

Analyse the way in which Peter set the tone for Christian preaching from the beginning of the Church

Introduction

“According to Acts, Peter is the first-named apostle and the only public spokesman in Jerusalem” [1]. Peter was the dominant apostle (authorised messenger of Jesus). His preaching of the core doctrinal themes of the resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Church being open to all peoples needs analysis.

Peter set forth the main doctrines for Christianity and if he was the rock Jesus built the Church on then he fulfilled that role. The notion of Peter being the rock does not endorse the papacy or the view that Peter was the pope. Rather it contradicts it. A rock is not necessarily a man who claims to be monarch of the Church and infallible. And if Peter was the rock how could the papacy be the rock?

Centrality of Jesus' Resurrection

Peter delivered the first ever sermon of the Church [2] - the most important post-“resurrection” sermon ever taught. Peter laid down the essential and everlasting foundations of Christian preaching.

Peter's preaching in content was always centred on the risen Jesus Christ (Christ means anointed king [3]). “From whence...did the early Christology arise? In our view all fingers point to Peter” [4]. .

It was evangelistic - he engaged in exposition of the Jewish scriptures to try and show his Jewish hearers that Jesus rose from the dead. Doctrine is intended to help one sanctify one's life as a religion understands sanctification. Accordingly, Peter first taught doctrine and then told people what to do with it. He exhorted his listeners that because Jesus rose they must repent and be baptised to give public witness to him and their intention to follow him.

Peter preached to the Jewish leaders, “Jesus is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” [5].

This is an attempt at exposition - he thinks he explains an Old Testament text as predicting Jesus and how Jesus is to be the foundation that all doctrines and spiritual activity is based on. It is exhortation for they are called to follow Jesus only.

Why does Peter say of the name that there is no other name given to mankind? God has given us many names but only Jesus saves. God has given us prophets such as Moses and Elijah to give us light but only Jesus gives us an eternal relationship with God. It implies that there is no salvation unless we have the right explicit knowledge of Jesus. The view that we can be saved by Jesus without knowing that he died and rose for us - ie that Jesus finds ways to reveal himself without us even realising it is heretical liberalism.

The rejection is best understood as referring to how the people rejected Jesus by having him crucified. Thus Jesus now being the cornerstone implies that Jesus has now been given the highest rank and importance in terms of our salvation. This is a reference to the risen Jesus. He then says that there is no salvation in anybody else at all. He speaks of Jesus as being alive to save us. The present tense is extremely important.

Is Peter making a tautology: Salvation is impossible with nobody but Jesus BECAUSE there is no other name under heaven given to man that can save us? That would be circular reasoning. Jesus is saviour because he is the one who saves us. But is it circular reasoning? If God has decreed that you must know the name of Jesus to be saved then that implies that Jesus is our saviour. This is not circular reasoning. If the bank decrees that you must have 10 euro in the account to earn interest then that implies that interest is possible. That is not circular reasoning. Peter makes it clear that the notion of people being saved who are good but know nothing of Jesus is nonsense.

Peter was clear that the Old Testament was inspired scripture and that the gospel could be found in it. He hoped to be instrumental in helping Jesus' followers think that the faith taught by Jesus enjoyed continuity with Judaism and can be understood as updated and corrected Judaism - or better still, the fulfilment of Judaism in the creation of a relationship and intimacy between humankind and the creator God of love.

In Acts 10, Peter gives a summary of Christian teaching that is strikingly similar to the summary given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. “The wording is identical at one point “raised on the third day” and quite close elsewhere” [6]. It is telling us that Peter was indeed giving the doctrine of the faith and not simply his own opinions. Paul was writing to Christians showing that the alleged resurrection was to be focused on not just in evangelism but in general Christian preaching. Believers would edify their faith by remembering it and learning more about its meaning.

Another proof of how Peter's teaching set the evangelistic tone for the whole early Church is in how Paul preaches the same argument as Peter that scripture says the Messiah will rise [7]. Both men gave an account of Jesus' alleged death and resurrection before using the argument.

The living and risen Jesus was the theme of Peter's preaching and if he seemed to digress from it, his purpose was only to clarify things for a relationship with him. The resurrection was central to all his preaching activity explicitly and implicitly.

Style of Preaching

Peter's style of preaching involved learning from what God had revealed in the past and applying it to the present to promote Jesus. He preached salvation history.

The Old Testament was and is the Bible of the Jews. Peter preached about the works of God as told in the Old Testament for he found that it drew Jews to the "risen Jesus". Peter's preaching was founded on the following understanding. The role of the Old Testament was to promote righteousness and declare prophecies of the work of Christ and the Church. Through it, God prepared the world for Christ.

He preached that a text [8] indicating resurrection from the dead was referring to the resurrection of Jesus. This method of learning about the present from the lessons of the past was useful for establishing common ground with the Jews. He challenged them to think afresh for themselves. His preaching style then was firm but not domineering.

Here's another example. Peter used the Old Testament statements when preaching apologetically. Peter argued that "Jesus by being raised from the dead, fulfilled Psalm 16, and since Psalm 16 refers to the Messianic King (Son of David), then Jesus is the Christ" [9]. He challenged the Jewish view that the text meant the author David for David was dead and it spoke of a risen Messiah.

