

The Sermon that Converted Thousands

"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or else believe me on account of the works themselves"- Jesus (John 14:11).

Facing obstacles far greater than those we meet today, the early Church at its start in Jerusalem grew explosively and continued-so, so quickly that people in Macedonia years later expressed fear that Christians were *"turning the world upside-down"* (Acts 17:6). This occurred while rabbis and priests forbade Jews from following Jesus, and Roman authorities charged with sedition *all* who worshipped Jesus instead of Caesar (17:7). In both cases they faced severe persecution by various means depending on the circumstances. They certainly never got permission; let alone approval, to advance their faith. Further still, no printed flyers existed to broaden their reach to the masses, for another 1400 years.¹ Yet still the movement grew rapidly.² How? Were the mounting numbers caused by naïveté on the part of hearers, or manipulation as a ploy of the heralds? The answer to both queries is "No!" This wave was *instigated* by the Holy Spirit (**H.S.**)³ who **united** together, two crucial facets of the Gospel. At Peter's *inaugural* sermon, the H.S. inspired the Apostle to both convincingly frame Jesus' deity and saving work in the light of Scripture, and **underscore the battery of facts that proved⁴ Jesus' saving power.**⁵

The second chapter of Acts provides a vivid illustration of *how* this crusade *began*. The very first *Christian sermon ever* was preached at the Temple by Peter on the Day of Pentecost 50 days after Easter. Although Jewish believers⁶ (**Jb**) had assembled there for the different *purpose* of observing the *Feast of Weeks* (Lev. 23:16, Luke 22:7); the disciples, in obedience to Jesus' command to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the H.S. (Acts 1:5), were certain to be there too. For that very reason, despite the likelihood of the Jbs being either *indifferent* or *hostile* to Jesus, their sight-and-sound witness of the HS's visitation could easily keep the potentially-hostile crowd within earshot of Peter's proclamation (Acts 2:38).

What is notable about Peter's sermon, is that he didn't *center* his *message* on the H.S. and the wonders that marked His coming; but rather on the person and work of Jesus Christ. My point is not to diminish the gravitas of the H.S. It is instead to highlight that the spectacle of the H.S. noted in 2:2-13 served as a **powerful summons-to-attention**, at which point Peter turned his focus onto Jesus Christ in light of His suddenly-new **glory**-stage that followed from His 33-year stage of **humility/humiliation** (Philippians 2:6-11). This is indeed just as Jesus had foretold it by stating, *"When the Spirit of truth comes... He will glorify me [Jesus], for He will take what is mine and declare it to you"* (John 16:13a, 14). Peter's witty remark about the H.S. was prompted by the charge of the Jbs that the speakers *"in other tongues"* (v. 4) were *"drunk"* with alcohol (v. 15). So to allay their bewilderment, he clarified to the contrary that it was really the Holy Spirit, the very fountain of *renewal* and *order*, who was filling them (1 Cor. 14:33).

Peter then suddenly shifted to the *heart* of his sermon by declaring: *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man **attested to you** (v.22) by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through Him **in your midst** (v.22), **as you yourselves know...**" (v.22). He then furthered his delivery by stating, *"This Jesus God raised up, and of that **we are all witnesses**" (v.32), and then explained that "[God has poured out His Holy Spirit, the effects of which] **you yourselves are seeing and hearing**" (v.33). For Peter, these miracles *unmistakably* attested that Jesus is just as He had claimed Himself to be.**

Notice that these **boldface** clauses focused NOT on the miracles *per-se* (which he granted), but the **public** aspect of them.⁷ His engagement with the crowd consequently shifted the focus from hearsay, to the throngs of *first-hand*, eye-witnesses of out-in-the-open events. So he closed, *"With **certainty** (asphalos - GK) ...**know** [this] that God has made both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified"* (36).

Note then the upshot from these points: Peter's *public* engagement with his audience over the public aspect of Jesus' miraculous works were met **not** with mockery or naysaying, but instead manifest repentance⁸ across crowds of former more-or-less **enemies** of Jesus. I judge that these factors, all by themselves, are sufficient to make the case for Jesus' resurrection rock-solid (*asphalos* as in asphalt).

