

“PREACHING CHRIST”

The bulk of this passage consists of a sermon that Paul preached in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. For this reason, this passage provides a good example of what preaching that seeks to follow the apostolic pattern should look like. One thing that especially stands out about Paul’s sermon is that it was clearly a Christ-centered sermon. This is an absolutely crucial trait to apostolic preaching. Apostolic preaching preaches Christ. That being said, there are different approaches to Christ-centered preaching, and some are closer to the apostolic pattern than others. In his book on preaching, Westminster Seminary in California professor Dennis Johnson identifies three features that give shape to the apostolic approach to Christ-centered preaching. First, such preaching is *redemptive-historical* in its presentation of Christ. That is, it preaches Christ in light of the whole story of Scripture. Second, such preaching is *missiologically communicated*. In other words, it genuinely seeks to communicate the gospel to all sorts of people. And third, such preaching is *grace-driven*. That is, while it speaks the truth about sin and the need for repentance, its ultimate goal is not to make people feel bad about themselves but to bring them to Christ. We can see all three of these traits in the sermon that Paul preached in Pisidian Antioch. And for this reason, I am going to use Johnson’s three traits of apostolic Christ-

centered preaching as the headings under which we will study this passage tonight.

Before we look at Paul's sermon, though, we need to say a few things about the context in which it was preached. This passage begins by telling us that Paul and his companions left the island of Cyprus, where their ministry had resulted in the conversion of an important official, and sailed to southern Asia Minor. Luke also tells us that John left them at this point and went back to Jerusalem. (John's other name was Mark -- the same Mark who wrote the second Gospel). Though Luke does not say anything at this point about why John left, this matter will become a point of contention between Paul and Barnabas later on.

Luke then tells us that Paul and his companions traveled north into Pisidia, which was in the province of Galatia, and came to the city of Antioch. This is a different Antioch than the one that was mentioned at the beginning of chapter 13, which was located in Syria. Antioch in Pisidia was a Roman colony with a sizable Jewish population. We do not know why Paul's company decided to go there. Perhaps it was because of its strategic location. Or perhaps it was because Sergius Paulus, the proconsul who was converted through their ministry on Cyprus, sent them there. We learn from other ancient literature that Sergius had family in Antioch of Pisidia, so he might have sent Paul there in order to preach

the gospel to his relatives. Whatever the reason, the sermon that Paul preached at Pisidian Antioch is the first example that we have of his preaching.

This sermon was preached in a Jewish synagogue. In synagogue services at that time, there was a reading from the Law and a reading from the Prophets. After the passages were read, a respected teacher would deliver a sermon on those texts. Paul, as you may remember, had rabbinical training, so he would have been held in high regard by the rulers of the synagogue. This explains why they invited him to preach. But what he said in his sermon was probably not at all what they were expecting to hear.

Redemptive-Historical Preaching

This brings us to the first trait of apostolic Christ-centered preaching: it is redemptive-historical in nature. Paul clearly situates his proclamation of Christ in the context of Old Testament history. Now of course, one of the reasons why he spent so much time on this in this sermon was due to the fact that he was preaching to Jews. This makes this sermon different than the one that Paul preached to the men of Athens in chapter 17. Yet even in that sermon Paul presented Christ as the climax of redemptive-history, saying, “The times of

ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

Paul’s summary of Old Testament history in this synagogue sermon places a heavy emphasis upon God’s gracious provision for the people of Israel. Listen again to the way Paul described God’s dealings with Israel: *God* chose our fathers; *God* made the people of Israel great during their stay in Egypt; *God* led them out of Egypt; *God* put up with them in the wilderness; *God* gave them the land of Canaan; *God* gave them judges; *God* gave them kings. Paul’s treatment of the history of God’s dealings with his people focuses upon the fact that God is the source of every good thing that Israel has ever known. Israel’s entire history is expounded as a preparation for the gift of salvation that God gives his people in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s handling of Old Testament history also tells us something about the relationship between the historical outworking of God’s plan of redemption and God’s revelation of this redemption. Jesus was prophesied before he came into the world. The entire Old Testament prepared the way for his coming. At the same time, the gospel was not preached in all its fullness until after Jesus accomplished his redemptive work within history. In the words of Geerhardus Vos, “Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must, therefore, unfold

itself in installments as redemption does.” [*Biblical Theology*, 6] In other words, biblical revelation is progressive in nature.

