

IRREDUCIBLE
Acts 2:14-41
(Some ideas and content from Robert B. Sloan,
“Canonical Theology of the New Testament”
in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*)

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Today, we hear sermon number three from a twelve-week sermon series from Luke’s second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*. In our first sermon, Luke picked up the Jesus story where he left off in his first volume, the Gospel. We begin Acts with the ascension of Jesus and Jesus’ command to the disciples: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the remotest part of the earth.” So Jesus is telling His apostles to stay in Jerusalem, wait for the gift of the Spirit – “You will receive power, a baptism by fire, and you will become the empowered church.”

In the second sermon, last Sunday, we experienced the descent of a mighty, rushing wind. We heard the Spirit in the sound of wind; and we saw the Spirit in the flickering tongues of fire. As a result of the Spirit coming down, the apostles stood up and began to preach in languages they had not learned. We learned a new word last week: *xenolalia* – when one is gifted to speak, especially preach, in a language with which he is not accustomed. The Jews from all the Diaspora heard the gospel, each in his own language. They are amazed. Look at Acts 2:7. “They were amazed and astonished, saying, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” Look at verses 12-13. “And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others were mocking and saying, ‘They are full of sweet wine.’”

The apostles have waited. The Holy Spirit has descended. And the gospel is being preached in all languages – the reverse of the Tower of Babel. Men once divided by a diversity of languages are united with one gospel.

Are these guys drunk? How are these Galileans preaching in languages they haven’t learned? What is this all about?

Peter stands up in 2:14 and delivers a sermon to explain the phenomena of the Spirit. “But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: ‘Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day...’ (Luke 2:14-15).

The message I am about to preach to you today may be a theological earthquake for you, as it was for me when I first heard it. I have had the opportunity to sit at the feet of renowned theologians and biblical scholars – men like R. E. Clements, Michael Parsons, Bill Bellenger E. Earl Ellis, David Garland, Bruce Corley, F. B. Huey, James Brooks, and, most influential of all, Robert Sloan.

Of all the lessons I absorbed from these learned men, there is no lesson that has shaped my theology as much as this message.

My sole authority for preaching and teaching is God's Word – the Old and the New Testaments. I try to faithfully deliver to you what I uncover from Jeremiah, or Paul, or the author of Hebrews. To the best of my ability, I try to be faithful to the text and tell you what it says, what the original author meant to the original audience, and then help apply it to our lives today. I do not try to reshape the text; I let the text reshape us.

But the paramount question is: "What is at the center of the New Testament? What holds these books together?" These books are very, very different – these 27 works. Some are Gospels – they are sort of like biographies of Jesus. Others are more like letters – we call them epistles. And then there is apocalyptic literature at the end – Revelation. What is at the center of all these various books? Some of the books are very Jewish, like the Epistle to the Hebrews. In Hebrews, Jesus is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Others are very much Gentile-sounding, like the Gospel of Mark. In Mark, a Roman soldier, a Gentile, declares at its climax, "Truly this was the Son of God."

What is the dominating center of the New Testament? What combines these biographies, history (Acts), letters, homilies, and apocalyptic literature into a coherent whole?

Here is the earthquake statement: The early church had a theological core – a set of beliefs – before it had a New Testament.

Paul didn't have a New Testament – he was writing the New Testament. The early churches didn't have these 27 books at their worship services.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that 1 Thessalonians, written about A.D. 50, represents the earliest of the 27 books of the New Testament. We assume that Jesus died no later than A.D. 33. We have a period of two decades, at the minimum, during which early Christians prayed, preached, sang, worshiped, evangelized, and experienced the presence of the Lord in their midst – without having even one document of what we call the New Testament. And that's one community in Thessalonica who had one book – so we're really talking about almost a century of worship without a complete collection called the New Testament.

And despite the fact they didn't have any of the books of the New Testament, they believed something. They preached something. They lived something. What was that? How do we find it?

Are you following me? Scripture for the early church was the Old Testament.

But from the very beginning, the earliest Christians had a theology. They believed something, even though they didn't have a New Testament. And the best place, of all places, to find this theological core of the apostles is in the book called *The Acts of the Apostles*. We are upon it today, the center of the early church.

The first time I grasped the theological core that existed before a single New Testament book was penned, I began to understand the New Testament. I began to read the New Testament with new lenses. When I understood the apostles' theology preached in Acts, then I understood the rest of the New Testament. And I want to give you that opportunity today.

You see, the *Acts of the Apostles* is more than a history of the early church. It is a theological history of the progress of the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. And what is preached in Acts is later applied by Paul to specific communities where churches have been planted. He applies this core I'm going to give you today to their problem or situation and produces this "occasional" literature.

There are various hymns collected in the New Testament, like Philippians 2 or Colossians 1, from which we can derive an insight into this common core of Christianity, but the very best place is right here in Acts 2 and the other early sermons preached by the apostles, especially Peter.

Our fixed points for discussion:

- First we have the beginning of the Christian movement, the birth of the church some time around the advent of the fourth decade of the first century, about A.D. 33.
- Then, eventually, by A.D. 367, we have a list of the 27 books of the New Testament found in an Easter letter of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria.
- In between, we have that fluid period where we don't yet have an authoritative New Testament, at least not complete in every place. Yet we have something called the church, which is living and preaching Jesus.

The center begins with the life of Jesus, this rabbi from Nazareth. He's a charismatic preacher, a miracle worker. He's a friend to sinners and an innovative interpreter of the Jewish law. He's put to death at the instigation of Jewish authorities during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate. There follows an unexpected and dramatic series of resurrection appearances, which convinced His disillusioned and disheartened followers that, in fact, He had been raised by God to absolute life.

