

Acts 2:14–41

What Does This Mean? A Pentecost Sermon

One reason why most of us enjoy reading the Gospels is that we all enjoy good stories. In this commentary we have stressed the power of narrative to unlock our imagination and restructure our world view. But speeches, particularly sermons, are another matter. The conventional three-points-and-a-poem sermon is no one's definition of fun. Acts has some twenty-eight speeches, mostly by Peter and Paul, that account for nearly a third of the entire text. The interpreter of Acts must overcome a built-in bias against so much sermonizing. Why did Luke put so much of Acts in the form of speeches?

The crowd's accusation of drunkenness serves as a cue for Peter to make a speech. Here is a pattern we will see repeated in Acts. The church is confronted by a crowd, some of whom understand and some of whom do not. An apostle speaks, interpreting the gospel through a sermon. Luke's pattern was a favorite of classical historians. Through speeches, put upon the lips of distinguished historical figures, the ancient historian interpreted the meaning of events. At first this may seem a rather unimaginative, prosaic literary convention until we remember how, in our own day, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address did more than open a cemetery—it gave meaning and substance to a national cataclysm. [Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech](#) reinterpreted our history and constitution and mobilized a people into action for justice. A good speech can turn us inside out.

Furthermore, a good speech has an identifiable and memorable form. Good speakers develop a distinctive style and a particular way of dealing with their material. Even though not all speeches in Acts follow the same outline, C.H. Dodd identified a definite pattern in Acts for their presentation in apostolic *kerygma*:

1. The age of fulfillment, or the coming of the kingdom of God, is at hand (vv. 16–21).
2. This coming has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of [Jesus](#) (vv. 22–23).
3. By virtue of the resurrection, [Jesus](#) is exalted at the right hand of God as the messianic head of the [new Israel](#) (vv. 24–36).

4. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory (v. 33).
5. The messianic age will shortly reach its consummation in the second coming of Christ.
6. Forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation come with repentance (vv. 38–39 [p. 11]).

Dodd says, “We may take it that this is what the author of Acts meant by ‘preaching the kingdom of God’” (p. 24). Here is the core of apostolic preaching as portrayed in Acts. But who is the audience for this preaching? Unbelievers in the street? In our earlier discussion of the purpose of Acts, we asserted that Acts was probably written for “insiders”—Christians who were struggling to retain the boldness, faith, and confidence in the face of new internal and/or external struggles. The Luke-Theophilus dialogue was part of a long conversation between God and the people of God. Luke is the moderator between Theophilus' church and the panel of eyewitnesses of the Christ-event. It is the church's own skepticism, doubt, and despair which is the audience for Peter's speech.

Any good speech is more than *what* was said, and *to whom* it was said; it is also a matter of *how* it is said. First, Peter bluntly counters the mockers' assertion of drunkenness (vv. 14–15). Crowds had earlier made the same charge of drunkenness against Jesus himself: “Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34). The church sees plainly that these events, experienced by the crowd as only disruptive inebriation and scandalous irrationality, are fulfillment of prophecy (vv. 14–21). Joel said that in the terrible and wonderful last days there would be an outpouring of the Spirit on everyone (Joel 2:28–32). The Spirit, once the exotic possession of a prophetic few, is now offered to all. The crowd, which also knows the Scriptures, do not see what the Scriptures so clearly prove.

We shall see this technique of promise and fulfillment throughout Acts, just as it is seen in Luke's Gospel. Its goal is to closely link the history of Israel with the life of Jesus and to assert that the community the Spirit forms is in unbroken succession of Israel's own pattern of expectation and realization. Israel exists as the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, a promise Luke reiterates frequently (Acts 3:25; 7:2–8, 17; Luke 1:15, 72–73). When Jesus was born, it was foretold by the prophets. Jesus, filled with the Spirit, confirms the messianic hopes (Luke 4:16–19). Even Jesus' suffering and death, such scandals to the world, were part of prophecy (Luke 24:44). After his resurrection, it

suddenly becomes clear to the disciples that the seemingly baffling events of Christ's life and ministry were part of God's plan (Luke 24) and are the basis for their mission to preach to all the nations (Luke 24:47–48).

In Peter's speech we are listening to a Jew speaking to fellow Jews, linking the story of Jesus with the Scriptures of the Jews. For Luke the Scriptures of the Jews are the primary context within which Jesus' life is comprehended. The Old Testament is not "Christianized" in this process, rather it is allowed to speak its own word about the coming salvation. Nowhere does Luke speak of the "founding" of the church or of the formation of some "new Israel." There is only one Israel—the faithful people who respond faithfully to the promises of God. The story of Jesus both gathers and divides Israel. The disciples in Acts, who in Luke's view are the core of truly faithful Israel, preach the word by which Israel's mission to all the nations is at last brought to fulfillment: "For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39).

The response to Peter's rehearsal of the story of Jesus is immediate and specific—the crowd wants to know what to do (2:37). The *kerygma* has the power to evoke that which it celebrates. People are moved to repent upon hearing the story. Fortunately for the crowd and all successive hearers of the story, the gift of the Spirit and the forgiveness of sins is not simply for eyewitnesses or those who were among the first to see and hear. No, "the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39).

The power being offered here is not that of Peter's homiletical ability to work the crowd up into an emotional frenzy or in the crowd's sincere inner determination to get themselves right with God. The story of Peter's Pentecost speech is told so that there is no doubt the power is that of the Spirit. The word which convicts the crowd is the *externum verbum*, the "external word," (Luther) that comes from without. True, the crowd responds, asking what they should now do. But their action is response, not initiative. The word Peter has spoken to them is neither something they have derived from within themselves nor is it part of their own experience or natural inclination. None of that can save them, for they are, as are we all, part of a "crooked generation" (2:40).

