



Luke 1:1-4

“An Impressive Start”
(1st in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

December 2, 2012

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St.
Greenwood, SC 29646

Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org
Email: PThrailkil@aol.com (comments welcome!)

“Following Christ From City Center!”

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 1:1-4

Each of the four gospels begins in a different manner: Matthew with a genealogy (1:1-17), Mark with a brief announcement (1:1), Luke with a formal preface (1:1-4), John with a hymnic prologue (1:1-18). Luke's opening paragraph has attracted intense study since it deliberately parallels the prefaces of many ancient biographical and historical writings- a mark of sophistication! Luke knew his art and expected hearers to recognize the tradition in which he wrote. His second volume on a separate scroll, Acts, opens with a secondary preface (1:1-2) which asserts that the work of Jesus (now risen!) continues through his people in the Spirit. Jesus is the founder of a new movement with deep roots in an old faith: Judaism. Acts demonstrates how the founder continues among his followers through his heavenly rule and the Holy Spirit poured out upon them for a mission to Jews and Gentiles. Luke 1:1-4 is deliberately rhetorical with parallel structure. It is one long sentence in two parts, vv.1-2 (the *since*) and vv.3-4 (the *then*). Each has three phrases. The questions Who? What? and Why? are answered twice. A chart is helpful.

A. vv.1-2 Writers And Preachers Before Luke.	A' vv.3-4 Luke's Own Research, Writing, Purpose.
1. v.1a Who? <i>many</i>	1' v.3a Who? <i>me also</i>
2. v.1b What? <i>compile a narrative among us</i>	2' v.3b What? <i>write an orderly account most excellent Theophilus</i> (+ 4 statements of quality study)
3. v.2 Why? <i>eyewitnesses, servants</i> (+ 4 statements of quality sources) <i>the Word (logos)</i>	3' v.4 Why? <i>certainty about instruction</i> <i>the matters (logoi)</i>

Note that Luke gives us five levels of early tradition: 1) Jesus himself- *the things fulfilled among us*- though he is not yet named; 2) the eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry who became servants of this revelation- *the Word*; 3) compilers and writers before Luke- *the many*; 4) Luke's own composition- *it seemed good to me also*; 5) Theophilus and others. The trajectory continues in 6) Luke's being accepted into the canon as one of four gospels with Acts as the first church history, and 7) the use of Luke's works down to our day in reading and preaching, in art and music, in further church histories and Jesus research.

Luke highlights the quality of his sources in v.2 with a technical term for the cross-generational preservation of oral tradition (*delivered to us*.) The witnesses are early (*from the beginning*), of highest quality (*first hand*), and lead to a new vocation (*servants of the Word*). The disciples- some of whom became apostles- believed themselves to be recipients of divine revelation from God in Jesus and the Spirit that led to a new life. Fishermen became preachers! In a parallel set of four attributes in v.3b, Luke emphasizes the quality of his own work. It was 1) a following 2) of all relevant persons and materials, 3) carried out with attention to accuracy and 4) proper scope from the beginning to the present.

Luke's deep convictions are that the God of Israel has now fulfilled the promises of Scripture in a way that offers salvation in Jesus to all peoples. He numbers himself among the preservers and creative interpreters of these matters. Luke operates as a careful and self-conscious ancient historian and biographer. His preface is an artful invitation and tease to read volumes 1 and 2. The stated audience is Theophilus, likely also the patron. In a world where the Jesus story and its meaning was already being distorted, and where following Jesus involved suffering, new and old believers needed to maintain their confidence and courage in the midst of challenges within the ranks and from outside the walls. Read on!

LUKE 1:1-4 "AN IMPRESSIVE START"

