THE SERMON THAT LAUNCHED

THE CHURCH

Acts 2:14-41

By

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I have read that the number one fear that people have is the fear of speaking in public. It ranks ahead of the fear of death! The fear of speaking in public would increase if a person knew that he would be speaking to a hostile audience. Add to that the fact that the audience is not just a small group, but at least five to ten thousand hostile people, and you must address them without a public address system! To make matters worse, you have made a fool out of yourself just weeks before in such a manner that many in your audience would have heard about it. And, you have no time to prepare your message. The opportunity presents itself and you’re on—without any notes!

Such was the situation facing Peter on the Day of Pentecost. The sound of the rushing wind from heaven had drawn a large crowd, which then heard all the believers speaking of the great deeds of God in the many different native languages of the crowd. This perplexed them as they asked, “What does this mean?” (2:12). But others in the crowd were mocking and accusing the believers of being drunk. It was to this Jewish crowd in the city of Jerusalem, where Jesus had been killed just over seven weeks ago, that Peter delivered the sermon that launched the church. In terms of results—about 3,000 got saved that day—it was one of the greatest sermons ever preached.

Luke here only gives us the gist of that great sermon (2:40). But even so, there is far more here than I can deal with in the time allotted to me. Thus I plan to give an overview of the whole sermon today and then go back in future weeks and look more in depth at certain parts of it. I want to walk you through this sermon, explaining the flow of thought so that you grasp Peter’s method and argument. Even though you may never be called on to preach to a crowd, you will have opportunities to bear witness for Christ. Studying Peter’s sermon can help you be ready.

Peter begins (2:14-21) with the questions that the crowd was asking about the phenomena of Pentecost, linking what they saw
and heard to the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32. He then (2:22-36) rather abruptly shifts to the person of Jesus, arguing as his bottom line that God authenticated Jesus as Lord and Christ, “this Jesus whom you crucified” (2:36). But he builds his argument inductively (a good method with hostile audiences), building his case point by point, but not giving the main point until last. When his audience responds with conviction of sin, asking, “What shall we do?” Peter tells them to repent and be baptized, and 3,000 did so. Let’s work through his sermon in more detail:

1. Joel prophesied about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that you have just witnessed (2:14-21).

Notice that twice Peter appeals to his audience to listen carefully to his words (2:14, 22). No matter how dynamic or dull the speaker may be, the audience has a responsibility to listen carefully. Even the Lord Jesus, the most gifted speaker in history, exhorted His audiences to take care how they listened (Luke 8:18). In other words, the responsibility for a good sermon lies not only with the preacher, but also with the hearers. We should always ask God to give us ears to hear what He wants to say to us through His Word.

Peter begins with a touch of humor. Some mockers were accusing the believers who spoke in tongues of being drunk. Peter could have ignored them or responded defensively, but instead he says, in effect, “It’s too early for us to be drunk!” The Jews would not normally have eaten or drunk at this hour during the Feast of Pentecost. Often, a touch of humor can disarm your critics long enough to gain a hearing. If you are called on to preach, your introduction should grab the attention of the audience and make them want to hear the rest of what you have to say.

Then, Peter explains that the phenomena they had seen and heard were “what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (2:16). He proceeds to quote, with a few minor variations, Joel 2:28-32. Later Peter will cite Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1. He did not have a Bible in book form, since books as we know them were not yet invented. And he did not unroll several scrolls to the right text so that he could read these verses. Rather, he recited them from memory! If you want to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ, you must memorize certain Scriptures that explain the gospel. You will not always have a Bible handy to look up the verses.
Peter’s citation of Joel makes three points:

A. In the last days, God will pour forth of His Spirit on all flesh (2:17-18).

Joel’s prophecy actually says, “after this,” but Peter changes it to “the last days.” The time from Jesus’ first coming until His second coming can all be referred to as the last days. The apostles did not know that it would stretch out to 2,000 years. But as Paul put it, we are the ones “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Peter warned “that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’” (2 Pet. 3:3-4). He goes on to say that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. But Peter’s citation of Joel is simply making the point, we are now in the end times when this prophecy will be fulfilled.