What saves them is the story of what has happened. What has happened is that in Jesus the Christ there is a power loose in the world which is power for them. They have

not been looking for Jesus; rather, they are the ones “whom the Lord our God calls to him” (2:39). This externality of the Spirit and its work for them is signified by Luke’s use of the passive imperative verb form in Acts 2:40, a use obscured by most of our English translations. It is not so much “Save yourselves ...” but let yourself be saved! Here is salvation, not as earnest human striving but salvation beyond such striving, salvation which only comes as the call and work of the Spirit which both testifies to and enacts salvation among the crowd . The Spirit that inspired prophets like Joel now inspires Peter to tell what has happened for Israel. God’s restoration of a prophetic people has begun.

A note of urgency is added by the way Luke reports the immediate reaction of the crowd and Peter’s quick response to their question. Time is short. Luke adds to the Joel quotation, “in the last days” (2:17) and “above” and “signs beneath” (2:19), to create an eschatological, end-of-time mood in the scene. The images remind us of the discourse on the signs of the end in Luke 21:10–11, 25. Peter “testified with many other words and exhorted them” because of the urgency of the time.

The response demanded by Peter is straightforward: repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (v. 38). Interpreters of this response should take care (1) not to reduce this into a step-by-step pattern for a person’s salvation: a person is “cut to the heart” (v. 37), repents, is baptized, receives forgiveness, then receives the Holy Spirit. This pattern of conversion appears nowhere else in Acts. Elsewhere when Luke recounts the conversion of a crowd he merely says that many believed (4:4; 5:14) or that they turned to the Lord (9:35). Here is no order-of-salvation, but rather a conclusion of Peter’s speech. In his speech Peter has asserted the guilt of the Jerusalemites for the death of Jesus (2:22–23, 36). When they ask what they must do, the context makes clear that something must be done about their guilt. In other accounts of conversion in Acts repentance and forgiveness play a part, but here the theme of repentance and forgiveness are central aspects of conversion. For Luke the ability to repent and the possession of the Spirit are gifts of God (5:31–32; 11:18). Even as the Spirit is a gift, the repentance and forgiveness of Israel are also miraculous gifts. The story of Pentecost day began with the gift of the Spirit to the assembled apostles. Now the day concludes with the gift of reconciliation for those who heretofore stood on the outside. Taken in the context of Luke’s narrative as a whole, this account of the conversions at Pentecost may

be most significant as a piece of the larger story of the amazing growth of the Christian community. The rather surprising, overwhelming response of Peter's audience can only be described as a divine gift. The movement of the good news to "the end of the earth" has begun (see *Reflection: Conversion in Acts*).

Nor should we (2) attempt to make too much out of the report of baptism in the name of Christ followed by mention of the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38). This is not some sequential pattern being reported here, as later references to baptism and the Holy Spirit in Acts will show (10:47; 19:1–7). Luke does not intend to suggest a sequence of first "water baptism" and then "spirit baptism." Water and Spirit are together. In fact, when the crowd wonders what they must do to be saved, that is, what they must do to receive forgiveness and the Spirit, Peter presents repentance and baptism.

On the other hand, (3) there is no mechanistic relationship between water and the Spirit, as other references in Luke-Acts to the reception of the Spirit show. Luke 3:16 records John the Baptist declaring, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Acts 1:5 (and 11:16) appears to contrast water baptism with Spirit baptism. But Acts 10:47 and 19:1–7 affirm the unity of water and Spirit. Luke does not contrast water and Spirit but rather wants to underscore the distinctive aspect Christian baptism brings to the older baptism of John—the Spirit. In a sense there are two kinds of baptism in Luke-Acts, but they are not Spirit versus water. Rather they are John's baptism of preparation for the Christ and Jesus' baptism by water and Spirit. Luke knows no clear-cut pattern of how and when the Spirit is given. Acts 10:44–48 shows Cornelius and his family receiving the Spirit *before* they were baptized. But in Acts 19:5–6 the Spirit comes on the disciples of John the Baptist when Paul lays his hands on them *after* their baptism. Surely this diversity within Luke-Acts is testimony to the diversity and freedom of the experience of the Spirit within the church of Luke's day.

Finally, (4) not too much should be made of the early baptismal formula, baptism "in the name of Jesus Christ" (v. 38), as if the Spirit is somehow disconnected from this formula. Acts 2:38 gives the formula of the name of Jesus with the promise that in submitting to baptism "you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit blows where it will in Acts, connected with the act of baptism and laying-on-of-hands but refusing to be bound by later ecclesiastical definitions and conventions. To be baptized in the name

of Jesus Christ is to participate in his life-giving Spirit.

Thus, Peter's Pentecost speech ends with empowerment being offered to all. The crowd, formed from the ranks of a "crooked generation," is not to be left to its own devices. It is the recipient of Spirit-empowered preaching. While Sunday morning sermon recipients in the pew may consider their preacher's sermons a dubious gift, we should ponder again the significance of how, in Paul's words, "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" ([Rom. 10:17](#)). What people say helps to determine the world in which they live. Luke constructs what Peter should have said at Pentecost and therefore what world he thinks the crowd should embrace. The speech points beyond Peter to the God who saves. It is the God who keeps promises that matters in this sermon, so that when the sermon ends no one is in doubt that there is a God who is busy in the world. The speech effects the condition it reports:

Thou hast made known to me the ways of life;
thou wilt make me full of gladness with thy presence ([2:28](#)).