One Periodic Sentence, Sophisticated Rhetorical Brevity

I. 1:1-4 LUKE'S LITERARY AND RHETORICAL PREFACE TO HIS GOSPEL: VOLUME ONE.

Engage The Wider World, 35 ft. Scroll, 32 ft. For Acts

A. 1:1-2 Gospel Writers And Preachers Before Luke: 3 Parts. c. Mid-80's Of First Century?

1a	1	Inasmuch as (because) many have undertaken (lit. <i>set heir hands</i>)	WHO?	Protasis, <i>If</i> (vv.1-2), Canon Still Forming Level 3, Cause = Other Writers Incremental Innovation Within A Tradition
b	2	to compile (arrange) <i>a narrative</i> of the things (<i>events</i>) that have been accomplished (fulfilled) among <i>us</i> ,	WHAT?	Church = Center Of Activity: <i>Us</i> p.v. <i>By God</i> , Heb. 2:3-4, Salvation/Fulfilled Prophecy
Quality (4)	2	3a just as they were delivered to <i>us</i>	WHY?	p.v. 4:21, 22:37, 24:44, Acts 1:16, 3:18 Orally, 1 Cor. 15:3, 11:23, Heb. 2:3
		b1 by those who from the beginning		Level 2, Acts 1:21-22, 10:37, 1 Group, 8:1-3
		b2 were <u>eyewitnesses</u>		<i>First Hand</i> : Valued In Ancient Histories, Acts 4:20
		b3 and became servants of <i>the Word (logos)</i> ,		<i>Committed</i> , Acts 1:8, 21-22, 6:2-4, 10:37, 11:15, 13:31-32
				History: Luke Has Documents/Eye-Witnesses/Research

B. 1:3-4 Luke's Own Gospel Research And Writing In This Ongoing Tradition: 3 Parts.

Apodosis, *Then* (vv.3-4) Level 4, Careful Historian, Larger Audience

3a	1'	it seemed good to me also,	WHO?	<i>Me also</i> (Luke), Acts 15:22-28 (HS!) No Critique Of Predecessors
Care (4)				Luke Proclaims Jesus/Truth
b	2'a	having investigated (followed)	Task: Up To Date	WHAT?
	b	all things	Scope: Sources/People	A Credible, Orderly Account// Acts 1:1
	c	accurately	Method: History	Acts 18:26, Erudition Leading To Insight!
	d	from the first	Extent: Origins	Historian, Not Necessarily Chronological (Acts 26:5)
c		to write <i>an orderly</i> (continuous) <i>account</i> for you, most excellent Theophilus,		Level 5, Believer? Elite Patron Goal = <i>Truth, Nothing But The Truth</i>
4	3'	that you may know the <u>certainty</u> concerning the matters (<i>logoi</i> , things) about which you have been instructed.	WHY?	vs. Distortions, Acts 2:23, 11:4 25:26 Your Confidence/Appropriation vs. Distortions/Suffering Acts 18:25, 1 Cor. 14:19 = Pastoral Theology
				Oral/Written Materials, The Faith Must Be <i>Well Taught</i> = Catechesis

7 Parts Of Ancient Historical/Biographical Prefaces

Parallels in Luke's Preface (1:1-4)

1.	Author's predecessors, often with critical comments.	1.	"Inasmuch as many have undertaken" (no criticism)
2.	Subject matter of the work.	2.	"the things that have been fulfilled among us"
3.	Author's qualifications for writing.	3.	a. <u>Luke's Quality Sources</u> : "delivered us to/ by those who from the beginning/ were eyewitnesses/ and became ministers of the word"
	Eyewitnesses valued for ancient history		b. <u>Luke's Personal Care</u> : "having investigated/ all things/ accurately/ from the first"
4.	Statement of arrangement or table of contents.	4.	"an orderly account" (not necessarily chronological)
5.	Purpose of the writing.	5.	"that you may have certainty (know the truth)"
6.	Author's name.	6.*	Omitted. 2 nd Century tradition attributes gospel to Luke.
7.	Official addressee(s) and/or patron.	7.	"most excellent Theophilus" (lover of God)

7 Layers of Testimony From Jesus To Today: A Process In History, Superintended By The Holy Spirit In The Church

6BC-30AD	Level 1:	<i>The person and works of Jesus</i> (historical, crucified, risen and ruling Lord)
	↑↓	
30-90A.D.?	Level 2:	<i>Eyewitnesses</i> (1 st generation: saw/oral reports: John's baptism through ascension) <i>who became ministers of the Word</i> (first disciples/apostles after Pentecost: proclaim)
	↑↓	
60-85A.D.?	Level 3:	<i>Other narratives</i> (Mark, Q, Matthew? various oral and written collections)
	↑↓	
80A.D.?	Level 4:	<i>Us</i> = Luke (2 nd generation) who received and investigated the testimony of others
	↑↓	
80A.D. +	Level 5:	<i>Theophilus</i> and other contemporary readers of Luke-Acts (3 rd generation)
-----	↑↓	
1-4 th Century	Level 6:	Reception into the canon of the New Testament by the church: 4 Gospels.
	↑↓	
4 th -21 st Century/Beyond	Level 7:	Christian history/tradition down to us; Jesus still rules his church by the Spirit today!

