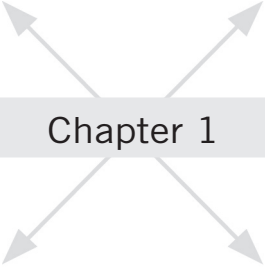


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Chapter 1

IF GOD SAYS HE LOVES YOU, CHECK IT OUT

If you were Luke, traveling companion of the apostle Paul, and you wanted to set about writing the story of Jesus Christ, where would you start?

You never actually met Jesus face-to-face, so you're going to have to construct the story secondhand. Divine inspiration will play a huge role, but you probably don't know that yet. Many accounts of Jesus' life—some credible, others not so much—were circulating during the first century. So your first task would be to read as many of those accounts as you could, and start formulating questions.

Then you'd put together a list of people you needed to talk to—people who were there, who knew Jesus at various times in his life. Credible sources. You'd interview those people at length, asking them who, what, when, where, why, and how. You'd take careful notes, because the tape recorder will not be invented for another 1,900 years. Then you'd compile those notes into your story—choosing what to include and what to

leave out, based on whether it contributed to the overall point of the story.

Having done all that, you'd finally write a well-researched, orderly, credible account for your audience, the early church, so people could know what really happened and what it all meant.

We have just described the work of a journalist. Well, except for the part about divine inspiration. A journalist examines facts; interviews eyewitnesses; collects details; produces a story that is timely, important, and interesting; and delivers it to an audience. The purpose (beyond eking out a modest living, of course) is to authoritatively show the audience what happened, and why they should care.

Look at the first four verses of Luke's gospel. Before launching into the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Luke the physician introduces himself as Luke the journalist:

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 from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 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. (Luke 1:1–4 NIV)

A sign used to hang in Chicago's famed City News Bureau: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." It

admonished reporters to verify all claims with eyewitness accounts.

Nineteen centuries ago, Luke checked it out. All of it. Interviewing key people, he carefully reconstructed the events of Jesus' life, providing the kind of vivid details that modern features editors live for:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. (Luke 2:8–9 ESV)

Without Luke, Christmas today would look completely different. We wouldn't have nativity scenes. No pageants. No "Angels We Have Heard on High." Gospel writers Mark and John skip Jesus' birth altogether. Matthew tells us about the magi, but only gives bare-bones details about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Luke gives us the shepherds, the angels, no room at the inn, the manger, the swaddling clothes.

Want to know how a reporter gets a better story than anyone else? Better sourcing. And who would be the best source for all that happens in Luke 1 and 2?

Mary.

How else could Luke have quoted the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise upon learning she was pregnant? How else would he have discovered the details of John's birth, or his parents' responses? How would he have known about Simeon and Anna in the temple, and their reaction upon seeing the baby Jesus? Luke includes details that only Mary would have

known, and he leaves us this clue in chapter 2, verse 19: “but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often” (NLT).

DETAILS, DETAILS

Good journalism pays attention to detail. Not just random detail, but revealing detail—something that helps people understand the story better, even to see it in their mind’s eye. Luke’s gospel brims with this kind of detail.

On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. (Luke 5:17–19 ESV)

Matthew recounts this same episode, but omits some of the revealing detail: the crowded room, digging a hole in the roof, lowering the man through it into the middle of the room.

Another example:

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seek-

ing to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:1–8 ESV)

Luke scoops all the other gospel writers on this one, and in so doing captures one of the best examples of Jesus’ straightforward brand of grace. Again, the crowd, the kind of tree Zacchaeus climbed, the dialogue . . . vintage Luke.

Notice the punchy sentences, the sharp action verbs, the rare adjective here and there. In Luke, God chose a writer who happened to be a doctor to give us a whole book of clear snapshots of Jesus’ life. In so doing, Luke did the painstaking legwork of an ace reporter.

Good journalists are good sifters. They take a pile of pieces—some of which belong, some of which don’t—and construct them into something that makes sense and looks good.

In his book *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement*, Michael Card says of Luke, “He has ‘ordered’ the story of Jesus. He has collected stories and grouped them together in meaningful ways.”

That’s exactly what journalists do. We are not stenographers, reporting every detail of an event with equal weight. We choose the most significant as our focus.

The apostle John gives us a hint about the amount of leg-work that all four gospel writers had to do in the final verse of his account of Jesus' life.

Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25, NLT)

What Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had to do, then, was sift. They had to take the best stories and work them into narratives that captured Jesus' life accurately and fairly. Writing with the Holy Spirit sitting at the editor's desk probably made that task easier, but still—can you imagine the stories they could have told but ran out of time and space to write? Look what we have, think about what the gospel writers must have left out, and it makes the Gospels that much more impressive.

