

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE MAIN POINTS IN THE SERMONS AND SPEECHES OF ACTS 1-15?

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1 Introduction

The sermons in Acts, inspired by the Holy Spirit, spelling out the life and saving work of Jesus, spearheaded the growth of the church. In this essay we shall focus in particular on points made in the sermons of Peter in Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 10, those of Paul in 13 and 14, as well as speeches of Stephen and James. Note that we seek to be thematic and not simply go sequentially through the texts. Before commencing an outline of the main points per se, we note that there appears to be a “common template¹” notably for the “evangelical” sermons in Chapters 2, 3, 5, 10 and 13, with first an explanation of events, second expounding the gospel of Christ, and third a call to repentance, faith in Jesus and baptism. Breaking down the “gospel” further is the “Kerygma” pattern - the fulfilment of the Old Testament, the facts of Jesus’ death and resurrection to which the Apostles witnessed personally, and the announcement he will return as judge. These patterns help provide the structure we use below.

2 Explanations: The Holy Spirit and Universalism

What then are the main points? The first is to highlight the coming of the Holy Spirit, for example as Peter quotes from Joel (Acts 2:16) “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...” thereby putting across the message that the “last days” before judgement and of the New Covenant have arrived, as witness the Apostles speaking in intelligible tongues.

An aspect of the New Covenant is universalism – a key point of the speeches. In the quote above, it is stated that “all men” will benefit – not just Jews, while the speaking in different tongues it itself symbolic of God’s desire for outreach. In Acts 10:35 in the first sermon to Gentiles, there is an affirmation of Gentiles’ favour before God and a breaking of barriers with Jews “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” And in the speech of James in Acts 15, he quotes Amos in favour of Peter’s plea to accept the Gentiles in Acts 15:17 “...the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things”.

3 Explanations: The authority and witness of the Apostles

¹ NIV Study Bible, 1650

The Apostles claim the right to speak out since God ordains them to as in Acts 5:30 "We must obey God rather than men!" Peter later notes Jesus' own mandate –in Acts 10:42 "He commanded us to preach to the people", also justifying preaching to the Gentiles. That the Apostles may be ordained by God is implicitly acknowledged by Gamaliel in Acts 5:38-39 "if their purpose...is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Also underpinning the authority of the sermons and speeches is proclamation of the Apostles as witnesses to Christ's resurrection, as in Acts 2:32 "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact." The Holy Spirit is equally a witness, Acts 5:33 "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." For Paul the witness is modestly indirect, Acts 13:30-31 "But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people."

4 The Gospel of Christ

The heart of their message is the "Gospel of Christ" – proclaiming his miraculous powers, death and resurrection, all linked directly to his relation to God, as set out succinctly in Acts 2:22-24 "Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and sign, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." Note that the Jews are held responsible for Jesus' death.

For the Gentiles the Gospel message also highlights the liberation Jesus provides from the devil's power – demonic forces were of major concern to Gentiles, Acts 10:38 "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

It outlining their Gospel, the Apostles in successive sermons develop a "Christology" of who Jesus is and what he will in future do. Stephen sees Jesus exalted at God's right hand in Acts 7:56 "'Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Peter proclaims Jesus as the creator, now glorified, in Acts 3:15 "Jesus, the Holy and

Righteous one, the author of life, is now glorified” and his role as restorer and judge in end times follows in Acts 2:21 “He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” and Acts 10:42 “and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.”

5 Foundation in the Old Testament

The Apostles stress the consistency of events now unfolding with the Old Testament prophecies, as for example the prophecy from David in Psalm 16 foreshadowing resurrection in Acts 2:27 “because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.” Peter explains that this did not apply to David himself, who died indeed, but God’s promise to place his descendent, Jesus, on the throne of Israel. More generally, they highlight how Jesus’ life fits within a historical analysis of the Jewish people. Jesus is the seed of Abraham spoken of in Genesis, and by sending him God has thereby shown continuing favour to the Jews, God’s chosen people; Acts 3:25-26 “And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways”

Stephen uses Old Testament analysis for a different purpose to stress that many of the most crucial things God did occurred outside Israel itself and to non-Jews, thus underpinning universalism, for example the commissioning of Abraham – a Gentile - in Mesopotamia and Haran (Acts 7:2), Joseph in Egypt (Acts 7:9-7:14), Moses’ commissioning in Egypt (Acts 7:30-34) and the miracle of the Exodus (Acts 7:36). He also points to the redundancy of temple worship, first indirectly via noting many of God’s wonders took place without the temple having existed, for example Acts 7:45-46 regarding Joshua and David with the tabernacle. Then he is more explicit in Acts 7:48, quoting Isaiah 66 “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men.” One implication is that Jesus has rendered the temple redundant since Christians have direct access to God via the Holy Spirit, a point made in more detail in the book of Hebrews. Yet more controversially, Isaiah could be construed as saying that the temple should never have existed at all.

6 Sin and redemption

Whereas we see from Acts 2:23 above that what has taken place was God's will as predicted via the prophets, guilt of the Jews remains. To Jews in general the Apostles offer some mitigation; Acts 3:18 "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance" but to the Sanhedrin the full responsibility Acts 5:30 "whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree". Consistent with this, Stephen points out that the Israelites have resisted God's messages through the prophets such as Joseph and Moses and this is continued by their rejection of Jesus as Messiah, and in turn reflects their failure to keep the law they profess to uphold. Acts 7:51-53 "...You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him- you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

Following this hard message, the sermons offer a call to repentance and baptism as in Acts 2:38 "'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. We note that scripture quoted from Joel itself links powerfully to the call to repentance (Acts 2:21) "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." forgiveness is available despite their sin of crucifying God's anointed. It is stressed in Acts 5:31 that it is God's will that repentance of Israel should occur "God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel." God's generous call to repentance is contrasted to inevitable failure to keep the Law of Moses in Acts 13:38-39 "'Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses."

God takes a hand and pre-empts this call to repentance and baptism in the case of the Gentile Cornelius, to convince Peter that God wanted the Gentiles to be baptised (Acts 10:44-8) "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." As Stephen is martyred there is no explicit call for repentance there is one for forgiveness in Acts 7:60 "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." – the same words as Jesus uttered on the cross.

7 Gifts from God

Finally there is the promise of gifts Acts 2:33 “And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Complementing the gift of the Spirit, the Apostles highlight Jesus’ continuing power as is given credit for the healing of the lame man, illustrating he is still alive Acts 3:16 “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.”

8 A Gentile sermon

Before concluding, we can contrast the points made above from “Jewish or believing Gentile” sermons with words of Paul to a purely uninformed Gentile audience in Lystra in Acts 14:15-17; there is no mention of scripture or even Jesus but the one God’s generosity in creation and his desire for all nations to come to him, turning from idolatry “We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

9 Conclusion

It is important to stress in conclusion that the speeches are all deeply inspired by the Holy Spirit, and thus show wisdom and depth beyond human power. In this they are fully in line with Jesus’ promise in Matthew 10:19-20 “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Thank God, that is still true today.

References

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