AN IMPRESSIVE START

“... it seemed good to me also,
having investigated all things accurately from the first...”

Luke understated reason for writing the most beautiful book ever written.

L U K E 1 : 3a

Ours is a casual age. Some would say *sloppy*, but casual will do. Companies have *casual Fridays* in which employees *dress down*. Some have gone *all casual*. Formality is on the way out, except on rare occasions. Hierarchy has been flattened. Pop culture has swallowed adult culture. It’s amazing what people wear to Wal-Mart these days; there’s even a humorous website devote to spectacular spottings.

As a child I vividly remember my parents dressing up for formal dances in the late 1950's, most often around Christmas and New Year’s. The feel of a satin tuxedo lapel between my little fingers, the funny waistband I learned to call a *cummerbund*, and my father’s onyx cuff links with monograms always fascinated me. Pleated shirts and suspenders. Chiffon and taffeta make different sounds than the normal clothes your mother wears around the house. My pants never had purple stripes down the sides. These were curio items from a parallel universe, an adult world to which I was not privy. Thirty minutes in their dressing room, and my parents were transformed from mom and dad into an elegant couple needing a horse-drawn carriage- or at least a chauffeur I imagined- to match their sophistication. Chanel No. 5 was the fragrance I remember when I was kissed goodnight, left with the babysitter and a pat on the noggin. There was daily life, and then there were *occasions* and *events*. Early on I learned the distinction. Ours is a casual age. Polos have replaced pleated French shirts; Rockports have replaced patent leather. I will not comment on cargo pants at weddings or spray-on t-shirts for young women on Sunday mornings. I am a pastor, not the fashion police.

Looking up, I asked, “Why are you so dressed up?”

“It’s a formal, black-tie event,” my dad replied as he deftly manipulated his bow tie so the dimple was in the middle. I remember feeling somewhat like a butler on such occasions as I padded around the house in my footed pajamas with the buttons in front and flap in the back. I opened the door as they left; they in turn gave me a slight bow. There was a feeling of childlike awe as they departed to worlds unknown. Several years ago in



Luke 1:1-4 5

Georgetown Lori and I went to four formals in two weeks. It was a little much, but also fun. Ours is a casual age. Something is lost, something gained. You be the judge.

But there are times when only the best is good enough, times when elegance and sophistication and expense are in order, say when you are building a cathedral, composing a symphony or researching a new presidential biography. There are times when casual is out of place, not up to the task. It was such an occasion when Luke, with help from a sponsor, hired a professional scribe who unrolled a thirty-five foot scroll of expensive papyrus sheets to write the opening sentence of Luke’s old and new story about Jesus and the movement of life he founded, a movement that welcomed outsiders- in those days Gentiles and women- into equal participation with Jewish men as followers of Jesus.

Our best guess is that Luke dictated from his carefully arranged sources- some written and others oral, but that a professional scribe actually marked out the columns and carefully inscribed the Greek capital letters one after another with no spaces or punctuation; that’s how it was done to get the most on a page. Such ancient biographies and histories took a professional to write them and a trained person to read them by mentally putting the spaces between the words and knowing where the paragraphs began and ended. It was a sophisticated endeavor, one for which Luke needed a well-heeled sponsor, and in this case we know both his name and the title of honor he bore, *most excellent Theophilus*. A patron, a man of some standing, one willing to support a Syrian Jewish physician from Antioch who had become a second-generation Jesus-follower, who then became a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, who had the intellectual and literary gifts to do the research, compile the sources, speak to the remaining eyewitnesses, weigh the evidence and present the meaning of Jesus and his followers for later generations to read and ponder. Quite a resume.

