

Peter's Sermon on the First Pentecost

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The light of Faith still burns as brightly as these candles. (NC Photograph)

Know Your Faith On Page 5B

There are many scholars who hold that the sermons of the apostles presented in the Book of Acts are the work of Luke, the author of the book, rather than of the apostles themselves. They say he has followed a tradition of ancient historians, who put speeches into their narratives expressing what the principal characters of the story would have said, or should have said on such occasions.

Others hold that Luke did not completely invent the speeches but elaborated on pieces that had been orally handed down or had been partly written down. They work diligently to show what those original apostolic pieces must have been.

There are also conservative scholars, of course, who take a dim view of interpretations that do not agree with what the text literally says. If the text says "Peter began to speak," they hold it is Peter who spoke all that follows.

You are free in this matter to follow the opinion you think best. You can find various strata of apostolic preaching, or you can say it is all preaching of the late 1st century, or you can say it is Luke who skillfully composes everything, with or without historical documents at his disposal, so that all the speeches of the book express a single, coherent theological position.

In any case, the Book of Acts, with God as its principal author, gives witness, in the speeches of Peter, to the resurrection of Jesus as a factual, historical event, the great culmination of the wonderful works of God throughout the history of the Jewish people, fulfilling promises made to Abraham and his descendants.

Notice how, in Peter's speech of chapter 2, prophecies attributed to Joel and David are explained as fulfilled in Jesus. It has been said that Peter's sermon gives us a specimen of the primitive kerygma, or proclamation, which was based on the fact of Christ's Resurrection and the prophecies of the Old Testament interpreted messianically.

If you take it that the sermon ends at 2:38, you have an ending with a creed formula, and you can argue that the purpose of preaching in Luke's day

was to get acceptance of the creed, which was understood as God's law proclaimed by the apostles. If you consider that his sermon really continued to include verses 37-40, you can say that the early Christian preaching demanded repentance and baptism, promised forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, and ended with an alternative: salvation or damnation.

The use of the Old Testament in Acts shows that the Church was convinced that the Old Testament foretold the events of the New Testament, and that the Church has received the Holy Spirit to guide her in interpreting the Bible. The interpretation sometimes transforms the literal meaning of the Old Testament text.

There has been a great deal of study in recent years on the liturgical background of the Acts of the Apostles. Some scholars have worked hard, for example, to show that Peter's sermons are connected with liturgical readings used in the Jewish synagogues of his day.

There is a general tendency among scholars to hold that Luke deliberately composed his account of the Pentecost event to liken it to the earlier great event of God's spectacular coming on Mount Sinai, as described in the Old Testament Book of Exodus.

It has been said that part of Luke's purpose in writing Acts was to show that the Christian faith was the continuation and fulfillment of Judaism. Peter's sermon in chapter 2 explains to the Jewish people what God was working out.

Luke, by putting it in the setting of sound, wind, and tongues of fire on Pentecost suggests the idea that fifty (Pentecost) days after the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus we have the inauguration of the New Covenant, like the centuries-old commemoration of the Covenant of Sinai, the giving of the Law to the Jews, observed 50 (Pentecost) days after the Passover.

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