

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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Christianity is a religion that in its origins: centered in **a person**, around whom developed **a community of followers**, out of whom developed **a collection of beliefs and teaching** which, when written down, became the rule of faith and practice for the community of believers. This person was **Jesus of Nazareth** who was the Messiah. This community of followers was **his church** (the *ekklesia tou christou*), and the collection of beliefs and teaching of the early church became **the New Testament**, which with the Old Testament writings is a part of what is called within Christianity, the Scriptures. These are the essentials with reference to the Christianity, which developed in the first century in the Mediterranean world, as may be seen in the book of Acts of Apostles and the other NT writings. The book of Acts of Apostles is one of the major sources for determining what first century Christianity was about.

The book of Acts of Apostles may be studied from various perspectives or areas of interest. It may be studied as a book of conversions in that the most fully developed conversion accounts of the NT are found in Acts 2 (Pentecost), 8 (the Ethiopian), 9 (Saul of Tarsus), and 10 (Cornelius). Acts may be studied as a source of first century preaching, merging the conversion accounts with the speeches. This is significant because the most essential beliefs of the earliest Christians are found in the speeches of Acts. There are seventeen speeches in all, twelve apostolic and five other speeches. The most essential themes of earliest Christianity are found in these speeches; especially the earliest beliefs concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. All the speeches are apologetic in nature (i.e. they consists of logical argumentation) and all are christologically

centered (i.e. they are concerned with the identity of the Messiah/Christ). The only exception being chapter 17, Paul's address to the Athenian scholars called the Areopagus, where Paul presents the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

The first of these speeches is found in Acts 2, the presentation of Peter in which he concludes with the declaration that the identity of Messiah was one with the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. The speech of Acts 2 gives an outline of all the speeches of Acts, with exception of the Areopagus speech.

Peter's Discourse (2:22-35)

At the very outset of his discourse Peter appeals to the voice of Scripture for an explanation of the phenomena occurring in Jerusalem that day. This was in fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Joel (2:28-32), as well as others. Hence, it follows that: (1) this thing is according to the Scriptures, and therefore, (2) this thing is of God. Evidence of this nature is unimpeachable and Peter makes good use of it.

From here he begins to develop a line of argumentation which culminates in the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified by the Jewish hierarchy and the Romans, was the long awaited Messiah sent from God.

God's Presence in the Life of Jesus (2:22)

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth [was] a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs, which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know.

At the outset of this address stands the name "Jesus of Nazareth," the historical name by which he was called by the people of Palestine, as seen in Matt 21:11, "Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee." Peter was now to declare him to be someone who was more than a prophet; in fact, he was the Chosen One, the Anointed of God - the Messiah!

Four times in this proclamation (verses 22, 23, 36), Peter calls out the name "Jesus," asserting that this Jesus was approved of God by the things which he did in their very midst, things the prophets of old had done, which identified them as messengers sent from God.

Many of the Jews who came to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover remained for the time between the Passover and the feast of Shavuot (Pentecost). There would possibly have been a number of these pilgrims who were witness of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Many of the multitudes of Jews assembled in the Temple for the early morning activities of *Shavuot* (the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost) were homeland Jews who would have been in the city when Jesus was crucified, and the multitude of Diaspora Jew would have, very possibly, heard about it.

To those who knew what had happened to Jesus on that day, the sound of Jesus' name would have sent a shudder through them; especially, if they experienced the darkness that covered the city and the very shaking of the earth that occurred at his death. Even more, the mentioning of the name "Jesus of Nazareth" to those who were directly responsible for what happened to him (the members of the Sanhedrin) would have pealed through them like a toll of a death knell.

God's Presence in His Death (2:23)

. . . this Jesus [who was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

The death of Jesus was according to the definite plan and prior knowledge of God. Simply put, God had full knowledge of what would happen and the death of Jesus was not an interruption of God's agenda for the salvation of mankind; rather, it was a part of it.