Luke knew he was standing on the shoulders of those who had earlier preserved the traditions about Jesus. He also knew the Greek literary and historical tradition. He knew he had only once chance to make a first impression in a formal preface, and he knew that his patron would be pleased. How does one strengthen the faith of a new believer and give him confidence any better than present two magnificent volumes for reading and reflection: the life of Jesus, Volume 1, and the life of the early church, Volume 2? All copies came from that original, formulated by Luke the author and written by a scribe whose name is now lost. The chapel at MUSC is *St. Luke’s Chapel*. How many hospitals have been built in his name? Think of the art and music that have come from his first two chapters only, what we call *the Christmas story*. So with the advantage of hindsight, when Luke says, “it seemed good to me also,” we see behind that decision the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹ He did not know what fruit would come of his work, but neither do we. We are to obey the

¹ Acts 15:22-28.

promptings of the Spirit and bring all our human creativity and training to bear on whatever is the work before us that honors Jesus Christ and serves his people.

Our best traditions are that Luke was martyred at age 84 and buried at Thebes in Greece where his tomb was venerated.² The lead coffin was transferred to Constantinople in A.D. 338 and later taken to Padua in Italy likely in the 8th century during a controversy about images and relics. In 1354 the skull was separated from the body at the order of Emperor Charles IV and is now housed in Prague. The marble sarcophagus was opened in 1562, but in 1992 the bishop of Padua received a request from a Greek bishop that a portion of the bones be returned to Thebes as a courtesy.

In 1998, under the supervision of an Italian pathologist and a population geneticist, the 400 year old lead seals were removed, the coffin opened, and scientific tests began. In the coffin was found the skeleton but not the head. It appears the body had decomposed in the coffin because of matching insect marks on the lead and the pelvis which had fused to the lead. DNA tests on a tooth found in the coffin revealed the bones of a Syrian male who died between A.D. 72 and A.D. 416. That is consistent with what we know of Luke but not proof. When the head was brought back from Prague, it fit perfectly the top neck bone like a key in a lock, as did the tooth when fitted back into the right jaw. The dimensions of the coffin exactly fit to the millimeter Luke’s old tomb in Thebes. Evidence for continuity was mounting. In 2000, a rib near the heart was returned to the tomb in Thebes.³

Now since we Protestants- with a few exceptions- have abandoned the veneration of holy relics and their healing virtues, it does not much matter whose the bones are since we have both Luke’s gospel and Acts, but could it be that the one whose book we begin to read today now lies in three pieces: in Prague, Padua, and Thebes? If it is Luke- and I think it likely- and if the seals were again broken, you could touch the bones of the hands that doctored St. Paul and the bones of the feet that traveled to do the research for his historical biography of Jesus, one who himself knew the Apostles. Now you may find this macabre; I find it fascinating as a reminder that ours is an historical faith, not some fairy tale, and that just as Luke was himself an historical investigator, so should we be. We cannot assume anything any longer; we must teach the whole faith from top to bottom to new generations.

² For an article on the tomb, <http://full-of-grace-and-truth.blogspot.com/2008/10/st-luke-evangelist.html>.

³ Nicholas Wade, “Body of St. Luke Gains Credibility,” October 16, 2001, www.nytimes.com. For the scientific paper, “Genetic characterization of the body attributed to the evangelist Luke,” see www.pnas.org/content/98/23/13460.full.

As an aside, it is also highly probable that the bones of St. Peter are indeed under the altar at the Vatican and that the bones of Paul have been recently verified in a Roman Church that bears his name.⁴ Our ancient Christian heroes were buried somewhere; the sites were honored early on as places of pilgrimage; many had churches built over their graves, so why be surprised? Our faith is not about myths but real people, only one of which has so far had his flesh and bones transformed by resurrection, and that is Jesus. Luke and the rest of our dead, including Peter and Paul and my grandmother Lida, still await the great event.

Saint Luke combines for me many attractive characteristics. He was historically grounded, theologically sophisticated, and cross-culturally savvy. He used the most sophisticated communications medium of his day- the hero's biography- to display the church's Savior before a pagan world. He was a publisher, a fund and friend raiser. He was a traveling missionary and the church's first written historian. He believed in science and miracles, medicine and prayer. He was open to the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit as a Pentecostal person, and he was ever-tender to the poor and alert to justice issues. He consistently portrayed women and men and equals in the church. So vivid are his written portraits of the holy family that he is not only the patron saint of medicine but also of icon painters, and in holy tradition is said to have painted the first icon of the Lord's mother.