WHO IS THIS GUY?

The eighth and ninth chapters of Luke are, in themselves, an example of masterful journalism (remember that the chapter and verse divisions were added centuries later). Chapter 8 opens with Jesus and his growing band of followers—now including women—traveling from town to town. It sets the scene. The story then lets readers tag along as Jesus teaches from town to town. We get the parables of the farmer scattering seed and of the lamp.

Then, a pivotal scene: the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the terrified disciples, and Jesus ordering the storm to be calm. A short, powerful quote from his stunned disciples: "Who is this

man? When he gives a command, even the wind and waves obey him!”

“*Who is this man?*” That’s the central question of the Gospels, distilled into one amazing, short anecdote about a storm and a boat. Notice that Luke himself doesn’t ask the question. He lets the story’s characters ask it, in dialogue. And then, for the rest of chapters 8 and 9, Luke sets about answering it—again not by telling us, but by *showing* us.

In chapter 8, Jesus not only is shown to hold power over the weather. He holds power over demons—shown as he casts a legion of them out of a man and into a herd of pigs. He holds power over sickness and disease—shown as the hemorrhaging woman touches the fringe of his robe and immediately is healed. And he even holds power over death—shown as he raises the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader.

In Chapter 9, Luke keeps building toward an answer by stringing together key scenes. Jesus’ sending out of the disciples and feeding of the 5,000 show his ability and desire to provide for people’s needs. Then, the central question again—this time asked of the disciples two different ways by Jesus himself: “Who do people say I am? . . . Who do you say I am?” After some of the disciples give the standard “one of the prophets” response, Peter exclaims, “You are the Messiah, sent from God!”

Cue the dramatic music. It’s finally out there. Chapter 9, verse 20. Jesus’ true identity, bluntly stated by a man who never minced words. Jesus then quickly reminds them not to tell anyone—and that the Messiah is not what they expected.

“*Who is this man?*” That’s a question every journalist should ask himself when composing a story about a person. It’s the heart of every good profile. And then, the real art is

to reveal the answer not in statements, but in stories and dialogue. Luke does this throughout his gospel and Acts; he gives readers enough clues to figure it out for themselves.

SIMON (PETER) SAYS . . .

In the latter part of Acts, Luke does much of his reporting firsthand based on his travels with Paul. Earlier, though, he employs the same reporting techniques he used for his gospel. Luke wasn't present for Peter's miraculous escape from jail, so he would have had to reconstruct Acts 12:6–19 based on an interview with Peter. Let's imagine how that interview might have gone:

Luke: So, I heard you escaped from prison.

Peter: Yeah, it was crazy.

Luke: What happened?

Peter: Well, an angel came in the middle of the night and let me out.

Luke: An angel? What did he do?

Peter: Well, he pushed on me, and when I woke up there was this bright light.

Luke: He pushed on you? Where?

Peter: On my side.

Luke: Then what happened?

Peter: He told me to get dressed and put on my sandals.

Luke: Were those his exact words?

Peter: Yeah.

Luke: Did he say anything else?

Peter: He said, "Now put on your coat and follow me."

Luke: Exact words?

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- Peter: Exact words. So I did what he said and followed him out of the cell.
- Luke: Wait. Weren't you chained somehow?
- Peter: Oh, yeah. I was chained to two guards, but when the angel woke me up, the chains just fell off.
- Luke: Two guards were *chained* to you?
- Peter: Yeah.
- Luke: Where were the chains attached?
- Peter: At the wrists.
- Luke: And the chains fell off? How?
- Peter: I don't know. They just fell off.
- Luke: The guards didn't wake up?
- Peter: I don't really know. The whole thing was kind of like a dream. I had this angel in front of me, so I wasn't paying a lot of attention to the guards, you know?
- Luke: So then what happened?
- Peter: Well, I just followed the angel and we walked out.
- Luke: Did anyone see you?
- Peter: I'm not sure. We went past two guard posts and then went through the gate leading to the city.
- Luke: Wouldn't that gate have been closed and locked?
- Peter: Yeah, it just opened by itself.
- Luke: What were you thinking?
- Peter: You know, after that thing with the animals and the bedsheet, I just assumed this was another weird dream.
- Luke: When did you realize it wasn't?
- Peter: After we walked through that gate. All of a sudden the angel was gone, and it hits me: It's really

true. The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jewish leaders had planned to do to me!

Luke: I just want to be sure I get some background here. Herod Agrippa put you in prison?

Peter: Yeah.

Luke: When was that?