Peter’s use of Joel is in line with what biblical scholars have identified from the Dead Sea Scrolls as a typical form of Hebrew teaching, called a “pesher” (from the Hebrew word for “interpretation”). “It lays all emphasis on fulfillment without attempting to exegete the details of the biblical prophecy it ‘interprets’” (Richard Longenecker, Expositor’s Bible Commentary [Zondervan], 9:275). Thus Peter never specifically shows how prophecy, visions, and dreams are identified with the phenomenon of speaking in tongues that everyone had heard. But he seems to use this passage since it is “the nearest equivalent to tongues in Old Testament phraseology” (I. Howard Marshall, Acts [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 73).

Peter’s main point is not the particular form that the outpouring of the Spirit took, but rather that He was poured out “on all flesh.” Not just the prophets or rabbis, but even sons and daughters would experience this outpouring of the Spirit (2:17). Not just the older men, but also younger men would know the Lord and His will (“visions”). Not just the wealthy, but even bondslaves would know the fulness of the Spirit. Not just men, but also women would have the Spirit. As the apostle Paul later taught, “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). No believer today lacks the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.
B. This outpouring of the Spirit will be followed by a time of terrible judgment (2:19-20).

Peter did not know how soon these judgments would take place (since Joel does not indicate such). He was not claiming that they had been fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost; rather, he is saying that these things would precede “the great and glorious day of the Lord.” Since the prophecy had begun to be fulfilled, as evidenced by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it is reasonable to assume that the rest will come to pass in due time.

Some relate these signs in the heavens back to the darkening of the sky on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, understanding them “as tokens of the advent of the day of the Lord” (F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts [Eerdmans], p. 69). Others interpret these signs as symbols for any cataclysmic judgments, whether volcanoes, earthquakes, fires, or whatever. I might grant that there may have been an initial, symbolic fulfillment when Titus destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But Revelation 6:12 predicts these same signs when the Lamb breaks the sixth seal during the Great Tribulation. Thus the literal fulfillment still awaits that time just prior to the return of Christ when He will judge the whole world.

Peter’s point is that the outpouring of the Spirit predicted by Joel has happened. The Messianic age has begun. Can God’s awful judgment predicted in the same passage be far behind? Then Joel offers good news:

C. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (2:21).

Here is the great mercy of our God! He offers to those who deserve His judgment a means of escape. Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Up to this point, Peter has been rather generic. He has linked the phenomena of Pentecost to Joel’s prophecy about the outpouring of God’s Spirit in the last days. This hints that the day of Messiah has dawned, inaugurating the last days, but he hasn’t yet said that clearly. He has also brought up the subject of God’s judgment at the final Day of the Lord, but he hasn’t stated yet that his audience (good religious Jews) needs to fear that judgment. And he has set forth the offer of God’s mercy for anyone who will
take it. But now he shifts from preaching to meddling! He gets specific about just who this Lord is that a person must call upon to be saved. He shows them that they had crucified their Messiah!

2. God authenticated Jesus as both Lord and Christ (2:22-36).

Although he doesn’t state the punch line until verse 36, Peter shows four ways that God authenticated Jesus as Lord and Christ:

A. God authenticated Jesus as Lord and Christ through His miracles (2:22).

Even Jesus’ enemies had to admit the fact of His miracles (although some attributed them to Satan’s power; Luke 11:15). But most people acknowledged, as Nicodemus did, that “no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). Peter reminds his audience that Jesus had done many such miracles in their midst, and they knew it.