Perhaps by immersing ourselves in his gospel on Sunday mornings and his story of the early church on Wednesday evenings, we may come to see what he saw of the human and divine Jesus and be ourselves transformed by it, as I have often said, "There's nothing wrong with Pastor Phil or any of the churches he's served that more of Jesus won't cure." So it is with a sense of holy privilege, since I too stand on the shoulders of giants- including particularly my professor Dr. Charles Talbert who spend nearly his whole career with Luke and Acts- that I launch into this series with anticipation that the Holy Spirit will pour life and light upon this church as we pay close attention. And since I turn sixty next year, I do not know if I will ever again work through this material in quite the same way. What a privilege for us both! I am committed to quality preparation, and I hope that is matched on your part by quality attendance and listening with prayer. And if God grants us mercy, we will all be changed with a new hunger to know and follow the Lord among his people.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

If sometime toward the end of the first century you had wandered into a house church in Antioch and heard only the first paragraph of Luke's gospel, you would know several things about the author. That he was a biographer of the founder of a new movement with roots

⁴ "Pope: Basilica bones belong to apostle St. Paul," www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/europe/06/29/vatican.st.paul.bones/index.

Luke 1:1-4 8

in the old religion of the Jews, that his Greek was good, and that the first paragraph was a formal preface which laid out his credentials and purpose.⁵ You would also notice that the founder's name was not mentioned in the Preface, and that might make you curious. The reading, however long it continued, was slow and deliberate, and afterwards one of the leaders talked about the reading and what it meant. Not many could read from such scrolls, and since the life of the founder was still thought to be among his people through his Spirit, this was more than history; it was life.

And if you were especially astute listener, you would mentally separate the five levels of Luke's tradition in his opening paragraph:

1. First the founder of the new movement;
2. then the eyewitnesses who first promoted his cause;
3. thirdly, other writers who served as Luke's sources, the chief of which was likely Mark;
4. then Luke's own updated version of the Jesus history;
5. and finally, Theophilus as the first hearer, and later on congregations like the one you visit today as copies were spread.

That's five layers in one long, highly structured sentence. You would nod and think, "Well presented, as good as any. Perhaps I should find out who these Christians are so keen on this man Jesus whom I am told was crucified by one of our governors six decades ago."

Tradition is a good word. It refers to what was carefully handed down across generations, and the more important the information, the more careful the transmission. We today are the beneficiaries of a long tradition that reached across the ages with the gift of this story. We are indebted. We are not free to change the core Christian tradition or the teaching it embodies, though we must apply it fresh to each generation as Luke did. In Luke's day there were already five layers. Who can tell how many more stand along the trail that bridged the story of Jesus over time and down to us? What did it take to get the story to you? From Jerusalem to Antioch to Corinth to Rome to Canterbury in England and Plymouth in Massachusetts, then down the coast to Carolina till one day you showed up at a baptism or Sunday School or a worship service where someone taught you "Jesus loves me, this I know," gave you a Bible and asked, "Would you like to be part of what God is doing in the

⁵ On the preface, see Charles Talbert, *Luke* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1982), 7-11; for more recent assessments of Luke 1:1-4, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), "The Preface to Luke's Gospel," 116-123; David Garland, *Luke: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 2011), 49-58.

world?” Under the propulsion of God’s Spirit the story reached from *then to now* and from *there to here* and from *them to me* so I could be reconciled to God and uncover the purpose of my life. One of the joys of heaven- and after that the kingdom- will be to review and personally meet each link of the human chain that brought the story near and to thank each one. I get to know the God of Jesus and be part of a people who span space and time because a long line of saints and scholars and preachers and missionaries passed on the story intact. The question is, Will we? Are we grateful enough for the treasures to pass them on?

Luke begins with a reference to those who came before, “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us...” What is hidden here is an indirect reference to God. Events have *been accomplished* and *been fulfilled*, and who is it that has done the fulfilling of ancient prophecies and hopes? None other than the God of the Jews. And since God has been busy, we have to get busy informing people by writing gospels and sending missionaries!

