Group or a Sunday Class).

OR Maybe you're a skeptic without the facts – IF so...I'll bet you have some sense of your own failings and guilt and need...and I'm trying to assure you, when you come to Jesus Christ and see Him as God's answer to those needs, the Rescuer of the guilty, THEN you'll see like never before how it fits together; it's intellectually plausible like nothing else is... it has implications for all of life.

A Man rose from the DEAD never to die again...and you're being invited to JOIN HIM (I know sounds outrageous... and it IS ... and IT IS true.)

To receive this GIFT OF LIFE will make your own personal history will mean something it never has...

I'll be up here a while after the closing songs if you'd like to talk.