Grace-Driven Preaching

This brings us to the second trait of apostolic Christ-centered preaching: it is grace-driven. After mentioning David, Paul quickly points out that God fulfilled his promise of a Savior by bringing Jesus into the world as the true Son of David. Now, I want to call your attention to what Paul does and does not say about Christ in these verses. This is very significant, because it helps us to see where our focus should be when we preach and bear witness to Christ. In many churches today, Jesus is primarily, and sometimes exclusively, preached as an example for us to follow. Jesus cared for the sick and the poor; so should we. Jesus welcomed outcasts; so should we. Jesus turned the other cheek; so should we. Of course, there is a sense in which Jesus’ life does serve as an example for us to follow. But if that is all that a church says in its preaching of Christ, then its preaching is not following the apostolic pattern. If all that we say about Jesus is that we should follow his example, then the Jesus we preach cannot save anyone. God’s standard is perfect righteousness. What good is Jesus’ perfect example to us if we are not able to follow it perfectly?

It is significant that Paul says nothing in this sermon that indicates that Jesus came into the world in order to set an example for us to follow. Of course, as I have already said, there is certainly a sense in which Christians are called to follow Jesus' example. But that is not the essence of the gospel. If it was, then Paul certainly would have included it here. Instead, the only thing that he says about Jesus is that he was unjustly condemned to death by the Jewish leaders and Pilate, and that God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. This tells us that Christ's atoning death and his resurrection from the dead are the things that are central to apostolic preaching.

After conveying the historical facts of Christ's death and resurrection, Paul then shifts to the sermon's application. This is signaled by his use of the word "therefore" in verse 38. Listen again to what Paul says there: "Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." Paul's point of application is focused upon the crucial distinction between the law and the gospel. The law cannot save us, but the gospel can. Of course, this is not to say that the law is a bad thing. On the contrary, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." (Rom. 7:12) The

problem with the law is not the law itself. We are the problem. The reason why the law cannot save us is because we cannot meet its righteous requirements. The law tells us what God requires of us. The gospel tells us what God has accomplished for us. Through faith in Christ, God freely gives the righteousness that he requires in his law.

Missiologically-Communicated Preaching

This brings us to the third aspect of apostolic Christ-centered preaching: it is missiologically communicated. This simply means that it is offered to all sorts of people. Paul preached in the synagogue to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. Many of those who heard him responded to the gospel in faith. It was right for Paul to bring the gospel to the Jews first, because salvation is from the Jews. The gospel is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. That being said, the gospel is not the property of the Jews. It had to be preached to others as well. This is why Paul turned to the Gentiles when many of the Jews in this city rejected his message. Apostolic preaching always seeks to bring the gospel to all who will hear it.

In describing the Gentiles' warm reception of Paul's message, Luke says something that further underscores the fact that the gospel is God's gracious

provision. He writes, “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” Now it is true that the words “election” and “predestination” are not used here, but this is clearly what Luke is talking about. He says that the only people who believed Paul’s message were those who had been appointed to eternal life. This is one of the clearest and most succinct statements relating to God’s total sovereignty in salvation that can be found in the entire Bible. It tells us in straightforward terms that God is the one who decides who will be saved.

This statement also shows us that a proper understanding of the doctrine of election should not in any way inhibit evangelism and missions. On the contrary, it is only because of God’s electing grace that our efforts can bear any fruit. Left to ourselves, no one would believe. But the doctrine of election guarantees the success of evangelism and missions. Those who have been appointed to eternal life will believe.

Notice also how the Gentiles’ response of faith is described in verse 48. Luke wants us to see that this is not merely a matter of intellectual assent. It was not merely about changing their worldview. Luke says that these Gentiles “began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord.” As Michael Horton often says, the preaching of the biblical *drama* and the *doctrine* that arises from it results in

doxology and *discipleship* in the lives of those who believe. In other words, true faith results in a life of grateful worship and obedience.

Luke concludes by telling us about the escalation of opposition from some of the Jews in the city. And he says that Paul and Barnabas responded to this opposition by shaking the dust from their feet and moving on to another city. This gesture was very significant, and it was one that the Jews would have understood perfectly well. This was something that Jews would do when they were leaving a Gentile city. They would shake the dust from their feet as a symbol of cleansing themselves of the impurity of sinners who did not worship the true God. It was highly ironic for Paul and Barnabas to respond to the Jewish opposition with this symbolic gesture. It was their way of saying that these Jews who had rejected Jesus had become spiritual Gentiles, while the Gentiles who had responded to the gospel in faith were now a part of God's people. It was a powerful statement, declaring that the Jews who rejected Jesus were actually no longer a part of the true Israel.

This passage shows us that there are only two responses to the gospel of Jesus Christ: faith and unbelief. And it is worth noting that the same sermon was met

by both responses. Paul's sermon certainly was grace-driven, but this did not cause him to go light in his treatment of sin and our inability to make any contribution to our salvation. The Jews who rejected Christ surely would have taken offense at hearing Paul say that they could not be freed from their sins by the law of Moses. But the Jews and Gentiles who believed were not offended by this at all. In fact, they rejoiced in the message that Paul preached. Why? Not because they were more intelligent or more spiritual than those who rejected the gospel. They believed because they were appointed to eternal life. And if your faith resides in Christ, then the same is true of you.