Luke then gives us a footnote on the high quality of his sources, and as the author of a history, quality sources matter. Luke had access not just to those with first-hand knowledge of a part of Jesus’ ministry but to those who followed him *from the beginning*, meaning from his baptism by John the Baptist onwards,⁶ about three or so years. And since there were many such people, they were self-correcting. The material was eye-witness, from the start, and with many internal controls. The experience had also changed their lives, so that after Jesus’ resurrection they did not go back to life as before but risked their reputations and lives as *servants of the Word*, another name for Christian story-tellers and missionaries. This was the body of tradition Luke says was *delivered to us*, meaning Luke was not operating alone. Four marks of quality: the stories and their meaning was formally passed on by early, first-hand observers whose lives it changed. God was at work, Jesus was the point man, and they were the first products of his singular life. Pretty impressive.

There is a shift from past to present in verse 3 as Luke turns to his own writing with the simple phrase *it seemed good to me also*, which is a humble and indirect way of claiming the authorization of the Holy Spirit. Mark’s story was already circulating, but it lacked birth stories, resurrection accounts, and was not followed by church history, so Luke drew it up into a new and larger whole, like taking a small house and building a much larger house around it. Then, just as he gave four marks of his quality sources, Luke adds four marks of his quality work. He investigated and came up-to-date; nothing was left out; the research valued accuracy and confirmation, and it went back to the beginning, as he said, “having investigated/ all things/ accurately/ from the first.” Great sources plus thorough methodology are the stuff of quality history, and Luke has them all.

⁶ Acts 1:12-26.

Luke 1:1-4 10

He then tells us why all the bother. So that one man, his patron *Theophilus*, and all who get access to copies later on, may have their new faith strengthened and grounded in the facts about Jesus and what they mean. What a privilege for Theophilus to be presented the two scrolls of Luke and Acts and to begin to hear them read in public and discussed with Luke providing commentary, as he said, *that you may know the certainty concerning the matters about which you have been instructed.*

There is a proper Christian confidence that remains humble yet assured, and the crisis in our day is that we have lost our theological confidence because we have not done for our generation what Luke did for Theophilus. It takes work, it takes study, it takes patience to pass on the content and meaning of the classic Christian faith and the new life that flows from it. And here the one is the key to many, just as what was prepared for Theophilus was copied, made the cut for the New Testament, then spread around the world as one of the four approved biographies of Jesus, four windows into one amazing life.⁷ We must know the faith; we must teach the faith; we must add our testimonies of what this Jesus has done for us, and we must respect the difficulty and necessity of this work. It is highly interactive, both with the primary sources and with the lives and questions of the people before us. The traffic moves in both directions; gospel to life, and life to gospel.

From these opening four verses I draw a number of insights. First, that the tradition about Jesus is precious; it is a spiritual treasure unlike any in the world, and that we as the church are responsible to make it accessible to each new generation, just as Luke did fifty or so years after the foundational events. The tradition is our spiritual umbilical cord that connects us to our mother. Our faith is always only one generation away from extinction. In Scripture reading, in hymns, in liturgies and sermons and poems and songs and testimonies we preserve and pass on the tradition of Jesus. It is the work of evangelism to notify people about what God has done and to invite them to join the community of faith where the traditions about Jesus live on because he is alive and at work in our midst.

Secondly, I learn that each individual's faith journey is to be taken seriously. Luke wrote for an audience of one, giving spiritual direction to a well-off Greek convert Theophilus. He had received instruction, enough perhaps for baptism, but he needed more to grow up in Christ and move beyond the basics towards intellectual and spiritual maturity. Theophilus is an example of the Christian who never ceases to read and study and think, unlike many who never attend a class, read a serious book, or apply their gray matter to the faith. They are carried by the tradition, but they do not explore it firsthand as did Theophilus.

⁷ On the fourfold witness, see Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels And The One Gospel Of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press, 2000), Chapter II, "The Authors of the Four Gospels..." 8-33.

Thirdly, that our faith is open to historical investigation. It is not a myth or a legend but rooted in events and interpreted by faith. We are convinced that God the creator, the one who called Israel into being, has acted decisively in Jesus Christ, and that the whole world needs access to the story. Jesus is God’s final word to the whole human family.

