

Peter's Sermon

Acts 2:22-36

Introduction

We arrive at Peter's first sermon, and the message of the early church. It is a message which must also be ours. It is important and valuable to see the ground rules and the emphasis he makes.

It is not enough to say we need to preach Jesus, for many 'Jesus's are being presented today. We must be clear who Jesus is, what He has done for mankind, how He can be known, and what He requires of us. We need men to understand Him in the context of the Gospel. "Christ comes to us clothed in His Gospel" (John Calvin). We cannot separate Christ from the truths the Bible teaches about Him. There is no other true Christ than the one known through the teaching of the Bible

Peter's sermon is scriptural, Christ-centred, plain, practical, personal and persuasive. The preacher is in earnest and anointed by the Holy Spirit. The congregation backed him up as well. We learn from the passage that they were united and prayerful and an intensely concerned congregation. Their hearts had been prepared by God. They were not just spectators, and even less were they critics. Something here for preacher and congregation to learn!

Two Gospel Events

What is the burden of this Pentecost sermon, and indeed all other sermons in Acts? It is the same emphasis that is made by all the Apostles in the New Testament. Their preaching and teaching is centred on the person of Christ, and important truths about Him. A Christ-centred message is the mark of all authentic Christian teaching. **Christ and him crucified** (1 Corinthians 2:2). "We preach always Him" (Luther). "I went into such and such a town and offered them Christ" (Wesley). We are not here to preach moral ideas, philosophy or a Christian outlook on politics.

So here is Peter, presenting Christ to the people. He declares that Christ was approved by God, as seen by His miracles, death, Resurrection and present glory, as a result of which He is now Lord and Christ. The death and Resurrection are the centre of it all. **This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge, and you... out him to death... But God raised Him from the dead** (Acts 2:23,24) and exalted Him to His right hand.

The death and Resurrection are at the heart of the Gospel. Paul summarized it, **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures** (1 Corinthians 15:3,4). Because Christ has died, our sins have been dealt with. Justice has been carried out. The penalty has been borne. But borne by a substitute – God, in the person of His Son, out of great love has borne the penalty of His own law for sins.

*“Your debt He has paid
And your work He has done”*

Therefore, righteously, freely and perfectly our sin can be forgiven. **Each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all** (Isaiah 53:6). This is the message of the Gospel, and it meets men’s most urgent need. If true of the New Testament, this message must be right at the core and centre of all preaching. “Our Lord’s substitutionary sacrifice is the heart and centre of evangelical religion” (C.H.Spurgeon).

In Leith Samuel’s book *Time to Wake Up*, he compares evangelical fantasy against Bible realism, and speaks of dangerous tendencies and subtle changes, even in the evangelical world at present. In a chapter on *What is the Heart of the Gospel?* he speaks of the danger of bypassing the Cross in our preaching. At the Reformation, men were worried about guilt so needed a clear understanding of the Cross. But today men are not concerned with guilt, but with lack of power. So the centre of gravity has shifted to Pentecost and power. Some portray the Cross as just an important staging post on the way to the throbbing heart of Christianity – Pentecost, from which all blessings flow, and making us first class Christians.

Leith emphasises that it is not what men think they need, but what God thinks they need, that matters. He poses two questions. Is this change of emphasis true to the New Testament? Certainly not – the emphasis we find there is on God’s truth and not man’s experience. The second question: Is this change of emphasis producing better or more godly disciples? Even the leaders of this new emphasis are the first to admit this new approach is not conspicuous for greater godliness than straight evangelicals. So there is an urgent need to return to the emphasis of the early church, to maintain it ourselves and cooperate only with those who are similarly faithful to New Testament teaching.

Do we know personally Him who died and rose again? Are we saved ourselves? Are we right with God?

Two Gospel Witnesses

The message of Christ, and Him crucified and risen, is preached on the basis of two Gospel witnesses, (1) Scripture, and (2) personal experience.

Note how scriptural Peter’s sermon is. 10 out of 22 verses are from Peter’s Bible, i.e. the Old Testament. Quotations are taken from Psalm 16, Psalm 110 and Joel 2. Then he goes on to say, speaking of the Resurrection of the Lord, **we are all witnesses of it.**

All true preaching is Bible based. We have no right to preach a Christ of our own theories and speculation, only the Christ of the Bible. True preaching is not a man airing his opinions about religion and morals and the current international situation. But it is preaching the Christ of God on the basis of the Word of God in the power of God. The preacher will not always be popular. Men do not readily bow before the Word of God. They like to pick and choose what suits them. But this is the only way to build up people in the truth of God and the ways of God.