While many in our day deny that miracles can occur, they are basing their denials on the assumption that God does not exist, contrary to much evidence in creation. In the mornings National Public Radio has a program called “The Pulse of the Planet,” which is totally naturalistic and evolutionary. Ironically, their motto is that they are bringing you “the miracles of science.” I would like to ask them, “How does science perform miracles?” What they are presenting are the miracles of God as seen in His creation! The miracles that Jesus did, attested by many eyewitnesses, including His enemies (John 11:47), authenticate Him as Lord and Christ.

B. God authenticated Jesus as Lord and Christ through His death (2:23).

Here Peter stomps on some toes: “This man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.” Jesus’ death at first glance may have seemed like something that invalidated His messianic claims. But Peter shows that Jesus was not killed because He was a victim of His enemies. He was killed because God predetermined before the world began that Jesus would die as the Savior of His people. Isaiah 53:10 prophesied, “But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief.” And so rather than invalidating Jesus as Lord and Messiah, His
death actually validated Him, since it was a fulfillment of God’s eternal decree.

Does this mean that since God determined it, men are not responsible? No, Peter says, “you nailed [Him] to a cross by the hands of lawless [lit.] men [the Romans] and put Him to death.” Without violating their will, God used evil men to accomplish His eternal purpose, but those evil men were responsible for their crime. No one can blame God for his own sin.

C. God authenticated Jesus as Lord and Christ through His resurrection (2:24-32).

After spending one verse each on Jesus’ life and death, Peter spends nine verses on His resurrection, which is the main theme of the apostolic preaching in Acts. Note the implicit contrast between “you put Him to death. But God raised Him up again” (2:23-24). In other words, they were guilty of opposing God!

Peter cites Psalm 16:8-11 to show an Old Testament prediction of the resurrection. In that psalm, David declares that God will not abandon his soul to Hades nor allow His holy one to undergo decay. But, Peter argues, David both died and was buried, and his tomb was right there in Jerusalem. In other words, David’s body did undergo decay. Therefore, David as a prophet knew that God had promised to seat one of his descendants on his throne, and so he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of Christ. Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah when he confidently states, “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses” (2:32). Perhaps the other eleven standing with Peter nodded in affirmation.

Thus Jesus’ miracles, death and resurrection all authenticate Him as both Lord and Christ. But there is a final evidence:

D. God authenticated Jesus as Lord and Christ through His exaltation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (2:33-36).

Peter states that the ascended, exalted Jesus was the one who had sent the Holy Spirit as evidenced by the miracle of everyone speaking in foreign languages. Again, he cites David: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (Ps. 110:1). Since David is not seated at God’s right hand, this must refer to Messiah. A not-so-subtle im-
lication is that the enemies of Messiah are those who crucified Him! Then Peter comes to his punch line (2:36): “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

3. The crowd’s response and Peter’s application (2:37-41).

A. The crowd responds with conviction (2:37).

Their address, “brethren,” shows that their hearts had been softened. To be “pierced to the heart” shows their feelings of deep anguish as they realized that they were guilty of killing their own Messiah. The Holy Spirit stabbed them with conviction of their terrible sin. C. H. Spurgeon said, “It is idle to attempt to heal those who are not wounded, to attempt to clothe those who have never been stripped, and to make those rich who have never realized their poverty” (Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit [Ages Software], vol. 44, “A Far Reaching Promise”). The conviction of sin is often the missing note in our evangelistic efforts. We are too quick in trying to heal people who do not realize that they are mortally ill. We need to use God’s holy law to show sinners their desperate condition. Only after they feel that should we apply the promise of God’s grace in the gospel.

B. Peter applies the message: Repentance, baptism, and promise (2:38-40).

First Peter calls upon them to repent. There are many in our day who argue that repentance has no place in salvation; rather, all a person must do is believe in Christ. Repentance, they say, comes later. If so, Peter botched the gospel! The fact is, repentance and faith are flip sides of the same coin. You cannot have true saving faith without repentance. Others minimize the definition of repentance, saying that it means simply to change your mind about who Jesus is. Certainly it includes that, but it is more than that. I. Howard Marshall writes, “The word indicates a change of direction in a person’s life rather than simply a mental change of attitude or a feeling of remorse; it signifies a turning away from a sinful and godless way of life” (ibid., p. 80). Faith in Jesus Christ is implicit in repentance, as it also is in Peter’s next word.