Significantly, Peter elsewhere stated "*Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you*" (1 Peter 3:15). This pattern suggests that Peter may have applied *evidence*-based messages all across his 30-year ministry. Why not? The Book of Acts notes that 3,000 attendees were baptized at the sermon's close (2:41). That same general message also further ignited an *ongoing* trend that included the conversions of many *priests* who repudiated their prior hostility to Jesus (6:7). Clearly Peter reconciled faith and reason because the H.S. Himself truly is "*the Spirit of Truth*" (John 16:13). As a consequence, the uniting of *biblical* AND *factual* truths resulted in numbers of hearers being *cut to their very hearts*⁹ (2:37).

It is vital then to heed Peter's example *today* by applying his methods in *our* preaching. Firstly, biblical claims that are validated to be true deserve to be brought into the open (Mark 4:21f.). Unless we highlight the apologetic evidence the Bible consistently uses¹⁰ we will merely perpetuate those unfruitful methods that, for example, effectively leave the skeptic who dismisses the Gospel as myth, in his/her ignorance and lostness. To avert this tragic mistake, the late Sir Norman Anderson, Professor of Law at the University of London, vividly clarified the consequences of that decision which confronts us all:

*"Easter is not primarily a comfort, but a challenge. [Its] message is either [true] or it is a gigantic hoax...Either it is infinitely more than a beautiful story or else it is infinitely less. If it is true, it is the supreme fact of history, and to fail to adjust one's life to its implications means irreparable loss."*¹¹

Although skepticism is doubtlessly at present on the march, in reality the vast majority of scoffers **never bother to investigate** the evidence substantiating that Jesus is risen from the dead. This means they are ignorant. So now is the time to inform and persuade skeptics by, first of all, equipping Christians to boldly *proclaim* the solid truth that Jesus is "*the resurrection and the life*," (John 11:25).¹²

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¹ Elton Trueblood writes, "*That the Christian movement could have succeeded so that the humble men who fished on the shores of the Sea of Galilee today are better known than the very Caesars who ruled the world...is so amazing it would be incredible if we did not know it to be the case.*" (*Philosophy of Religion*, (Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 140).

² Estimates range between 100,000 to 300,000 believers by the end of the 1st century. See Kaari Ward, ed. *Jesus and His Times*. (Reader's Digest, 1987), p. 298, ** and University of Wash. Prof. of Sociology, Rodney Stark. *For the Glory of God*. (Princeton, 2003), p.27.

³ As the Third Person of the Holy Trinity God, the Holy Spirit inspired the contents of Peter's sermon along the lines of 2 Timothy 3:16. In this paper, the word, "His," with a capital "H" designates the Holy Spirit, not Peter.

⁴ By "prove" I mean that which is beyond a reasonable doubt. Legal scholar Dr. John Warwick Montgomery writes, "*Legal reasoning operates on probabilities, not possibilities: preponderance of evidence in most civil actions; evidence beyond reasonable...doubt in criminal matters.*" *History, Law, and Christianity*. (Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 2002), p. 91 (boldface mine).

⁵ As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, "*It is in fact more important for us to know what God did to Israel, in God's Son Jesus Christ, than to discover what God intends for us today.*" *Life Together*. (Harper and Row, 1954).

⁶ **Not associated** with the Jesus-followers, they gathered from all across the Roman Empire to celebrate a festival that looked **backward** in time.

⁷ It should be noted that in Judea and Galilee multitudes of people were eager to undermine Christianity by any means, if, but only if, possible.

⁸ Repent (*metanoia* in Gk) means to have a change of mind

⁹ The "heart" in the metaphorical sense is not the seat of emotions but the center of convictions which, includes both our intellect and volition.

¹⁰ See my paper, "The Pervasive Employment of Apologetics in the Bible," at my website: www.christianityontheoffense.com

¹¹ J.N.D. Anderson. *The Evidence for the Resurrection*. (Intervarsity, 1966), pp. 3-4.

¹² For further reading: Gary Habermas's broad listing of articles at <https://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/articles.htm> ** Lee Strobel's, *The Case for Faith*. (Zondervan, 2000), ** and my article, "Hoax? Myth? Or Literally True,?" at my website, *Ibid*.