

Christian Mission in a Pagan World: A Study of Acts

Session 2: "Peter's Evangelistic Sermon"

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Reading: Acts 2:14-41

Introduction to Session 2:

"Evangelism" is a word that often carries negative connotations for many people, often conjuring up images of wealthy televangelists, hypocritical preachers, and uncomfortable encounters with door-to-door missionaries. But the work of evangelism—telling the good news of Jesus Christ—is one of the most central tasks that Christians have been given. And in chapter 2 of Acts, we find the first ever example of that task being carried out as Peter gives his first evangelistic sermon to the crowd in Jerusalem. As we study that event in this session, we will focus on two questions. First, how does Peter express the "good news" of Jesus as Christ? And second, how are people meant to respond to this news?

What do you think of when you hear the word "evangelist?" Some people have negative associations with the term "evangelism."

Richard Peace (Fuller Seminary)

"The very term 'evangelism' has come to have negative connotations to many people in the United States. Evangelism is often seen as coercive, manipulative, and dishonest. Its practitioners are portrayed as hostile, falsely superior, and often just plain rude. In some denominations pastors joke about the 'E word,' by which they mean that evangelism is not something to be discussed in polite theological company."

According to the book of Acts, "evangelism" is central to the life and mission of the church. Evangelism is the preaching and declaring of the good news of salvation (the Gospel).

What does it mean to preach the Gospel? What is this Good News? How are people meant to respond? We can learn more by studying the speech of Peter the Apostle in Acts 2. It is the first recorded example of an evangelistic message being given by one of Jesus' followers. Let's look at what Peter says and also how his listeners respond.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes upon the believers gathered in Jerusalem. They start to fulfill the mission that Jesus had given them to be his witnesses. They start to speak about the mighty acts of God in different languages. Some think the talkative believers are drunk. So Peter stands up and starts to explain to the crowd what is going on.

Acts 2:15

These people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.

Some read more into the meaning of the term "third hour," but Father Jonathan mentions that is a way for Peter to lighten things up at the beginning of his speech. Peter then gives the first gospel evangelistic sermon.

Three key features of the Christian Gospel described by the Apostle Peter:

#1 - Gospel is a continuation of the Old Testament

Peter interprets the gift of the Spirit and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. He mentions both the book of Joel and the Psalms.

Marcionism is a heresy in the early Christian church. Marcion thought the Good News was a radical departure from the Old Testament. He thought the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament was a different religion than that of Jesus and his message of mercy, love, and forgiveness.

Today there is still a tendency to pit the Old Testament and the Gospel of Jesus in the New Testament against one another.

Peter is clear that what has taken place in Jesus and on the day of Pentecost is not a departure from

what God was doing in the life of Israel but a fulfillment of it – spoken and expected by the prophets.

#2 - Gospel revolves around death and resurrection of Jesus

It is easy for us to forget how strange it is that we as Christians treat the DEATH of Jesus as Good News. This is the death of an innocent man. It was the most horrific and humiliating form of death in the Roman world.

But Peter doesn't explain how the death of Jesus brings salvation (i.e. "atonement theory") but does make the death of Jesus central. And he makes the resurrection inseparable from the cross. For Peter, there is no Good News without both the cross and the empty tomb.

Acts 2:23-24

... this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

#3 – Gospel is an announcement that Jesus is King

In the four gospel books, Jesus is always talking about "the kingdom of God is at hand." But in Acts the message is about His death and resurrection.

Where did the talk of the kingdom go?

Peter continues the theme by telling the crowd that the crucified and risen Jesus is now King.

Acts 2:36

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

The words "Lord" and "Christ" had a specific meaning for a Jewish audience.

"Christ" is a Greek word that translates the Hebrew word for "messiah" (the anointed one.) Christ in Greek then means "God's anointed King."

"Lord" refers to a master or ruler in the Roman world. It is also the word used to translate the holy name of God in the Old Testament.

So for Peter to call Jesus both "Lord" and "Christ" – that has deep meaning. He is the anointed King. He is Lord. He is the God of Israel.

Therefore, it is now the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who is king and is reigning through Jesus. **That is the Good News: through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has become King.**

N.T. Wright explains that all four gospels tell of how God is becoming king through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. He continues ...

Bishop N.T. Wright (New Testament Scholar)

"New creation has begun and will be completed. Jesus is ruling over that new creation and making it happen through the witness of his church. 'The ruler of this world' has been overthrown: the powers of the world have been led behind Jesus's triumphal procession as a beaten, bedraggled rabble."

All of that is implied in Peter's words about Jesus being made Lord and Christ.

Peter is saying that the kingdom of God has arrived through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God has become King. This helps us understand why Christians in Acts face so much opposition. If the message of the church was just about having an individual relationship with God it would pose no real threat. But Christians make a claim about who is the true Lord overall. And this claim changes everything.

Peter's message is an announcement about what God has done and what God is doing still.

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

This is a message and announcement that calls for a response. How do the people respond?

Acts 2:37

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'

This is an appropriate question! Peter's response:

Acts 2:38

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Christians have sometimes misunderstood this word “repentance.” In the 4th century, Jerome used a Latin phrase which means “do penance” in his translation for the western church. This caused many Christians to think that repentance means doing certain penitential acts. But Jesus is very clear in the gospels that “to repent” is to recognize our sin; to turn away from the life we have been living; to turn to Christ and trust him.

Jesus often used the terms “repent” and “believe” together in a single phrase.

Peter calls the crowd to repent (turn from their life) and to turn to Jesus. He also tells them to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.

Paul later explains that baptism is connected to forgiveness of sins because it is through baptism that we are joined to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Our guilt and sin is covered over in his death and that we are raised to new life and forgiveness. Baptism is the means by which God unites individual people to Jesus. Baptism is the way individuals receive this promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

All throughout the book of Acts we will see the announcement of what God is doing with a call to respond with repentance and to be baptized.

Peter’s preaching on Pentecost was very successful. Luke tells us that 3,000 people believed that day and were baptized.

Luke gives us the first glimpse of the common life of the early church:

Acts 2:42

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Luke also goes on to tell us that they were selling their possessions and sharing with anyone who had a material need, worshipping on a daily basis, and giving thanks to God for everything.

Just like Jesus, Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and he preached the Good News of the kingdom. What we got in response was the church – this community of baptized individuals now bound to one another in faith – who are gathering together for worship and prayer, for study and fellowship; who are meeting each other’s needs with shocking generosity.

This is what it looks like to carry out the mission of the church. These Christians are giving us a glimpse of what it looks like to bear witness to the belief that Christ really is King – so much so that they live it out in their daily lives.

The story of the early Christians is our story. The Gospel has not changed. Jesus is still king. We are still called to repent and be baptized. The church is still a community of people gathering together for prayer, for worship, for study – sharing with one another and responding with gratitude and generosity.

For the next lesson, please read Acts chapters 6-7.