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Sermon Title: Peter's Sermon at Pentecost: *the Message We Proclaim*

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Peter's Sermon at Pentecost: *the Message We Proclaim*

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Acts 2:14-41, as we continue our journey through The Acts of the Apostles, which we may well rename *The Continuing Acts of the Risen Jesus through the Church*. We have noted that the apostles and the 120 other disciples obediently gathered in the temple and upper room to pray and wait for the in-filling of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus had promised them. They were already converted, but when the Day of Pentecost came, they were visited by amazing phenomena that demonstrated that they had received the power of God to enable them to do the Great Commission that the risen Lord Jesus had given them (1:8). When the Holy Spirit filled the church, they were empowered with the gift of speaking about the wonders of God to all the Jews who were living in and visiting Jerusalem on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit gave them on this day the miraculous gift of speaking the language and dialect of pilgrims from literally all over the civilized world, places where the Jewish people had been dispersed since the 8th Century BC.

Our text last Sunday ended with the mixed reaction of the crowd to this miraculous gift of tongues/languages. Some, in an effort to discredit these Spirit-empowered witnesses, accused them of being drunk. As we will see, Peter replied with some humor and then seized the opportunity to preach the first sermon in the life of the newly born church and their obedience to the Great Commission. In this sermon, of which we have only an abbreviated version,

gives an outline of the essential message that the church proclaimed then and must still proclaim to this very day.

Follow as I read **Acts 2:14-41**.

One thing that is immediately clear in reading the Book of Acts is the primacy and priority of preaching. As has been often said, the Great Commission of Jesus in 1:8, at his Mount of Ascension, provides an outline for the Book of Acts, showing the expansion of gospel proclamation from Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Peter emerges as the main preacher in the Jerusalem church, particularly in Acts 2-6. Then, beginning in chapter 6, we see people like Stephen, the first martyr, and Philip, preaching the Christian message, and also Peter (chapters 10-11) preaching in Judea and Samaria. Beginning with chapter 13, Paul and his companions take the gospel “to the ends of the earth,” with missionary expansion to Rome and probably also to Spain.

That preaching was the priority of the apostles is seen in Acts 6, when the decision was made to select seven men (the first deacon-type ministers) to care for the administration of a ministry to needy widows. This task was delegated in order that the apostles could attend to their priority tasks of prayer and preaching (Acts 6:2, 4). Preaching seems to have been a ministry gift and responsibility given to the apostles, who apparently were succeeded by pastor/elders, who were called to oversee the churches. And Paul lists among the ministry gifts the gifts of pastoral preaching and teaching, which served to equip all of God’s people “for works of service” (Ephesians 4:11-12), and in his “swan song,” Paul admonished Pastor Timothy to faithfully “preach the Word” (2 Timothy 4:2).

But we will note also in our study of Acts that all of God’s people, the entire church, are to be vitally involved in the ministry of proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ. As Michael Green makes very clear in his studies of the Book of Acts, the early church was primarily a lay movement. He notes that the entire church was involved in the ministry of proclaiming the message of Jesus:

“That’s how the early church spread. They really believed in the ministry of every member. They were not all Pauls and Peters. They were just witnesses. And witnesses do not preach. They simply tell what they have seen. In this way,” says Green, “evangelism was engaged in continually, naturally, joyfully by Christians wherever they went. Harnack, one of the great historians of the early church,” notes Professor Green, “says that the mission of the church was in fact accomplished by informal missionaries. Christians would wander from hamlet to hamlet, from village to village, said Eusebius, in order to win fresh converts for their Lord.” Green adds that what was true then in the first church is true today—that the best evangelists are new believers. New converts still have many unconverted friends and they have a natural, disarming excitement about their new relationship with Jesus (page 47, *Acts for Today: First Century Christianity for Twentieth Century Christians*, by Michael Green. See also M Green’s *Evangelism through the Local Church*).

Let's look together at Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost as a model for the church's task of proclamation, whether through preaching or witnessing. We will note, first of all, that as on this Day of Pentecost, we are to proclaim today...

➤ **A Spirit-inspired message (verses 14-21)**

In the first part of our text (verses 14-21) we see that Peter was not alone in his preaching on the Day of Pentecost. It was in response to the Holy Spirit-inspired witness of the 120, who received the miraculous power to communicate "the wonders of God" in every dialect, that Peter was given the opportunity to preach the message of Christ (Verse 11). When Peter stood to preach, he didn't stand alone, but the other eleven apostles stood with him (verse 14). "Ministry is almost always done as a team in Acts," writes Ajith Fernando, pages 101-102, *Acts: the NIV Application Commentary*. *The Message* paraphrases verse 14 this way: "That's when Peter stood up and, *backed by the other eleven*, spoke out with bold urgency...." When Peter gave the message about Jesus there were many...