Jesus himself knew that death was a certainty to him. From the time Peter confessed him to be the Messiah (Mark 8:29; Matt 16:16;

Luke 9:18-22), Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and began to speak of his death to his disciples. The death of Jesus was no interruption in his messianic agenda; rather, this was an acknowledged part of his messianic agenda as foretold by Isaiah (52:13-53:12) and other inspired writers (Psalms 22:1-21).

Even though this was an event God knew would happen, Jesus' death was not God's doing, it was the result of the wicked schemes of evil men, some of whom may have been standing in the crowd Peter was addressing.

*God's Affirmation of Jesus by Raising Him
From Death (2:24-32)*

But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. 25: For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord (Hebrew - Yahweh) always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; 26: therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will dwell in hope. 27: For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One (the Chosen or Anointed One) see corruption. 28: Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou wilt make me full of gladness with thy presence.' 29: "Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30: Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, 31: he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah/Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. 32: This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses (2:24-32).

Even though Peter acknowledged that Jesus was a crucified Messiah he quickly affirmed that God had raised him from death and that this was "according to the Scriptures." Peter's words, "But God raised him up" must have sent a shock wave through this massive crowd, but he immediately declares that his words are no empty claim; they are in fact the very fulfillment of the Scriptures, and he

and the other disciples with him had seen Jesus alive three days after his crucifixion.

Peter quotes from the words of David in Psalms 16:8-11. He presents two lines of argumentation: (1) The soul of the person speaking in this text would not be left in the realm of the dead (Hebrew *Sheol* - the shadows, or Greek *Hades* - the unseen); and (2) the body of the person in this text, who is assumed to be in the realm of the dead, would not be in the grave long enough to experience the decay of his flesh.

David, the one believed to be the author of this text, must have been speaking of someone other than himself, Peter argues, since David's soul had gone into the realm of death and had not returned, and his body was in its tomb decayed. In fact, the tomb of David was visible to the audience from the courtyard where they were standing. This "someone" of whom David was speaking, Peter reasons, was the Messiah, the son of David, and these words of David were a prophecy of the Messiah's resurrection from death.

Peter, engaging in prophetic utterances himself, continues his inspired interpretation of this text by asserting that this Scripture further prophesied that the Messiah would not only be raised up from the grave but he would be raised up to sit upon the throne of David in fulfillment of God's promise of 2 Samuel 7:12-13.

God had promised that a descendent of David would not fail to sit upon the throne of David. That promise was immediately fulfilled by Solomon, but the throne was now empty and had been empty for over six centuries and now the promise had been unfulfilled in the ascension of the risen Jesus.

Gabriel, the messenger of God, had spoken of this same promise to Mariam, a young girl, a virgin, from Nazareth in Galilee (Luke 1:31-33), and had revealed to her that this promise would be fulfilled in the child which would be born to her, whom she was to name "*Yeshua*" (Jesus) meaning "*Yahweh* saves."

Peter makes the argument that this prophetic text of Psalms 16 was not fulfilled in David, then quickly affirms that it has been fulfilled in a descendent of David, Jesus of Nazareth, whom Peter obviously knew to be of the lineage of David, as Luke reported in the opening chapter of his Gospel.

"Being therefore a prophet," Peter continues, "and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he (i.e. David) foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah/Christ (the Anointed One - *Ha Mashiach* - who would sit upon his throne), and that he (the Anointed One) was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption." Peter then declares that, "This Jesus (the Anointed One) God raised up, and of that fact all of his disciples were witnesses," (2:30-32). According to Peter, this was "according to the Scriptures" and confirmed by "eye-witness testimony."

The Enthronement of Jesus at the Right Hand of God
(2:33-35)

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear. 34: For David did not ascend into the heavens; but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, 35: till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet.'

In the resurrection of the crucified Jesus God affirmed him as the Chosen One and vindicated his claims that he was sent from God. But his resurrection was not a resuscitation of the body as was typically understood in the Jewish apocalyptic writings and in Hellenistic mythology. Jesus of Nazareth had not only been raised from death, he had been lifted up into the very presence of God and had been enthroned at the right hand of God, a position of divine authority and absolute lordship, after the imagery of Daniel 7:13-14.

