

## PREACHING IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

By Mark Scott & Mark Moore

The book of Acts is punctuated with speeches. Most of them are sermons of some sort. These are not "breaks" in the action, but part of the essential "Acts" of the book. "No fewer than nineteen significant Christian speeches occur in his second volume (omitting the non-Christian speeches by Gamaliel, the Ephesian town clerk, and Tertullus). There are eight by Peter (in chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, and 15), one each by Stephen and James (in chapters 7 and 15), and nine by Paul (five sermons in chapters 13, 14, 17, 20, and 28, and four defense speeches in chapters 22 to 26)," (John R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, p. 69). Counting only the speeches of Peter, Paul and Stephen, this accounts for 20–25% of the book. In other words, it is simply not possible to understand the book of Acts without getting a handle on these speeches.

### I. Accuracy of the Sermons

These are not verbatim accounts. They are far too short for that. Case in point: Peter's sermon in chapter two lasted from the afternoon sacrifice (approximately 3 p.m.), until early evening when they were arrested. Thus, it was about 3 hours long. Yet the text takes less than thirty seconds to read. We also get a hint of this in Peter's Pentecost address when Luke writes, "With many other words he warned them . . ." (Acts 2:40). What we have, then, are reliable summaries of the speeches given on various occasions.

The question now becomes, "How much did Luke alter the actual speech in order to fit his narrative or theology?" We should consider several of things here. First, it was not uncommon for students to keep written records of important speeches. Thus Luke's sources may well have documented Peter and Paul's major addresses, and Luke himself, may have recorded some of Paul's.

Second, Luke is a master rhetorician. In other words, he uses forms of speech that were common and acceptable in his day; cf. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). In defense speeches he sounds like a lawyer, in Athens he sounds like a philosopher, and in Palestine he sounds somewhat like a Rabbi. Thus, the speeches fit hand in glove their setting. This is like what Thucydides claims he did in his speeches — he phrased the words so that they accurately reflect the very kinds of things the speaker would have said, even if they are not word for word reproductions.

Third, Luke reproduces the language, social setting, and theology of the speakers. For example, when speaking of Palestinian events, he introduces more Aramaism and when in Greek cities, his Greek is arguably the finest in the NT. Thus, it looks like he really did reflect not just the intentions of the speakers but their verbiage as well. As a result, Peter and Paul's speeches are comparable to the language and theology used in their own epistles. Thus it seems reasonable to regard the speeches as "reliable summaries."

## II. The Occasion/Place of the Sermons

It is as varied as the circumstances of the early church. Even the occasions of the sermons preach. They tell us that the early church spontaneously erupted into proclamation whenever and wherever it found an opportunity to articulate the message of Jesus. They were given on:

1. Jewish Holiday—Pentecost (Ac. 2).
2. Hour of Prayer—Temple (Ac. 3, 21, 22).
3. Meeting of the Sanhedrin—Council Chambers (Ac. 4–5, 23).
4. Synagogue—Sabbath (Ac. 7, 13, 17, et. al.).
5. Outdoors—Samaria and desert road (Ac. 8, 14).
6. House of Roman Official—Cornelius (Ac. 10).
7. In the Assembly of the Church—Leaders (Ac. 11, 15).
8. By the Riverside—Ladies (Ac. 16).
9. In Prison—jailer (Ac. 16).
10. In City Gates—Areopagus (Ac. 17).
11. In People's Homes—Crispus (Ac. 18, 20, et. al.).
12. In University Setting—Tyrannus (Ac. 19).
13. In Greek Theater—Ephesus (Ac. 19).
14. In Seaside Retreat Area—Miletus (Ac. 20).
15. In Roman Courts of Law—Defenses (Ac. 24–26).
16. On Board Ship—In Storm (Ac. 27).
17. On an Island—Malta (Ac. 28).
18. In Roman House-Arrest (Ac. 28).

## III. How to Imitate Apostolic Preaching

The style of these sermons varied, like it does for all preaching, depending on the text, audience, occasion, preacher and purpose. Sometimes the message moved deductively from Text, to Kerygma, to Proof, to Appeal (Acts 2). Other times it moved inductively from Story, to Text, to Appeal (Acts 7). But almost invariably it included the resurrection of Jesus as its central theme. Often these sermons included the use of O.T. texts which helped prove a point or demonstrate how prophecy had been fulfilled. There are some 104 quotations, citations, or allusions in these sermons. It is notable, therefore, that sermons to Gentile audiences (e.g. Acts 10 & 17), often lacked O.T. citations. Yet, why quote the Bible to those who don't know it? It is also of interest that there are no Scripture citations in Paul's sermon to the Ephesian Elders (Acts 20). Instead Paul uses the testimony of his own life to prove his point about how they should follow his example.

Luke chooses to record three dominant sermons of Paul in the second half of Acts (13, 17, 20). The first is a sermon to synagogue Jews, the second to educated pagan, the third to the Elders of the church of Ephesus. Hence, Luke is not primarily interested in the telling us the words spoken on these occasions. He is showing us a paradigm of preaching to these three target audiences.

So what lessons can be learned about how to preach "Apostolically"? (1) Since Paul's sermon to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20) is the closest parallel in Acts to what we call "preaching" today, we might be instructed to include more exhortation along with our exegesis. (2) We might want to be familiar with the kinds of literature, legends, and philosophical presuppositions that helped Paul grab the attention of the Athenians. (3) Along the same lines, we will need to exegete our audience as carefully as we do the text. We should feel free to exploit a variety of opportunities with a variety of styles, texts, and hermeneutical approaches. The Apostles were inspired, while I shall shoot for inspiring-homiletical commitment. Within this freedom of expression, however, we must stay true to the author's intended meaning. (4) Continue to take advantage of the liturgical setting to preach in, but expand your "preaching" to include other settings so as to encompass more unbelievers. (5) If we are to preach as the Apostles did, we will need to be familiar with a great variety of O.T. texts and be prepared to show unbelievers how these prophecies typologically predicated Jesus as the Christ. (6) We must make a beeline to the cross and resurrection of Jesus and extend an offer of forgiveness, grace, and salvation.

We need to be cautious about trying to narrow preaching down to one single kind of communication or style. After all there is great variety even in the book of Acts. This is reflected in the vocabulary used to describe preaching in this book: preach, teach, testify, say, proclaim, reasoning, dialogue, explaining, giving evidence, strengthen, encourage, dissension, debate, evangelize, declare, etc. Furthermore, because all we have are "reliable summaries" of these sermons we should be careful of assuming too much. For example, the fact that there are no illustrations, no alliterated outlines present in the text does not mean they were never used. And we may need to ask if the apostles were preaching in our day, what differences would they make in their preaching to communicate to our audience?

**Conclusion:** Preaching is central to the action of Acts. It was an essential characteristic of the early church. And it was a dangerous activity. It was dangerous to the preacher because it often placed him face to face with political opponents. It was perceived as dangerous by governmental entities who felt threatened by the new social configuration it announced. It was dangerous for those who responded because of the radical cost of discipleship. And it was dangerous for those that listened but refused respond because the very act of preaching was used by God to harden the hearts of those who headed not the message. Therefore we must not tinker with preaching. Through this message preached souls are brought out of darkness and into light, the gates of Hell give way, governments tumble, and the kingdom of God is established on this earth.