- *Ordinary people involved in proclamation*

Throughout the preaching and witness of this first church in Jerusalem, one of the striking features is the ordinariness of the people who dare to undertake the stupendous task of evangelizing and fulfilling Jesus' commission to them (See 4:13). In actuality, not one of the apostles was highly educated or theologically trained. The fact that they had been with Jesus was their only credential (4:13). Nor did they have a great record of loyalty to Jesus. They were ordinarily sinful and weak men and women who had received the transforming power of their risen Lord Jesus.

I think particularly of the preacher himself, Simon Peter. What a transformation he experienced in order to become the leader of the Jerusalem church! Despite his boastful claims, he had egregiously denied his Lord three times (Matthew 26:31-35; John 18:15-18; 25-27). Yet, following his repentance at the site of Jesus' trial (Mark 14:66-72), he later, after Jesus' resurrection, was restored by Jesus to a place of service. He was to "feed Jesus' sheep" as a pastor and preacher (John 21:15-17), which is what we see him doing in today's text.

The radical transformation of these ordinary men and women, from weak, doubting, oblivious, and fearful followers of Jesus to men and women who were willing to suffer and die for the Lord is one of the most profound evidences of the verity of the resurrection of Jesus. Such a transformation could not have been self-generated by these followers of Jesus had they not been absolutely convinced that their Lord was alive and had they not received an in-filling of the Spirit of their Lord himself.

And the modus operandi of our Lord has not changed in the 2000 years of church history. God continues to use ordinary people in order to showcase his extraordinary power. If the preaching and witness of the message of Christ were done only by the exceptionally gifted and credentialed, then the messengers would receive the credit and glory. God's purpose is to glorify himself through the weakness and dependence of his ordinary people (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5).

Peter stood with other ordinary people and we see him immediately...

- *Connecting with the audience*

How well I remember the preaching of my father, who never failed to begin his sermons with a joke or a funny story of some kind, regardless of how it connected with or was totally unrelated to the subject of his sermon. His theory was that it somehow established a connection with his audience, disarmed the defensive and perhaps also set everyone at ease. And he was a great storyteller.

Peter, however, connects by giving a rejoinder to the calumny of those who falsely accused the church of public drunkenness. This was the critics' lame rationalization for how the church could have spoken in all the dialects of the Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem (2:13). Peter replies with good humor that probably also reveals that he was not a Baptist! Had Peter been a Baptist (as the Landmark Baptists claim), he would have simply replied to the accusation of drunkenness, "We never touch the stuff!" But instead, he replied, "It's too early for us to be intoxicated with wine!" Especially on feast days no Jew would eat or drink until after the 9:00 AM prayers, perhaps breaking the fast at 10:00 AM.

This comment shows that Peter began at the point of the people's question, explaining their observations. And when we preach and witness, we need to be aware of the hard questions people are asking and even the criticisms they are leveling against us. We shouldn't reject even the most hostile and aggressive of our critics, but answer them directly with even disarming humor, if possible. What will be clear throughout the Book of Acts is the overcoming zeal of the followers of Jesus to share the message and to seek to win to Jesus even the most hostile of their enemies. Rather than retreating from opposition and even persecution, the believers continued to serve and love unconditionally, without bitterness, retreat or even complaining in their spirit.

In our witness and evangelism, we need to listen to the criticisms of those with whom we seek to share the message of Christ. Many in this Western- European culture, for example, are equating the message of us evangelical Christians with the politics of America. We must hear what they are saying and show that we understand their questions, but want to correct their misunderstandings. Then, as with Peter and the disciples, there needs to be...

- *Speaking with conviction and passion*

Typically, rabbis would sit while reading and expounding upon the law in the synagogues. But a messenger-herald, who had an urgent word for the people, would stand and raise his voice, as did Peter (verse 14). Our text says that Peter “addressed the crowd.” John Polhill comments that “The verb means *to speak seriously, with gravity*, a word often used for prophetic, inspired utterance” (page 108, *Acts: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC).

Although we may connect by means of a playful comment, when it comes time to share the message of Jesus we must speak, as did Peter, with conviction and passion. Because he was now filled with and transformed by the Spirit, Peter would never again deny his Lord. He would from then on leave no room for doubt as to what he believed about Jesus. The Old Testament Scriptures now came alive to him. Jesus had taught the disciples how their Old Testament Scriptures had prophetically witnessed to him, and Peter knows that all of Scripture is true and trustworthy.