“Each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” Peter is calling them to an individual response. Salvation always is a per-
sonal transaction, not a group plan. As with John the Baptist’s ministry, he links repentance, baptism, and forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). Baptism is never just an outward ritual, but rather is a public confession of one’s private faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ.

Those who argue that you must be baptized to be saved use this verse as their proof text. But they ignore both the context of this verse and the overwhelming testimony of Scripture, that salvation is by grace through faith, and that good works (such as baptism) are the result of salvation (Eph. 2:8-10). Granted, the notion of an unbaptized believer was foreign to the apostles, since it was assumed that saving faith would result in prompt obedience to Jesus Christ. But, in the next chapter (3:19), Peter calls his audience to repent “so that your sins may be wiped away,” but he never mentions baptism. When Peter called upon these people to be baptized, he was calling them to make a radical break with their culture and religion that had crucified the Messiah, and to publicly identified with Jesus Christ. This outward symbol would prove the reality of their inward repentance and faith, and the fact that God had forgiven their sins.

Then, Peter proclaims God’s promise, that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (i.e., the Holy Spirit Himself is the gift). When they repented and trusted in Christ, the Holy Spirit was a part of God’s gift of salvation. Peter extends the promise beyond them to their children and beyond them to those who are far off, “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” While salvation, on the one hand, requires that a person call on the name of the Lord (2:21), on the other hand no one calls on the Lord unless the Lord first calls him to Himself (2:39). Although Peter may not yet have understood it, those who are far off no doubt referred to the Gentiles. Luke summarizes Peter’s further exhortations with, “Be saved from this perverse generation” (2:40). Salvation always demands a radical break from our wicked culture.

C. The result: 3,000 souls saved (2:41).

Much modern evangelism tries to make becoming a Christian as easy as possible. We dodge the issue of sin. We don’t talk about the cost of discipleship. We wouldn’t dare call on people to make a radical break with their culture. But Peter called them to repen-
tance and baptism. For a Jew to be baptized was a traumatic thing. They generally looked on baptism as a rite for Gentile converts or for notorious sinners, not for “good” Jews (Longenecker, p. 286). But Peter preached boldly, God worked inwardly, and the church was launched, 3,000 strong! Peter’s message in a nutshell was:

Since God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ who will judge the world, sinners must repent.

Conclusion

Years ago I was reading Charles Simeon, a great Anglican preacher from the early 19th century. He stated that he had three aims in his preaching: to exalt the Savior, to humble the sinner, and to promote holiness. I thought that those were clear, godly aims, and so in a sermon, I shared that those were my aims, also. I was somewhat startled when a woman who had been on staff for 25 years with a Christian evangelistic organization came up to me and said, “I don’t agree with those aims. We don’t need to be humbled. We need to hear more how we are made in the image of God.”

Her comment reflects the man-centered focus of much modern evangelism. But the point of biblical evangelism is not to make people feel good about who they are or to feel that God loves them just as they are. Rather, it is to show them who Jesus Christ truly is, the Lord of the universe, the Christ of God who offered Himself for our sins and who was raised from the dead. It should show them who they are, sinners who crucified the Son of God, who are in danger of His impending judgment. It should show them God’s great mercy, that if they will repent and call on the name of the Lord, He will save them from His judgment. It should show them the need to live in obedience to Him, no matter what the cost.

Discussion Questions

1. Agree/disagree: Modern evangelism is too man-centered.
2. How can we get religious, “good” people to feel the conviction of their sins? (See Gal. 3:24; 1 Tim. 1:8-11; Matt. 5:21-48).
3. Why is repentance inseparable from true saving faith?
4. Can a person accept Jesus as Savior without accepting Him as Lord?

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