A decade and a half ago in a series of dialogs between liberal and conservative leaders in our church, Bishop Judith Craig- representing the theological left- stated the alternatives clearly. She described “two divergent world views, ways of coming at reality” related to God’s revelation to humanity. One, she said, believes that the “Holy Spirit’s activity is such that we continue to receive *new* revelation of God (emphasis on the word *new*),” while the other “believes the Holy Spirit is active in helping us comprehend *what has already been revealed*.”⁸ I ask you: Is God giving us *new stuff* that is not in the Scripture, or is God giving us new insight into the *old stuff* already in the book? It is a major division.

I do not believe in new revelation, and that marks me as a theological conservative, not a political but a theological conservative; a theological conservative may be politically radical if they use the faith to critique the culture and its power arrangements. And here I think myself in line with Luke who had a keen sense of being faithful to the tradition that came before him. Beware of any who claim new revelation not found in Scripture because they are about to take the church hostage for an alien agenda. This is the weakness and now the impending death of the mainline churches which are already breaking apart into new alliances.⁹ In our hunger for relevance, we have been more impressed with the intellectual fashions of our age than with the deposit of truth God has given.¹⁰

Bishop Craig’s error is the same as that of Mormonism of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Once we cut ourselves off from the authority of the tradition found in Holy Scripture and read through the Trinitarian creeds, we inevitably move off into heresy and cult-like religion. Some other book, written by a psychologist or sociologist or politician or self-proclaimed prophet, replaces the Bible and the faith as touchstones. I warn you in this day of pluralism not to pay attention to any teaching that is not found in Scripture or cannot be proved

⁸ United Methodist News list, Monday, November 24, 1997, Internet.

⁹ For a proposal on why United Methodists should not be understood as *mainline*, see Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist: Recovering Our Evangelistic Mission* (Nashville, Tn.: Discipleship Resources, 2008).

¹⁰ For a tough but fair critique of the theological program of Dr. Albert Outler and its baleful effects on United Methodism for the last fifty years, see William H. Abraham, *Celtic Fire* (Dallas, Tx.: Highland Loch Press, 2012), especially Chapter 1, “Holy Smoke,” 1-32; also his *Wesley for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2005).

thereby.¹¹ This is what our Methodist doctrines teach. There is no new revelation. Jesus is God’s last word to the human family, and the canon is closed. No more Scripture is being written. There’s enough in there to keep us busy and growing for a lifetime of faithful service. The Holy Spirit *brings to memory* what Jesus said; he does not give *new* revelation which contradicts the old. New revelation is simply old errors dressed up for a new day of deception. It will become increasingly important for United Methodists to know what we say *Yes* to and what we say *No* to because the boundaries are getting fuzzy, even to some of our bishops who are charged not to change the faith but to uphold and defend it against error.

If we are to remain recognizably Christian as United Methodists, we must attend to our doctrinal core which ties us to the central stream of Christian tradition. Our Methodist warm heart, our easy tolerance, or shallow American pragmatism, our dislike of controversy, our naive trust in denominational leaders and our lack of attention to the teaching of Bible and theology to laity has landed us in a mess. We are not to become the pleasant, smiling chaplain of an increasingly self-indulgent culture. To be busy and mean well is no substitute for hard thinking and disciplined living. We are to be a clear alternative, both in terms of what we believe and how we behave, particularly in the area of sexual ethics across the board. Our Christian tradition is a living tradition; it has flexibility which is how it has adapted itself and yet remained faithful for nearly two thousand years, but it also has boundaries, and it is at the boundaries that today’s attacks are most fierce.

That is my reading of Luke’s first sentence: Luke the physician and Jewish convert, Luke the historian, Luke the theologian, Luke the evangelist, Luke the spiritual guide, Luke the author, Luke the martyr, the same Luke whose bones are now scattered among the churches West and East. This is a dangerous book to be read and discussed in public. The author was hung at age 84 because his pagan neighbors could not take it any more of his faith and witness. He just would not shut up about Jesus. Following Jesus among his people will make you different, and if not, it is not him you are following. Read along with me. Pray that the Holy Spirit help us *get it*. I am hungry for living realities. I need help.

**Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
December 2, 2012 (1 Advent)**

¹¹ “The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite and necessary to salvation...,” *The Book of Discipline 2008*, 60.