The message that we share from the pulpit and by our daily witness is based upon the objective, historical truth of Jesus found in his inspired word, the Holy Scripture. By the word we measure our personal experiences, which serve to validate the word. Our personal testimony of Christ’s working in our lives is no substitute for the message of Jesus and the truth of God’s word, but simply connects us with people on a human level as we seek to bring to them the absolute, life-changing truth of God’s word. We speak with total confidence in the word and in the reality of the kingdom and of our risen, living Lord, who is present through the Holy Spirit.

We need to speak with the conviction and passion of Peter and also of Paul, who wrote to Timothy and the Ephesian church: “I *know* whom I have believed, and am *convinced* that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day” (2 Timothy 1:12). Our conviction about God’s truth is based on his trustworthy word. Our passion for the truth is based on our personal experience with Jesus Christ, past and present.

As we continue to look at the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost as a model for our proclamation of the message we note that ours also is...

➤ **A Jesus-centered message (verses 22-36)**

As we look into the heart of Peter’s message the subject is Jesus, throughout. He quotes passages from David’s Psalms that support the messianic identity and mission of Jesus. It’s good to relate our personal testimony. But no one is converted by hearing our entire life story but only by trusting Jesus, who is to be the subject of our message. This message is...

- *The story of Jesus and the sovereign purpose of God*

In his sermon, Peter centered upon Jesus and death and resurrection. Of course, there is much we can and should say about Jesus—his being the pre-incarnate Son of God, his being conceived by the Holy Spirit within the virgin Mary, his sinless life, his miracles and profound teaching. But, as Peter knew, the most important thing we can say about Jesus is his death for us, his death in our place, which we call his substitutionary death. What Peter was quick to point out was that Jesus' death was not an unforeseen tragedy. Rather, his death for us sinners was determined in the plan of God before the very creation of the world (Revelation 13:8). The crucifixion and death of Christ was prophesied in a passage that Peter quotes, as it is throughout the Old Testament (and at times explicitly, as in Isaiah 53).

This means that Jesus' suffering and death was the main objective of his life, and through his death for us he would bring glory to the Father by accomplishing the redemption and rescue of a fallen and hopelessly lost world (John 12:27-28; 17:4). The story of the cross is God's love story of his unconditional, unmerited love for a lost world (John 3:16). And when we, by God's free grace, enter into a personal, love relationship with him, we realize that our own salvation was in the mind of God "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4).

In other words, as Jesus told Pilate, no one could take his life from him. He willingly surrendered himself to his accusers and those who arrested, tried and crucified him. Had he chosen to save himself, Jesus could have called tens of thousands of angels to his rescue. But instead, Jesus determined to give himself to suffer and die for us (Matthew 26:47-56).

The story of his Jesus leads to a confrontation with the fact of...

- *The guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus*

Note that in the same sentence Peter speaks of the crucifixion of Jesus as God's sovereign "set purpose and foreknowledge," but also as the people's doing, "with the help of wicked men." Peter indicates that his very audience personally put Jesus to death by "nailing him to the cross" (verse 23). Although we are thousands of years removed from the time of Peter's sermon, we are included among those responsible for Jesus' death because he suffered and died also for us. Although he freely gave himself for us, we nevertheless share the guilt for his death. It was because of our sins that he had to die for us. He paid the penalty and debt that we should have had to pay. And to reject his atoning death in our behalf is to say with the crowd that called for Jesus' crucifixion, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). Unless we repent and turn from our sin, we will suffer the consequences of rejecting Christ, which is to suffer eternally for our guilt for sin.

And the message is that the crucifixion of Jesus was not the last word. Peter quotes David's 16th and 110th Psalms to expound...

- *The victorious resurrection and exaltation of Jesus*

Although Psalm 16 is a personal testimony of David, the message exceeds David's experience, since his body, which was buried near where Peter was preaching, did suffer decay. David's words prophesied the promised Messiah, the Son of David, whose body indeed would not suffer decay but rather would be raised on the third day (Verses 25-28). (See a sermon on these verses by John Piper, <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper87/jp870020.htm>).

The resurrection of Jesus meant that the suffering and death of Jesus were accepted by the Father as the pleasing sacrifice for the sins of the world. Not only was Jesus raised from the dead with his everlasting, resurrection body, but also he was exalted to the right hand of the Father and his enemies were made a footstool for his feet (verses 34-35, quoting Psalm 110:1). Jesus humbled himself to death on a cross, but Peter said that has made him "both Lord and Christ" (verse 36). Paul writes a similar theme of the kenosis (emptying) and pleroma (fullness/exaltation) of Christ:

He humbled himself and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him a name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:8b-11).