These Christians, convinced by their living Lord, used the Old Testament as their scripture and formed churches. They worshiped, they gave, they sang, they were persecuted. But they had a mission and message of the risen Lord to take throughout the Mediterranean world.

The early church had a theology before it ever had a New Testament – the New Testament which now gives us our theology. I'm going to give you the core of this early theology which the church preached and taught, lived out and loved, even before they ever had a New Testament.

I. In the events surrounding the person of Jesus, God was fulfilling the ancient Jewish scriptures.

Look how Peter begins his sermon in Luke 2:16. "But this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: And it shall be in the last days, God says, that I will pour forth My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...I will in those days pour forth My Spirit."

It is (v. 20), the Great and glorious Day of the Lord, of which the Old Testament prophets had been speaking.

One of the original tenets, the foundation of the apostles' theology is that everything about Jesus was a fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures. So when the Spirit is poured forth in Acts 2, the response is, "Oh, don't be surprised. The prophet Joel told us about this, saying, "The day of the Spirit, the day of the Lord would come."

But Peter does that throughout this sermon and in other sermons in Acts. He uses Psalm 16 in Luke 2:25, when David says of Jesus, "...You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of gladness and Your presence.' Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses."

Peter argues that the patriarch David is speaking of the resurrection of Jesus! The Jesus story fulfills scripture.

It happens again at the end. Peter uses Psalm 110. Look at verse 34: "For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'""

David envisions that Yahweh, the Lord, said to David's Lord, Jesus, "Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet." Therefore, at least three times in this first sermon, we see that Peter connects what's happening in the life of Jesus to the Old Testament scriptures: the pouring out of the Spirit from Joel 2; the resurrection of Jesus from Psalm 16; the ascension to the right hand of God from Psalm 110.

The life of the church, therefore, continues the scriptures of ancient Israel, especially in the person and life of Jesus, His crucifixion and resurrection.

II. The crucifixion of Jesus had been ordained by God and was, moreover, a mighty act of conquest and deliverance for His people.

In other words, God is not surprised by the crucifixion. The disciples were surprised, disillusioned, and disappointed. But not God.

Look at Luke 2:23. "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power."

Yes, the idea of a crucified Messiah was unthinkable to a Jew. Criminals are crucified, not holy kings. But this was the plan of God – not just the ploy of evil men.

III. This same crucified and risen Jesus is being exalted to the heavenly throne at the right hand of God and was installed as both Messiah and Lord, the supreme agent and executor of the kingdom of God.

Not only was He crucified, paying for your sins; not only was He resurrected, confirming the power and plan of God; but He is ascended and seated at the right hand of God. Look at verses 32-33. “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.” They had seen Him. “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.”

Then Psalm 110; He is enthroned with His enemies as His footstool, and He is – notice – “both Lord and Christ – this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36). He not only is the Christos, the Messiah, the Anointed One of Israel, He is the *kyrios*, the Lord – a word reserved for Yahweh Himself.

IV. Jesus pours forth the Spirit of God upon His people and, thus, He Himself is present in our midst as the living Lord.

That’s what this whole sermon is about, isn’t it? Jesus has told them, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” He told them that John baptized with water, but they would be baptized with the Spirit. So, in this sermon, Peter takes this whole passage in Joel and talks about the pouring forth of God’s Spirit upon God’s people.

Look at 2:18 again. “Even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit.”

Look at verse 33: “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.” They see the fire; they hear the wind. God’s Spirit is present, poured out by the Jesus who ascended to heaven.

V. The same Jesus will again be manifested to the world to vindicate His people and judge all the earth.

“It ain’t over ‘til it’s over,” as they say. This Jesus who has ascended will also descend. You remember what was said by the divine beings in Acts 1:11? “And they said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking at the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.’”

In Acts 2, our passage today, Peter preaches (v. 20), “the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the Great and Glorious Day of the Lord shall come.” The day of the outpouring of His Spirit was not only a day of deliverance for God’s people, but a day of judgment for God’s enemies, an apocalyptic day of signs and wonders. Look at verse 19: “I will grant wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke.”

“So the story of Jesus isn’t over,” the early church believed and taught. Jesus will come again for His bride – the church, His people – the new Israel.

There is another tenet they taught, and this is the most important for us. If everything else is true, you’d better be sure of this last one.

VI. To participate in the saving work of God through Christ and be included among the people of God, one must turn from sin and believe on the risen Christ as Messiah and Lord, confessing Him through baptism in His name.

In other words, repent. If Jesus really does fulfill all the ancient scriptures, if God was working uniquely for our salvation – satisfying the debt of our sins in the crucifixion and re-establishing victory in the resurrection of Jesus – if the Spirit has been poured forth upon God’s people, if the great day of the Lord is coming, if you want to be on the right side of the ledger, you must repent and call Jesus both Messiah and Lord.

Look at verse 36. “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ – this Jesus whom you crucified.” The call at the end of Peter’s sermons is to repent. It’s not just this first sermon of Peter’s. We see these same things in all of Peter’s sermons.

2:37-38; 41: “Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.’”

Really quick. Acts 3. Peter and James are going up to the temple at the hour of prayer. A man is begging for alms. Peter says, “Silver and gold have I none, but what I do have I give you in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene – walk!” The man stands up and walks. The people gather together in amazement again, and Peter preaches his second sermon in Acts 3:11. Look at 3:18. “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.”

In fact, he says in 3:24, “the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days.” What else did He call for them to do? Look at verse 19. “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” And finally, in 3:26, “God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

There you have it. This is the theology of the apostles. This is the core, the nucleus, the foundation from which everything else is built. These tenets I give you today tie the New Testament together into one coherent word of God. And if you understand these things, you can understand the New Testament. And if you do not understand these things, you cannot understand the New Testament.

So now you know that they believed. The question today is what do you believe and will you repent?