

# The Messages of First Century Preaching

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We are familiar with the sermons of Acts 2, and all the sermons of the early chapters of Acts of Apostles, as well as Paul's sermons to the synagogues concerning the fulfillment of the messianic expectation in Jesus of Nazareth. These were all messages to the Jews.

**(1) The message to the Jews:** the Messiah has come, he was Jesus of Nazareth: in Acts 2:14ff (to the Jews on Pentecost), 3:12ff (to the Jews in Jerusalem), 4:8ff and 5:29ff, (to the Sanhedrin), 7:1ff (Stephen to the Jews in Jerusalem), 8:26ff (to the Jewish Eunuch of Ethiopian); 10:1ff (to the house of Cornelius, a godfearer or Jewish proselyte); and in all of Paul's preaching in the Hellenistic Synagogues of Diaspora Judaism throughout the Mediterranean world (Acts 13-28); but there was another message.

**(2) The message to the Greco-Roman culture** (The *ethnoi* [races] - the other *ethnoi*, the Greeks, Romans, the Gentiles or Pagans): God is your Creator and you were created in his image [the message of Gen 1-3]. What sense would it have made for these first century preachers to go from village to village of the pagan world announcing that the longed for Messiah of Judaism had come? What is a "Messiah"? What concern is that to us? Who cares?

How do you think a message about Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic expectation would have been received or even understood by them? But what if the message to the people of the "other races" had to do with: who they were and the reason they were here? Would that message have generated any interest?

Probably so, because this world was filled with messages about **who** they were and **why** they were here (ancient mythology), and that story was pretty sad! According to the message of their religious stories (mythology), **the reason** why they were here was pretty sad as well. In Greco-Roman mythology human beings were a mistake of the creative activity of a rebellious and inept deity. There were a number of myths on this subject but in all man was a sub-creature who was held in disdain by the gods and was useless for nothing more than servitude and amusement. There was no such thing as human dignity in the mythology of this culture, unless man was united to a deity figure through procreation, as in the rapes of Zeus, or through noble achievements worthy of the favor of the gods, in which case he could become an immortal but not a god or deity figure.

## **The Apostolic Commission**

### *To the Twelve*

The message the twelve apostles of Christ were commanded to carry to the world (Matt 28:16-20), was to make disciples of all the people of Palestine, beginning with Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria (all Jewish cultures); then to take the message of Christ to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This was, if properly understood, an apostolic commission to those who had been with him throughout his ministry. This began to be fulfilled 40 days later in Jerusalem with the preaching of this group to a massive host of Jewish pilgrims assembled in Jerusalem for the joint feasts of Passover and Pentecost.

There was, however, no attempt to carry the message of the coming of the Jewish Messiah into the cultures of the non-Jewish world. That is, not until the risen Christ appeared to a man named Saul of Tarsus and gave him an apostolic commission, which is found in Acts 9:15-16, recalled by Paul in 26:15-18,

*Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' <sup>16</sup> 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 'Now get up and stand on your feet.*

*I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. <sup>17</sup>I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them <sup>18</sup>to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*

### ***To the Apostle Paul***

This apostle of Christ was being sent into another culture and his agenda, in terms of the message he presented to the culture he was trying to reach, can be seen throughout the record of his ministry in Acts of Apostles. When he addressed a Jewish audience, it was the message of the fulfillment of the promise of the Messiah in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. When addressing the culture of "the other *ethnoi*" – the Greco-Roman culture of the Gentile or Pagan world, his message to them was not that the messianic expectation of Judaism had been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth; rather, it had to do with the message mentioned above: with **who** they were, **where** they had come from, and **why** (the reason) they were here.

### **The Message to the Other Races**

Nowhere is this better seen than in Acts 17, when the Apostle Paul came to Athens, Greece, the world center of pagan thought: where pantheism ruled in the place monotheism and where every man sought the answers to the questions of his identity, his origins and the meaning of his existence in mythology. Paul's typical agenda when coming into a new place was to search out the Jewish synagogue, and start there. This is what he does in Athens, but another door opened for him and his audience changed, and so did his message; cf. Acts 17:16-34.

He went straight to the first and most essential issue: monotheism; then to the identity and nature of the one who was truly worthy of being called God. This God was the Creator of the whole of existence, man's existence, his world, and we are his offspring (we

were created in the image of God). If we are his offspring, created in his image, how should we then live? God will hold every man accountable for how he has lived.

The emphasis here is not on the Messianic identity of Jesus, but on theism; i.e., the existence of the One God - monotheism. Jesus' role is that of the one who came into the world to lead us back to God; he was seen as a savior or divine redeemer. Throughout Paul's letters you can see a twofold emphasis on the identity of Jesus. In fact, this difference can be seen in all of his letters.

Paul's letters were written to churches throughout the Mediterranean world. Although these churches had contingencies of Jewish Christians in their midst, the Gentile contingency of the church was of a Greco-Roman cultural background. From Paul's letters we can see much of what he had preached to them to bring them back into fellowship with God:

(1) that God was one, (2) that he was their Creator, (3) that they were beings created in the image of God, (4) that the human race through defiant, self-willed, rebellion against their Creator, had been driven from the presence of God and was now in enslavement to the Satanic forces of darkness and evil, (5) that God desired to redeem the human race and bring mankind back to him, (6) that he accomplished this by coming into our world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was both "one of us" and God with us," who through sacrificing himself for mankind destroyed the powers of sin and death for all those who would become one with him, (7) that to be reconciled with God man must acknowledge him, return to him in repentance, and be transformed by him through new birth (i.e., new creation wherein one is changed from one existence into a new existence), (8) and that can only be done by following the Son, who was sent into the world to lead mankind back to the Father.

These are the essentials of the story Paul called, the *euangelion* - the announcement, the glad tidings from God, the good story or

“godstory” - the gospel, which was “the power of God unto salvation,” (Rom 1:16). The story of God’s deliverance of the human race differs in detail and/or particulars depending on the audience addressed with the story.

Each approach has a “core teaching” with reference to the role of Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord and Savior of the human race. But, the particulars as to who and what he was differs from audience to audience. To the Jews, Jesus is the Messianic redeemer; to a non-Jewish audience, he is the savior of the human race, who came to show man the way back to God.

## **Conclusion**

Now, the question(s) for us: which message do we use for our audience? Who is our audience? What message is appropriate for a pluralistic society such as ours? What message would be the most appropriate for most of the mission fields of the world? If Paul were preaching to the people of the community of which we are a part, which message would he present to bring them back into fellowship with God?

The answer is: the one which tells them what they most need to know: (1) that God is and he is one, (2) that they are beings created in the image of God, (3) that they have destroyed themselves through defiant, self-willed, rebellion against the Creator, (4) that God longs to have them back, (5) that all they must do is seek him and come to know him, (6) and return to him in repentance with a desire to become one with their Creator, (7) that can only be done by following the Son (Jesus of Nazareth), who will lead us back to the Father.

This is what Paul said to the worldly philosophers of the Areopagus on Mars Hill in Athens in Acts 17:30, You don’t know who God is! “The times of this ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all people everywhere to repent! Choose the appropriate message! Learn the story God gave us, and tell it!

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