When we share the message about Jesus, we are not eliciting sympathy for the suffering Savior. We tell of his suffering and death and his unconditional love. But also we quickly affirm that Jesus was raised from the grave, that he lives and rules in glory and that he is being worshiped around his heavenly throne and he is worthy of the worship and adoration of all mankind, indeed, of all his creation. This is the picture we have throughout the Book of Revelation, of the Lamb who was slain but who is now worshiped and forever will be worshiped around his glorious throne (Rev. 5:12-14, etc).

Note finally that we, preachers and all witnesses, are to proclaim...

➤ **A life-changing message (verses 37-41)**

Now here was a sermon that brought a response! The people "were cut to the heart" with deep conviction and interrupted Peter's sermon by asking what they needed to do in response to the message (verse 37). When God is at work through his Spirit-filled preachers and witnesses, there will be a response to...

- *The convicting power and amazing grace of Jesus*

Greek scholar AT Robertson explains the word translated “cut” (verse 37) as meaning “to pierce, to sting sharply, to stun, to smite.” Robertson notes that Homer used this word to describe horses “dinting (*Webster*: “driving in with force”) the earth with their hoofs” (See page 34, volume III, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*). The work of the Holy Spirit is to convict (pierce the heart) of guilt, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8).

Of ourselves we can do nothing to convince people of their need for Christ, much less to convict them, to pierce their hearts. Only God through his Spirit can do that. Our part is to give a Spirit-led and Spirit-filled witness to the truth about Jesus for forgiveness of sin, salvation from death and the free gift of eternal life. The Spirit of God alone can bring people outside of Christ, who are without hope and without God in the world, to an awareness of need, the ability to believe and the will to turn to Christ as Lord and Savior.

Some debate over which comes first, faith or repentance. But as New Testament scholar I Howard Marshall says, faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin (page 81, *Acts* [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries]). We cannot have one without the other. God’s grace alone, through the Holy Spirit, enables you to realize your sin and what Jesus has done for you. Then you, as an act of faith, turn from your sin and trust Jesus to save and forgive you. Anything we claim as faith is less than true saving faith if we are not moved to be deeply sorry for our sin and eager to turn from sin and self-centeredness and then follow Jesus as Lord.

Just as was the case with this repentant crowd of 3,000, which no doubt included many who had not only approved but also had given consent to Jesus’ crucifixion, faith and repentance are the work of the amazing grace of God through Jesus. Grace is God’s free gift and even our faith/repentance response is his gracious gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). God’s grace, his unmerited goodness and favor, stands out sharply in this sermon. Peter had just told them of the guilt they all shared for Jesus’ crucifixion. Now he tells them the way toward immediate and complete forgiveness. All guilt would be removed forever upon their turning from sin, which would begin...

- *The way to new life*

Peter tells the crowd that they are to “Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins” (verse 38). This verse has long been a battle-ground between those who say baptism is essential for salvation and those who say it’s an act of obedience that follows and confirms salvation, which is an inner working of grace. We note what scholars say about the preposition ‘eis,’ translated “for,” which can also be translated “upon,” or “upon the basis of” (See Polhill, page 117, above citation, and AT Robertson, pages 35-36, above citation, both Baptists!). The fact is, not only in Acts, but throughout the New Testament

salvation is presented as a work of God within the heart and not dependent on human action or ritual. But the truth remains that in Acts the idea of an unbaptized believer is unthinkable. Baptism was the public confession of faith for all believers, who obediently portrayed their new life in Jesus (Romans 6:3-4). And on this Day of Pentecost there was indeed a mass baptism of 3,000 repentant, new followers of Jesus, swelling the membership of the church to 3,120!

And then Peter promised all that day who obeyed the gospel that they would receive...

- *The gift of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the kingdom*

All of those who believed the word and repented became involved immediately in the work of the kingdom of God, work that would spread to “all who are far off” (verse 39). Thus it is true that every child of God, even the brand new babe in Christ, has received the life-giving Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9). But now these new believers must follow Jesus as Lord. And probably for most of them, the baptism into the fullness of the Holy Spirit would follow later.

For most, only as we grow in our understanding of our life in Christ, do we realize our total dependence on the Holy Spirit to fill and empower us in order to receive every blessing that is ours in Christ. As we grow in the spiritual disciplines, we learn to be continually filled with the Spirit, walk in step with the Spirit and let the Spirit of God produce his fruit within us (Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:16-25). So, the first church was faced with the challenge of leading these 3,000 new converts in the way of discipleship (Matthew 28:19-20).

