EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS.

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
*And many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE I. 1–4.

1 Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a decla­ration of those things which are most surely believed among us,

2 Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;

3 It seemed good to me also, hav­ing had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus,

4 That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

THE Gospel of St. Luke, which we now begin, contains many precious things which are not recorded in the other three Gospels. Such, for instance, are the histories of Zacharias and Elizabeth,—the angel’s announcement to the Virgin Mary,—and, to speak generally, the whole contents of the first two chapters. Such, again, are the narratives of the conversion of Zacchæus and of the penitent thief, the walk to Emmaus, and the famous parables of the Pharisee and Publican, the rich man and Lazarus, and the Prodigal Son. These are portions of Scripture for which every well-instructed Christian feels peculiarly thankful. And for these we are indebted to the Gospel of St. Luke.

The short preface which we have now read is a peculiar feature of St. Luke’s Gospel. But we shall find, on examination, that it is full of most useful instruction.

In the first place, St. Luke gives us a *short, but valua­ble, sketch of the nature of a Gospel.* He calls it, “a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us.” It is a narrative of facts about Jesus Christ.

Christianity is a religion built upon facts. Let us never lose sight of this. It came before mankind at first in this shape. The first preachers did not go up and down the world, proclaiming an elaborate, artificial system of abstruse doctrines and deep principles. They made it their first business to tell men great plain facts. They went about telling a sin-laden world, that the Son of God had come down to earth, and lived for us, and died for us, and risen again. The Gospel, at its first publication, was far more simple than many make it now. It was neither more nor less than the history of Christ.

Let us aim at greater simplicity in our own personal religion. Let Christ and His Person be the sun of our system, and let the main desire of our souls be to live the life of faith in Him, and daily know Him better. This was St. Paul’s Christianity. “To me to live is Christ.” (Phil. i. 21.)

In the second place, St. Luke draws a beautiful picture of *the true position of the apostles in the early church.* He calls them, “eye-witnesses and ministers of the word.”

There is an instructive humility in this expression. There is an utter absence of that man-exalting tone which has so often crept into the Church. St. Luke gives the apostles no flattering titles. He affords not the slightest excuse to those who speak of them with idolatrous veneration, because of their office and near­ness to our Lord.

He describes them as “eye-witnesses.” They told men what they had seen with their own eyes, and heard with their own ears. (1 John i. 1.)—He describes them as “ministers of the word.” They were servants of the word of the Gospel. They were men who counted it their highest privilege to carry about, as messengers, the tidings of God’s love to a sinful world, and to tell the story of the cross.

Well would it have been for the Church and the world, if Christian ministers had never laid claim to higher dignity and honour than the apostles claimed for them­selves. It is a mournful fact, that ordained men have constantly exalted themselves and their office to a most unscriptural position. It is a no less mournful fact, that people have constantly helped forward the evil, by a lazy acquiescence in the demands of priest-craft, and by con­tenting themselves with a mere vicarious religion. There have been faults on both sides. Let us remember this, and be on our guard.

In the third place, St. Luke describes *his own qualifica­tions for the work of writing a Gospel.* He says that he “had perfect understanding of all things from the very first.”

It would be mere waste of time to inquire from what source St. Luke obtained the information which he has given us in his Gospel. We have no good reason for supposing that he saw our Lord work miracles, or heard Him teach. To say that he obtained his information from the Virgin Mary, or any of the apostles, is mere conjecture and speculation. Enough for us to know that St. Luke wrote by inspiration of God. Unquestionably he did not neglect the ordinary means of getting know­ledge. But the Holy Ghost guided him, no less than all other writers of the Bible, in his choice of matter. The Holy Ghost supplied him with thoughts, arrangement, sentences, and even words. And the result is, that what St. Luke wrote is not to be read as the “word of man,” but the “word of God.” (1 Thess. ii. 13.)

Let us carefully hold fast the great doctrine of the plenary inspiration of every word of the Bible. Let us never allow that any writer of the Old or New Testa­ment could make even the slightest verbal mistake or error, when writing as he was “moved by the Holy Ghost.” (2 Peter i. 21.) Let it be a settled principle with us in reading the Bible, that when we cannot understand a passage, or reconcile it with some other passage, the fault is not in the Book, but in ourselves. The adoption of this principle will place our feet upon a rock. To give it up is to stand upon a quicksand, and to fill our minds with endless uncertainties and doubts.

Finally, St. Luke informs us of *one main object he had in view in writing his Gospel.* It was that Theophilus “might know the certainty of those things wherein he had been instructed.”