This was not the commonly held view of the role of the Messiah. The Messiah of whom Peter speaks was not simply restored to the throne of David to rule from Jerusalem; rather, he had

ascended to the very throne of God. He was not only give the throne of the Davidic kingdom (which originated with God), he was given the very rule of *Adonai*, and his rule was not from Jerusalem, it was from *Shamah HaShamaim* - the heaven of heavens, the dwelling place of God. This is a major Christological theme which is more fully developed by Peter in his letters (1 Peter 1:3-12; 2:1:16-21;) as well as other NT writers, especially Paul (1 Cor 15:12-57; Eph 1:15-23; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:13-20); so also Hebrews 1:1-13.

Such a declaration as given here by Peter would have been mind boggling to this multitude. This Jesus who had been crucified as a messianic pretender is here being proclaimed to be, not only the long expected Messiah whom God had raised from death, Peter was presenting him as one who had been given heavenly existence and the very title *Adonai* (my Lord), which belonged only to God. Here in this text the title is given in Greek, as it is in the LXX, as "*Ho Kurios* (the Lord)" which became the primary title of Jesus for the early Christians.

The title "Lord" finds its fullest meaning and expression here in Peter's words. In the Gospels Jesus was called *kure* or *kurios* in the sense of one who is superior, one's master; here, however, the meaning of the term as used by Peter is being drawn from Psalms 110, which reads in the Hebrew text, "*Yahweh* says to *Adonai*, sit at my right hand." The Greek LXX reads, "*Ho Kurios* said to *Kurios mou*" - "The Lord (*Yahweh*) said to my Lord (the Messiah)." Both were Lord to David, of the King of Israel. In this Psalm David had to be making a reference to two entities who both were identified as "Lord."

If David was God's Chosen or Anointed One, and he envisioned the Messiah in this text as one who would be superior to him, the anointed king of Israel, then who would this second Lord be? This was the very text used by Jesus in the days just before his death to make this same argument with the Jewish scholars in the Temple (Luke 20:41-44).

Since, according to Peter's words, Jesus of Nazareth had been raised up to sit on the throne of God, he was a Lord who reigned as a

heavenly being, and was superior to David who reigned as an earthly king. Here was a concept of the Messiah that was clearly unknown in first century Judaism.

The messianic expectation of which Peter and the other disciples had been a part knew nothing of this kind of Messiah. Even their belief that Jesus was the Messiah during their time with him was not a belief in him as a Messiah who was a heavenly being, who would ascend to the throne of God rather than the throne of David, which was a greater ascension than to the throne of David. In 2 Kings 8:4-7 we are told that before a king was given to Israel, God ruled as their king; the throne of the king of Israel was a throne upon *Yahweh* ruled prior to this time. This understanding of who Jesus was is no doubt an insight given to Peter by inspiration of God, as Jesus foresaw in Matt 16:15-19.

Peter further insists that the outpouring of the miraculous phenomena they had witnessed was a result of the sending of the *Ruach HaKodesh* (the spirit of the Holy One), which was promised by God through Joel's prophecy, but Peter informs his audience that the sending of the *Ruach HaKodesh* had come from Jesus, "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear," (2:33).

Conclusion

Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly (asphalos - beyond doubt) that God has made him (epoiesen- caused to be) both Lord (kurios) and Messiah/Christ (christos), this Jesus whom you crucified," (2:36).

The apologetic thrust (i.e. a logical presentation of argumentation) of Peter's discourse springs boldly on his listeners. It is not an Aristotelian form of argumentation but an apologetic *midrash* common to the rabbis. Peter has reasoned from the Scriptures, the eyewitness experiences of the disciples, and the inspiration of God, which came from the baptism of the *Ruach*

HaKodesh, and God was present in it all. The conclusion to Peter's discourse is, "This Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified at the insistence of the Jewish rulers, God made to be Lord and Messiah!"