Peter: During Passover week. It was right after he had James killed. We heard Herod was going to put me on trial and have me killed right after Passover.

Luke: What happened when Herod realized you were gone?

Peter: Well, from what we heard, he had people searching everywhere. When they didn't find me, he questioned the guards, but they didn't know what happened. So he had them killed. I still feel bad about that part.

Luke: Okay, so you're walking down the street and you've realized this is no dream. Where did you go?

Peter: I went to Mary's house—John Mark's mother. Turns out, a bunch of people were praying for me there.

Luke: That must have been quite a shock to them when you showed up at the gate.

Peter: It was pretty funny, actually. A servant girl answered the door in the gate. She knew my voice and got all excited that I was there. So she runs back inside, and here I am still standing outside, banging on the door.

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Luke: Ha! I assume somebody finally came back and let you in?

Peter: Yeah. They couldn't believe it. It got kind of loud, so I had to motion for them to be quiet.

Luke: What did you say to them?

Peter: I told them what happened and told them to tell James and the others.

Luke: Oh, forgot to ask you before: Do you know the servant girl's name?

Peter: It was Rhonda, I think. Something like that. You might want to check with Mary on that.

THE STORY YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ IS TRUE

There's another reason Luke's writing remains so powerful: the stories really happened. They pass what newsrooms call the "smell test." The reporter did such a thorough job, and has earned such credibility with peers, that people believe what they read. Here's where journalism departs radically from novels and short stories. Good journalists don't make stuff up.

In 1981, Janet Cooke of the *Washington Post* won the Pulitzer Prize for her incredible profile of an 8-year-old heroin addict. Problem was, it turned out not to be true. Cooke was forced to resign and return her prize.

Journalism schools still teach about Cooke—and about Stephen Glass of the *New Republic* in the 1990s, and Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* in the early 2000s. They're cautionary tales: fabricate a story, or even a quote, and you'll eventually get caught. You'll lose all credibility. Your journalism career will be over.

Now think about Luke. In response to many less-than-

credible stories circulating, he's interviewing eyewitnesses for his "careful account." These interviewees very likely will read and react to his account. By the time Luke writes his gospel—around AD 60—people are being martyred for the cause of Jesus Christ. This had better be absolutely, without-question accurate. To modify Jason Robards' classic line from *All the President's Men*: "Nothing's riding on this. Just the formation of the church and future of the whole world."

The part of Luke's account that required the most care, the part that everything was riding on and, frankly, the part hardest for skeptics to believe, was Jesus' resurrection.

Thankfully, both Luke and John devote significant space in their gospels to postresurrection scenes.

Luke places special emphasis on the Road to Emmaus scene (chapter 24). As is often the case, he's the only gospel writer to get this part of the story. He walks us through the scene, offering detail in the form of long, precise dialogue between the two travelers (Cleopas and an unnamed man) and Jesus. He gives us the climactic breaking-of-the-bread scene, where the men suddenly recognize the risen Jesus.

With all of those details, Luke leaves out one that seems pretty significant to us: the identity of the second traveler. That's frustrating, until you think: Luke, under God's inspiration, carefully chose which details to use and which ones to leave out. Much as we'd like to know who the second follower of Jesus was, we can only guess. Some biblical scholars think it was Peter.

Maybe it just wasn't important enough for Luke to include. But then why name Cleopas, whom the Bible never mentions before or after? We like to think that the unnamed

traveler was Luke's source for this story, and that he granted the interview on the condition of anonymity. If that's indeed the case, then Luke honored journalistic ethics, and perhaps protected someone's life, by not revealing his source.

EYEWITNESS NEWS

We're not biblical scholars. We're journalists. We've highlighted Luke because we think his two books are the most journalistic in the Bible. Sometimes when we think about the Bible being divinely inspired, we picture the writers sitting at some ancient desk and God simply pouring the words into their heads. That may indeed have happened at times, especially during the writing process. But Luke makes it clear that the preliminary hard work of reporting played a huge role, too.

Luke's detail grows even more vivid in Acts, because starting with chapter 16 *he* is the eyewitness to much of what happens surrounding the apostle Paul. He starts using the word "we." He adds to the book's credibility by including detailed geographic references—logs that allow us today to plot these trips on a map and include them in the back of Bibles for reference.

You get the point. Good journalism forms a bridge from the people who lived the story to the people who didn't.

Or, as David Aikman puts it: "Journalism is an instinctive, passionate belief in truth and a determination to locate it."

A Christian believer who can do all of that can find quite a significant ministry. In fact, the words of Psalm 96:3 (NLT) can start to look a lot like a mission statement:

Publish his glorious deeds among the nations. Tell everyone about the amazing things he does.