There is no encouragement here for those who place confidence in unwritten traditions, and the voice of the church. St. Luke knew well the weakness of man’s memory, and the readiness with which a history alters its shape both by additions and alterations, when it depends only on word of mouth and report. What therefore does he do? He takes care to “write.”

There is no encouragement here for those who are opposed to the spread of religious knowledge, and talk of ignorance as the “mother of devotion.” St. Luke does not wish his friend to remain in doubt on any matter of his faith. He tells him that he wants him to “know the certainty of those things wherein he had been instructed.”

Let us close the passage with thankfulness for the Bible. Let us bless God daily that we are not left dependent on man’s traditions, and need not be led astray by ministers’ mistakes. We have a written volume, which is “able to make us wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” (2 Tim. iii. 15.)

Let us begin St. Luke’s Gospel with an earnest desire to know more ourselves of the truth as it is in Jesus, and with a hearty determination to do what in us lies to spread the knowledge of that truth throughout the world.

NOTES. LUXE I. 1–4.

[*Gospel according to St. Luke.*]Our information concerning St. Luke is scanty. It is conjectured by some that he was one of the seventy disciples sent forth by our Lord, in addition to the twelve apostles. (Luke x. 1.) There seems no reason to doubt that he was the companion of St. Paul in his travels, and that he was a “physician.” (Col. iv. 14.) Some have thought that his profes­sion as a physician may be traced in his manner of describing our Lord’s miraculous cures of diseases,—and his companionship of St. Paul in his manner of speaking on such subjects as God’s glory, and Christ’s love to sinners. It is generally agreed that his Gospel was written with a special reference to Gentile con­verts, rather than Jews. Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and others, suppose that St. Paul refers to Luke and his Gospel, in the words, “the brother whose praise is in the Gospel.” (2 Cor. viii. 18.)—This however is very questionable.

1.*—*[*Many have taken in hand.*]Who these “many” were, we do not know. That they wrote with any but good intentions we have no right to say. St. Luke’s meaning appears to be simply this, that they wrote without any divine call or inspiration. He certainly does not refer to Matthew and Mark. Ambrose re­marks, “Matthew did not *take in hand,* nor Mark, nor John, nor Luke. They, the divine Spirit supplying them with abund­ance of all words and matter, accomplished what they began without any effort.”

[*A declaration of those things.*]A glance at the Greek in this sentence, will show us that the word “of,” must be taken as a preposition, and means “about,” or “concerning.”

[*Most surely believed.*]The word so translated is rendered, when applied to Abraham, (Rom. iv. 21.) “fully persuaded,” and when applied to the preaching of the Gospel, “fully known,” (2 Tim. iv. 17.) Theophylact, in Suicer, defines it as meaning here, “things fully proved by many arguments.”

2*.—*[*The Word.*]Some think that this means the Lord Jesus Christ, the “Word,” who “was made flesh.” John i. 14. It seems however more probable that we are to take it as the written word, or word of the Gospel. It is not clear that the Lord Jesus is ever called “the Word” by any New Testament writer, except John.

3*.—*[*From the very first.*]The Greek word so translated means literally, “from above.” It is so rendered in John iii 31: xix. 11: James i. 17: iii. 15: iii. 17. Gomarus and Lightfoot think that it should be taken in this sense, and that it is an assertion of Luke’s inspiration. The expression would then signify, “having accurately traced up all things under Divine inspiration, or teaching, from above.” The majority of commentators agree with our translators. The Bible writers do not generally assert their own inspiration. The word in Acts xxvi. 5. is rendered, “from the beginning.”

[*In* *order.*]Wemust carefully observe that this expression does not imply that Luke followed the chronological order of the chief events in our Lord’s history, more than the other Evan­gelists. It rather signifies that he grouped together, and classified in an orderly way, the principal facts which he was inspired to record. Watson remarks, “Luke has less regard to chronological order than Matthew or Mark, and rather classifies the events, than narrates them in a series,—a method of com­posing history not uncommon with the writers of antiquity.” A. Clarke gives an example of this in the life of Augustus, by Suetonius. Campbell says that the word translated ‘in order,’ “does not necessarily relate to time. The proper import of it is distinctly, particularly, as opposed to confusedly, generally.’”

[*Theophilus.*]We know nothing certain about this person. The prevailing opinion is, that he was some Christian Gentile, in a high position, to whom St. Luke, for wise reasons, unknown to us, was directed to address himself in writing his Gospel. The expression “most excellent,” seems to indicate that he was no common person. It is the same expression which St. Paul used in addressing Felix and Festus. Acts xxiv. 3: xxvi. 5.

4*.—*[*“Certainty.”*]This is the same word which is translated “safety” in Acts v. 23, and 1Thess. v. 3.