I mentioned earlier that Peter may not have been a Baptist (evidence: his comment in verse 15). But the fact that he had a long sermon may lend evidence to his Baptist leanings! “With many other words he warned them,” says our text (verse 40). He continued to apply the word to their new life in Christ with warnings about how to guard their new faith from the surrounding culture of moral corruption. *The Message* paraphrases Peter’s warning against the corruption of “this sick and stupid culture!”

The gospel has many implications and applications to everyday life. Our preaching cannot end with the “plan of salvation” but must apply the message of Christ to all of life and show how Christ is the answer to whatever questions people might be asking and whatever needs they might be feeling. In your witness to people you must be willing to care about them and walk alongside them as they move toward faith, move into faith and grow in their faith. You may have to use “many other words” of love, concern and instruction before they are ready and willing to follow Christ.

God worked mightily through the preaching and witness of Peter and the other disciples, bringing in a great harvest on this Day of Pentecost. These new

converts became a part of the kingdom and the witness of the church in Jerusalem. They were now a part of God's new society, saved from the corruption and death that comes from the sick and stupid culture of the enemy.

Conclusion:

Again, we see the eleven other apostles standing with Peter and "backing him" as he preached (verse 14). And the other 120 disciples were there with him as examples of the converting power of the Holy Spirit. Because of their obedience to Jesus, they became part of what Jesus promised during his earthly ministry—that they would be involved in "greater things than these" miracles that Jesus performed (John 14:12). Because the Holy Spirit is at work through his church throughout the world, Jesus is now doing greater things, doing a worldwide work through his church.

I ask you to join with me in the faithful proclamation of the message of Jesus, as you support me in prayer and your involvement in our worship services. But also, join me as we all seek to proclaim the message of Jesus in our own spheres of influence. God has placed you exactly where you are to participate in his strategic plan of proclaiming the good news of Jesus by your life and words.

I quoted Michael Green earlier, who contends that the early church was primarily a lay movement. And the life of the church was a vital center for worship and seeking empowerment, encouragement and equipping for ministry. But, notes Green, the church must realize that the message must go out into the world before people will want to come and hear what we have to say. He speaks about how churches try to market themselves to attract unbelievers to their worship services, and instead of doing outreach they expend their time and energy on what he calls "in-drag," which is "not greatly appreciated by those who are targeted. It is usually fruitless," Green concludes (page 46, above citation).

I'm finding that the Alpha Course is a great way to reach those who are interested in Jesus and yet are not ready to come to an unfamiliar worship service in a church building. And as Nancy and I open our home for this way of presenting the message of Christ to seekers, many of you are backing us with your prayers and support, just as the Eleven stood with Peter and the 120 witnesses surrounded him as he preached. In fact, about ten of our ladies are preparing the meals for the ten sessions of Alpha evenings. That's what I call being "backed" by the church!

Also, your own friendship, relationships and acts of hospitality will be essential and key ingredients for reaching this "post-Christian" culture for Jesus Christ. God has placed you in this church to be a part of our preaching ministry. But others will come and hear only as we are willing to go and tell, and let others know what Jesus can do in their lives, even as he is working in our ordinary and quite imperfect lives.

We have a story to tell about a great Savior. I pray that we will seek God's Spirit-empowering for this life-saving and life-changing task.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Do you agree that proclamation (both preaching and witnessing) are priorities for the church? In what ways does your church give priority to the ministry of the Word?
2. How do you personally support the ministry of the Word, both through your church's preaching and witnessing ministries?
3. How well do you know the story of Jesus? Are you able to share the saving message of Jesus with others? Write down an outline of the important aspects of the Jesus story, the message of salvation.
4. Who do you know who need a saving relationship with Jesus? Write down their names and beside each name write a particular need in that person's life with which you could connect the message of Jesus as the answer to that need.
5. Every Christian has the presence of the Holy Spirit but not all have experienced the fullness of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Have you? If not, are you willing to meet the conditions for being filled and completely controlled by the Spirit (confessing and forsaking all known sin, restored in all broken relationships, full surrender to the will of God, and living by obedience, trust and faith)?
6. Are you willing to spend a day of prayer and fasting in order to pray for and seek the in-filling of God's Spirit (Luke 11:9-13)? Make plans for a personal retreat, if nothing more than time alone, away from all interruptions, in your own home.
7. Pray for a new Christian that you know who needs to be nurtured in faith and taught to live in the fullness of the Spirit and commit to be an encourager in her or his life.

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