Then it is important that we can verify the truth of what is said from our own experience – we are witnesses. Not enough to be able to say, “Go to the Cross”, must be able to say, “Come to the Cross”. Not enough to be an advocate, must be a witness. Not speak with philosophical detachment but be able to say, **One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see** (John 9:25).

*“O let me commend my Saviour to you.
I set to my seal that Jesus is true”*

Dr James Martineau, a Unitarian scholar, occasionally went to hear Spurgeon preach. Someone asked him why he went, when he didn't believe what Spurgeon said. His reply was, “No, but he does”. He respected that Spurgeon was a man of conviction, even though he did not share that conviction.

Two Gospel Promises

The first promise is the offer of forgiveness of sins to deal with the past. The second is the gift of the Holy Spirit to make us people of God. He promises to forgive and to change us. We will find peace with God and purity of character. Christ's work on the Cross was for us. Now we need the Holy Spirit to work within us.

These two gifts provide freedom which men so desperately need. Freedom from guilt, bad conscience, defilement, the threat of judgement and condemnation. Freedom from the downward drag of fallen nature, all those influences which centre around the self. To enable us to be new people, different people, changed people, these two promises are made to us. They are not inherited from our parents, or found in religious ritual. They are not earned by our own good living and merit. But they are gifts from the hand of God's grace.

Forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit are two priceless gifts purchased through Christ's death. Black words of indictment against us are removed because **the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin** (1 John 1:7).

And how vital is the inward work of regeneration and new birth by the Holy Spirit. No more need for outward reformation. No more tinkering with the super-structure. But a divine work, which goes right down to the foundation. It is vital for us all. “If you have not been born again, the day will come when you will wish you had never been born at all” (J.C.Ryle).

So in the Gospel, Christ comes to us with two blessings in His hands – forgiveness of sin in one hand, and new life in the Holy Spirit in the other.

Two Gospel Conditions

Two Gospel facts, attested by two Gospel witnesses, offering two Gospel promises, on the basis of two Gospel Conditions. Peter was not just concerned to preach great doctrine, however important and foundational as they are. He went on to apply the message to the hearts and consciences of the hearers. He presses the fact of sin on to his audience. In their case, their immediate responsibility was for the death of Christ.

You killed Him. But see how wrong you are – God raised Him from the dead and has exalted Him. You thought nothing of Christ, but God thinks everything of Christ. You were on the wrong side after all – you have been fighting against God. You are not just fools, but you have rejected God’s Messiah. So Peter aims at their conscience, exposes their guilt and danger. No wonder they were cut to the heart and in despair wondered what they should do.

Men are in exactly the same shoes today. They did not physically crucify Christ, but they have rejected and despised Him. They have delayed, or put off or completely rejected His claims. They have not allowed Him to enter their thoughts, never sought pardon, and never allowed Him to influence their lives. God has raised and exalted His Son, yet some have never given Him a second thought. They have treated Him as of no account. Oh the ingratitude, guilt, baseness, folly and enormity of our sin. To live as though Christ had never loved, lived, died and risen again. How terrible to sin against the one who has so loved us! **What shall we do?** they cried out, and so should we.

Two conditions – **repent and be baptised, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:38). Repentance is not just remorse, but actual forsaking of sin and going back to God. Repudiate present way of life. Do a radical about-turn.

But what about baptism? Is this sacramentalism? Is this to say we are saved by baptism? Does the water wash away my sin? N.B. that in the New Testament, baptism is the outward sign of inward faith. Baptism and faith are the outward and inward signs of the same reality, two parts of the same whole. Sometimes one is used when the other is meant. (This occurs in other speech, e.g. the “crown” to refer to the Queen, the “Whitehouse” to refer to the American president, “Downing Street” to refer to the Prime Minister.) So “baptism” is sometimes used to refer to faith, of which baptism is the outward sign.

So our response to the Gospel message should be repentance and faith, which should be signified outwardly by baptism. If we were closer to the New Testament, we would mention the outwards sign more often than we do when we speak of repentance and faith. Inner repentance and faith; outward baptism.

Conclusion

We began by saying that the Gospel preached by the early church is the same Gospel we are called to preach, maintain, uphold and defend today. It begins with two Gospel events – the atoning death of Christ followed by His glorious Resurrection. There would be no salvation from sin unless there was a living Saviour. But the living one can save, only because He died.

This message is based on two Gospel witnesses to the truth of the message, the Scripture, which is then verified and proved through personal experience. The message offers two Gospel promises, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We receive this if we fulfil two Gospel conditions - repentance and faith, whose outward evidence is baptism.

A whole series of questions come into the mind. Are we saved? Have our sins been forgiven? Do we know the new birth by the Holy Spirit? In other words, have we personally repented and believed? And gone on to signify it in baptism? Also, do we thank God for this Gospel, commend this Gospel to others, live our lives by the Gospel and uphold it?