

# —The Message of Acts—

## *Lesson 9—The Growing Word*

- I. How Grows the Church?
  - A. Church growth research has shown that unchurched, suburban North Americans are more likely to return to a church after an initial visit if: 1) their children were well cared for; 2) the music is contemporary; 3) friendly people welcome them; and 4) the preaching is quick paced and relevant to their felt needs.
  - B. But how does the church in the NT grow? Again and again, Luke tells us that the growth of the church was consonant with the faithful preaching of the gospel, Acts 6.7; 12.24; 13.49; 19.20. This coincides exactly with Paul's preeminent charge to the generation of pastors following the apostles, 1Tim 4.13; 5.17; 2Tim 2.2, 15; 4.1-5; Tit 2.1, 7-8, 15
- II. Central themes of the preaching in Acts
  - A. Jesus the Messiah has brought the promised Kingdom of God
    1. *The last days* promised through the prophets have dawned, days of relief and restoration, but also of crisis, in which the proud and stubborn are separated from those who humbly hope in God, Lk 1.50-53; 2.34-35. "History is in God's hands and the appearance of His Messiah has brought it to this moment of blessed opportunity and solemn decision" (Mt 16.15).
    2. God has given ample testimony to Jesus as His Messiah, Acts 2.22, 36. In Peter's first sermon (Acts 2) and Paul's first sermon (Acts 13) both men argue that Ps 16 has been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is the stone rejected (Ps 118.22). Jesus is the heir of David raised up to reign forever on the kingly throne (Ps 2.7). All this testifies that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah and therefore the inaugurator of the Kingdom of God, Mt 12.28.
    3. Jesus's death was the suffering of God's Servant prophesied in the OT, Acts 26.22-23
    4. Jesus resurrection was God's indisputable testimony that He was the Anointed King, sent to reign over His people forever, Ps 2.7
  - B. Jesus the Messiah bestows the blessings of the Kingdom of God
    1. The outpouring of the Spirit upon Jesus's ascension to the throne is the proof of His Messiahship, Acts 2.33-36. At the beginning of his sermon, Peter quoted Joel 2.32, that anyone who calls upon the LORD will be saved, and at the end of it he announced that the resurrection was God's declaration that the LORD upon whom men must call is Jesus, Acts 2.36, 38; 4.12
    2. As the exalted Prince and Saviour Jesus gives repentance and forgiveness to His people, Acts 5.31; 10.43
  - C. Jesus the Messiah will return to deliver and to judge
    1. Human history has not seen the last of Jesus and this gives reason both to hope and to fear.
    2. There is reason to hope because His resurrection assures believers of our resurrection and of our eternal life with Him as our Saviour.
    3. There is reason to fear because His resurrection is God's declaration to all humanity that He will at last sit in judgment over them, Acts 10.42.
  - D. Repent and trust in the name of Jesus
    1. While repentance and faith must be granted by God (Acts 11.18; 14.27; 16.14) the gospel will always include a call to repent and believe, Acts 20.18-21; 26.19-20; 1Th 1.2-10.
  - E. "This, then, is the structure of the gospel preached in Acts: 1) God has kept His promises by sending Jesus the Messiah to suffer in others' behalf and to be raised to life and lordship. 2) From His throne at God's right hand, Jesus bestows the blessings of the kingdom and awaits His return to bring final restraint and final judgment. 3) In the light of these truths, God calls on all who hear His good news to repent of their sins and turn to Him in faith. 4) Such a radical change of allegiance will be shown in submission to baptism in God's name and a lifestyle of joy, love, and holiness."

- III. Preaching today, if it's to be *apostolic* preaching as we see in Acts, must be truth-centered, revelation-centered, God-centered, and Christ-centered.
- A. The goal of preaching is not to meet people's felt-needs, but to tell them the truth about God and His revelation, about humanity and sin, about Jesus and His gospel, about the present opportunity for salvation and the future certainty of judgment.
  - B. Preaching's only basis, from which it gets its sole authority, is the revelation and self-disclosure of God in the Bible. Preaching doesn't find its power in passion or its persuading ability in human wit and style or its relevance in contemporary anecdotes. It finds its power and its rhetoric in remaining faithful to and dependent upon the text and gospel of Scripture, which is the revelation of God.
  - C. Preaching is neither focused on men nor determined by men, but is focused on God and determined by God. It's Him we proclaim and it's His message we declare. He is the object to whom we direct men's faith and He is the subject who fills our propositions. The aim of preaching is not to make people better in self and life (e.g. moralistic preaching) but to lead people to God in order that they might be better in self and life.
  - D. Preaching that builds people toward spiritual maturity never takes them beyond Christ, for He is the wisdom of God and in Him is the fullness of deity. So rather, it takes them more deeply into Christ, so that their thoughts, attitudes, values, desires, reactions, words, affections, and behavior are transformed by their death to sin in His death and their resurrection to holiness in His resurrection.
- IV. It's surprising that preaching still counts for something in late 20th century America...
- A. In most seminaries today, *homiletics* (the art of preaching and structuring sermons) no longer includes an emphasis on *rhetoric* (the art of persuasive speaking). Compare this to R. L. Dabney's classic text on preaching, *The Art of Sacred Rhetoric*, or by its new title, *Evangelical Eloquence*.
  - B. Furthermore, rhetorical/persuading skills have receded from the place of prominence it once held in public life. If someone speaks *too* skillfully, we suspect him, think he's trying to pull the wool over our eyes, hoodwink us, manipulate us, trying to sell us a bill of goods. Our media have not only shortened our attention spans but also lowered our threshold and justified our impatience with the spoken word. We want sound-bytes, memes, insta-grams, tweets. We don't have the patience to sit and listen. We've lost the mental energy to follow a speaker's arguments, trace a speaker's logic, and stick with a message until its conclusion. We now entrust our most important messages of love, our deepest secrets, and our vulnerability to a medium as trite and clinically cold as texting.
  - C. Again, it's truly amazing—and the evidence of a true work of grace—that any of us can listen to a sermon with the eagerness of real interest and the work of real engagement.
- V. Whatever we think of it, preaching is the avenue along which God's grace traveled to the ends of the earth of the ancient world and preaching is still God's chosen means to bring grace to its hearers today, 1Cor 1.21; 2Cor 5.20
- A. Preaching was and still is the Spirit's scalpel to cut men to the heart and bring the healing of both salvation and sanctification, Acts 26.14-20
  - B. Preaching always has been and ever will be the primary means of grace because it's pleased God to give faith upon hearing the Word preached (Rom 10.17) and to build His people up in holiness by their hearing the Word preached (1Cor 14.5; Rom 16.25). God's power to save and sanctify is displayed no better and no more often than from the pulpit.
  - C. *Therefore*, nothing is more important for our spiritual wellbeing than to sit regularly, faithfully, and diligently under the ministry of the Word of God.
    1. Preaching is that formative discipline by which God humbles the proud listener, corrects the wayward child, reproves the erring son, admonishes the resistant daughter, and conforms us into the image of Christ.
    2. Convinced by our culture that real change and meaningful engagement are always joined with sparks and excitement, we hanker for the exceptional, the sensational, the innovative, the extraordinary. But God has tied us to the ordinary, the regular, the weekly manna of preaching.
    3. Preaching should have as high a place in our minds and lives as it does in God's redemptive economy. We should expect from preaching all that God's been pleased to accomplish by it in the lives of His people before us and around us. We should expect not only salvation but also revival, reformation, and utter transformation to come by no better means than the extraordinarily ordinary and plain preaching of the Word of God.