Both titles ascribed to Jesus are filled with Christological significance. The title *Christos* is the Greek word for the Hebrew *Mashiach*, both mean "the Anointed One," and in the Jewish world this was the traditional title for the long expected savior of Israel (cf. John 1:20, 25, 41; 4:25, 29, 42; 10:24; 12:34).

The title *Kurios*, however, is the weightier of the two, especially among the later gentile converts. In the Hellenistic world, *kurios* was used as a title for kings or emperors (especially Caesar, who was called "*Kurios Kaisara*" (Lord Caesar), and was also used of the gods of the Greeks and the Romans. The title *kurios* was a designation for one possessing great power and authority. Only a monarch or deity was designated *Ho Kurios* in a nominative absolute construction with the definite article, "the Lord."

To the Jews, however, both Greek-speaking and Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking Jews, this was a titular designation for the God of Israel. *Kurios* was the Greek word used in the Greek Septuagint (LXX) version of the Hebrew Scriptures to translated the proper Hebrew name for God - *Yahweh*.

The claims made by Peter in this discourse to the several thousand Jews in the Temple for the *Shavuot* (Pentecost) celebration were not the ravings of a drunken Galilean, or the abstract mythologies of a deluded apocalyptic seer; rather, they were the most powerful truths of human existence to those who will believe them to be true.

Peter and the disciples knew this Jesus of Nazareth in the days of his flesh, had seen him put to death, and then had seen him alive again. He was not some martyred religious figure deluded by false apocalyptic expectations who fell beneath the turning wheels of human history as Albert Schweitzer suggests in his most famous book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Rather, he was the one of whom the ancient prophets and other inspired writers spoke; he was truly the Messiah of the Jewish expectation of some six hundred years. And, apparently, he was more; God had made him to be not only the Messiah, but had also enthroned him as "*Kurios Christos*" - "Lord Messiah."

As Paul wrote later, "God had given him the name which was above every name, and every tongue must confess this name to Jesus; every tongue must confess that Jesus is "Lord" (*Kurios*), to the glory of God the Father, (Phil 2:11). The titles used here to identify Jesus are of major importance and are developed throughout the speeches of Acts.

The most primitive understanding of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth to the earliest Christians was what may be called a developing Christology. During his ministry Jesus' disciples first believed him to be "a prophet," and then "the Messiah" in the role of David. Then, in his crucifixion they saw him as "the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53," and following his resurrection they saw him as "the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13-14;" this was after he had "opened the Scriptures" to them, revealing himself to them in these texts (Luke 24:25-27; 44-49).

Following his ascension, the most common way of speaking of him within the apostolic group was that he was "the Lord (*Ho Kurios*)." In the preaching of the apostles, primarily that of Peter, other titles appear such as, "the Holy One" (2:25), "the Holy and Righteous One" (3:13), "the Prince of life" (3:15), "God's Anointed" (4:26), "God's Holy Servant" (4:27, 29), and "Prince and Savior" (5:31).

It is Paul, however, who was the first in the book of Acts to proclaim Jesus to be "the Son of God" in the sense of a heavenly being. This is seen in Acts 9:20, and in his letters, which are the earliest inspired documents of the NT collection. Further, it is in Paul's letters that we find the earliest explicit claims to the deity of Christ; especially, that he was God who was here, "God was in Christ

reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19) Paul writes; and in Titus 2, he uses the language of Isaiah 9:6-7 to speak of him in the most explicit Christological language of the NT:

*For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men, 12: instructing us to renounce ungodliness and worldly desires, and that we should live responsible, righteous, and godly lives in this present age, 13: looking for the blessed hope, the appearing of **the glory (doxas) of our great God (megalou theou) and Savior (soteris) Jesus Christ**, 14: who gave himself on our behalf that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous of good works (Titus 2:11-14 my translation, mwl).*

This story of God's redemption of man through Christ is what led to the conversion of over 3,000 people at the beginning of church's existence, and this is the message or story that must be told today if our evangelism is to be patterned after the Scriptures. This is the theme we will develop in the lessons to follow. It was all about the identity of Jesus, and the church was not the cause of the conversions that occurred that day, they were the results.

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