

Acts 2:14-42
(Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 14:1-11)
“Apostolic Teaching”

Introduction

What happens when people have a life-changing encounter with God? What should we expect to see happen if God should answer our prayer to change us from the people we are to the people we long to be, or *should* long to be? Of course, every person is wonderfully unique and so each of our stories of grace will be unique. Nevertheless, there are certain basic elements that should mark every work of grace and render it authentic.

Every gathering of Christians, whether meeting as a local congregation or as a small group, should be marked by the same four passions that marked these first Christians: “They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (2:42). It is interesting and instructive that these first Christians of Pentecost responded to the tremendous outpouring of the Holy Spirit, not with undisciplined enthusiasm, but by devoting themselves to these four disciplines that have marked Christ’s disciples down through the ages: the disciplines of study, of community, of worship, and of prayer.

What I want to emphasize this morning is that the first of these – devotion to the apostles’ teaching – was foundational to the other three. But what marked the apostles’ teaching and made it so foundational? Was it simply a matter of studying the Scripture, each book in its historic, cultural setting? Was it merely a matter of understanding the lexical definitions of the words and common sense meaning of each passage? I would contend that to study the Bible in that way, as so many Bible students do, is not sufficient. Luke does not tell us that these first Christians devoted themselves merely to Bible study, but that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. What exactly does that mean?

Every time I return to this account of Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, I am impressed with what a model we are given of the kind of apostolic preaching and teaching that was so foundational to the explosive growth of the early church. This kind of teaching, empowered by the Holy Spirit, transformed individual lives, whole communities, entire cities, and ultimately the entire Roman Empire. Clearly, we have more to say and more to teach than Peter taught in this one sermon, and clearly what Luke has given us is a summary of a much longer sermon. But here we find perhaps the supreme model of how Christians are to handle the Scriptures, whatever the particular theme may be, because we have here the doctrinal center of Christian confession, as well as a call to action that is itself foundational to the Christian life.

Note with me this morning six characteristics of the kind of teaching that makes disciples who live under the Lordship of Christ and who seek to bring the kingdom of God to bear upon the kingdom of this world.

Body

1. Apostolic teaching starts with what is happening in our world.

The apostolic teaching we find in Scripture was never dry and academic. It always spoke into a real-life situation. Just as Jesus spoke to real people with the same kinds of issues that you and I face each day, so did his apostles, whether addressing a crowd as Peter was doing here, or writing a letter to address specific problems and challenges faced by local congregations as Paul did in his letters. Too often we are tempted to teach truth because it is truth, and to expect people to make their own application. But the apostles were more compassionate than that. They taught God's truth in the context of what was happening to their listeners, and sought to address the particular problems and struggles that they faced, the cries and whispers of their hearts.

So, here, Peter says, "You are confused by what is happening. Let me explain it to you. Let me address the question being asked throughout the city of Jerusalem this morning." You and I must be even better listeners than speakers if we are to address the hearts and minds of those around us.

2. Apostolic teaching connects our world with God's Word.

Peter does not begin to speculate and philosophize. Everything that he says rests upon Scripture. His words derive their authority from the Scripture. Like Peter, we can only say, "Thus says the Lord" with confidence when we can ground what we say in the written word of God. I am not saying that this is the only way that God communicates with us (wise counsel, circumstances, impressions of the heart and mind), but all other means must be tested against the written word of God, and nothing has the force and certainty of the Scripture interpreted through the illumination of the Holy Spirit in community.

So it is obvious that we should be students of God's Word and that his Word should so abide in us that we will have the apt word from God to address to the questions that arise in our own minds as well as in the minds of those around us. We cannot connect our world with God's Word unless we have a working knowledge of both. Thus, the importance of our understanding that our primary task is one of translation: Just as "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," so God desires through us to continue to take on human flesh and through us speak his Word and reveal his glory to our world.

3. Apostolic teaching presents Jesus as the key to interpreting both our world and God's Word.

Now, it's too easy to miss this. Most of us in Peter's situation would have been satisfied just to show that the Holy Spirit had been promised through the writings of

the prophet Joel. We would have given an overview of the Scripture's teaching about God's Spirit. But that would have led to a misunderstanding. In Peter's case, he would have been restricted to crafting a doctrine of the Holy Spirit out of an Old Testament context without understanding why it was that now, on this particular Pentecost, the promise had been fulfilled and the Holy Spirit poured out on them. Peter knows that unless his listeners understand the link between Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit, they will miss the gospel, and thus miss the blessing of the Spirit.

Jesus has just spent the forty days between his resurrection and ascension teaching them that the Scriptures are all about him, and therefore cannot be rightly understood apart from him. Peter has learned this well, and demonstrates this essential, foundational characteristic of apostolic teaching: it is thoroughly Christ-centered. You and I must never forget this, lest while teaching the Scriptures we miss the very reason that God has given them to us.

4. Apostolic teaching links the historical Jesus to the resurrected and exalted Christ.

A basic premise of radical New Testament scholarship is that there is a difference between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. This is assumed in the teaching of many seminaries and altogether too often in preaching. Yet such an assertion is a denial of the most basic tenet of the apostles' teaching. Look at how often in this sermon Peter says, "This same Jesus." Why does he say that? To emphasize that *the same Jesus* who lived and taught in the towns and villages of Galilee and Judea, who was arrested and delivered over to death, was raised from the dead and even now reigns at the Father's right hand.

Those who were there, those who knew Jesus and gave their lives as martyrs bearing witness to him, insisted that the historical Jesus was one and the same as the risen Christ whom they proclaimed (2:32). One day all the proud mockers of this world, including clever pastors and theologians who have mocked the very message entrusted to them, all together will bow low and proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.

5. Apostolic teaching connects our present experience to God's eternal purposes for us.

Only now is Peter ready to explain that the Holy Spirit, promised in ages past and now outpoured, is the gift of this same Jesus (2:33). It is the Spirit, promised by God through his prophets, who brings us all the benefits won for us by Jesus in his life, death and victory. Unless we make this clear, people will mistake the Holy Spirit for some vague spiritual power or influence into which they can tap if only they find the right spiritual exercises. Peter links the Holy Spirit to the continuing presence and ministry of Jesus, who creates a community of people empowered to lay aside this world's notions of power, and to love one another self-sacrificially.

It is important for us Americans who love celebrity, to remember that the biblical picture of a spiritually empowered person is not the successful star of evangelicalism, but rather the humble Christian living and working in a corner, far from the roar and acclaim of the crowd, quietly laying down his or her life for the honor of Christ.

6. Apostolic teaching calls us to respond to God's grace through repentance and baptism.

Here's the great good news: We are not left out in the cold watching others being transformed by God's Spirit, but without any hope ourselves of sharing in the blessing. As God's Spirit convicts us of our sin and rebellion against him, as we stand appalled at our own brokenness and failure, as we are cut to the heart, longing to be changed and made new, God's Word comes to us as it came to those long ago at Pentecost: "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. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (2:38,39).

Conclusion

We see, then, the centrality of an apostolic understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ for every area of life, and in understanding that centrality, we find ourselves called to act on what we know: to repent, to turn from our life of selfishness and rebellion, and to be baptized into the body of Christ, which continues his ministry to this day.

So the question this morning is this: Have you seen Jesus Christ standing at the center of human history, offering himself in your place, so that you might join him in transforming history, join him in his joyful work of turning the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of our God and of his Christ? If you have, then "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. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (2:38,39).

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