Peter saw miracles as an opportunity to preach the gospel and was careful not to glorify himself by his preaching but to keep the focus on Jesus. For example, Peter became the instrument through which Jesus healed the lame beggar at the Temple. He said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk [10]." That is to say, "Jesus does this not me." He spoke of Jesus as still alive. The people are stunned by the miracle and Peter took the opportunity to preach to them. "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead" [11]. Peter was drawing upon a fact of history. He could afford to be assertive here for Jesus didn't simply do the miracle, he did it through Peter to put his stamp and seal on the gospel as preached by Peter.

Is Peter's preaching the unerring Word of God? Yes - according to the Christian faith [12]. How can a man's preaching be claimed to be God's preaching? That is why we must examine the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit

Acts says the Holy Spirit came on Peter and Jesus' friends at Pentecost enabling them to speak the word of God in other languages [13] indicating they got the gift of verbal inspiration. Peter was claimed to have been inspired by the Spirit to preach the first sermon ever given.

Peter taught that Jesus was gloriously raised from the dead and God gave him the Holy Spirit when Jesus was exalted to glory so that Jesus could share the Holy Spirit with us. Christ is risen not just for show but to be truly our saviour so as Jesus rose from the dead not just for show but to be truly our saviour, it follows that the Holy Spirit must be involved deeply

A couple of believers had lied to the apostles about how much they owned and Peter told them that they lied to the Holy Spirit and this was not lying to men but to God [14]. Acts says he proved this by ordering them to be struck dead by divine power.

The Jewish leaders tried to stop the preaching of Peter and the apostles. But "Peter and the other apostles [said]: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"[15]. There would seem to be no need to even name Peter as he was an apostle. He is treated here as if he were their spokesman. He could be trusted to preach the gospel for the rest. To me, if a Church or if preachers are not led by God through the Holy Spirit, their product will be a man-made faith and organisation and serves only to glorify them.

The Holy Spirit, according to Christian doctrine, brings people into a relationship with the Father and the Risen Jesus. The early Church asked if this was confined only to people born as Jews or for all who wish to come to God.

Evangelising Non-Jews

The Samaritans were not real Jews and they accepted the gospel and were baptised. Peter and John were sent to Samaria and when they laid hands on them they received the Holy Spirit. [16] Opening the Church to people who were considered to be no better than non-Jews, was a huge preparation for the Church to be opened up to non-Jews. Why did God not give the people the Holy Spirit until the apostles laid hands on them? The Christians reason that God wanted them to witness the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in them as a result of their laying hands on them. This was to teach them that he was not going to refuse them the gift of the Holy Spirit just because they were not Jews.

Peter's ministry was based on his testimony to a spirit-filled Jesus who rose from the dead and was exalted so that he could share the Holy Spirit with believers irrespective of race. The newborn Church shared this vision which was why he was given such an important role and influence over it until it grew to maturity and Paul rose to prominence.

Peter and the early Church thought that non-Jews were unclean and not welcome in God's Church. "Peter's ministry ... had been confined to the land of Israel" [17] at first. He was "an apostle to the circumcised" [18] - meaning the Jews of Israel.

Peter was chosen to preach that the Church must be opened up to non-Jews.

Peter was given a vision forbidding him to call anything unclean that was clean in God's eyes [19]. The Holy Spirit supposedly told Peter to go down and meet non-Jews he had sent. Peter preached the gospel and invited them into the Church. The listeners thought they received the Holy Spirit. "Then Peter said, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." At least Peter did not ask people to take his word for it that his preaching was true. He looked for evidence and pointed it out and exhorted them to live up to the demands of the gospel.

Significance of Peter's preaching

Peter until the beginning of the ministry of Paul, was the most vocal and zealous teacher in the early Church. Peter's core doctrines were also Paul's and Paul took them all over the world in a way Peter never imagined.

Peter was the instrument of the Church becoming a community united by and focused on the resurrection of Jesus. This focus was developed further by Paul who proclaimed that if Jesus has not risen then the faith is in vain and believers to be pitied.

Conclusion

Peter's preaching clarified what the Church believed and what was revealed by God. He preached to enlighten Jews and non-Jews and to edify believers. He set the model for the Church's preaching.

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[1] Barnett, P. *The Birth of Christianity* (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005), p.94

[2] Acts 2

[3] Barnett, P. *The Birth of Christianity* (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005, p. 69, "Peter identified this 'anointed' one as God's holy servant"

[4] *ibid* p. 77

[5] Acts 4:11,12

[6] Barnett, P. The Birth of Christianity (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005), p. 152

[7] Compare Acts 2:24-31 and Acts 13:35-37

[8] Psalm 16

[9] O' Brien, P. New Testament 2 (Moore Correspondence Course, 1997), p. 30

[10] Acts 3:6

[11] Acts 3:15

[12] Acts 4:31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

[13] Acts 2:4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

[14] Acts 5:3,4

[15] Acts 5:29

[16] Acts 8:17

[17] Barnett, P. The Birth of Christianity (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005), p. 60

[18] Galatians 2:8 For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles.

[19] Acts 10