

RESEARCH PAPER

For

BIBL 424

In partial fulfillment for the course

ACTS

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THE GOSPEL MESSAGE IN THE SERMONS OF ACTS

Introduction

Ever since Jesus first gave His disciples the Great Commission, His faithful have joyfully spread the Good News—the Gospel—to all who would listen (and many who would not). As the first recorded history of the early church, Acts shows how believers immediately took this responsibility to heart. More importantly, Acts demonstrates that even though the message was tailored to the audience, the *essentials of the gospel never suffered*. Whether to disciples, unbelieving Jews, or pagans, any *complete evangelistic sermon*¹ included the good news about the risen Christ.

Prolegomena

What is the Gospel?

As Bock notes, “Nothing is more precious to evangelicals than the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ”² In that single statement, Bock not only communicates the

¹ Although it is easy to understand why only complete sermons should be considered, it is also important to only focus on the evangelistic ones. For instance, Peter had no reason to survey the gospel when he was suggesting Judas be replaced in Acts 1:16-22, Paul and Barnabas were trying to stop themselves from being worshiped in a chaotic atmosphere in Acts 14:15-17, and Paul was concentrating on his personal defense before Felix in Acts 24:10-21. If those and similar cases “lack” the full gospel message it is because that is not their purpose.

² Darrell L. Bock, “Jesus as Lord in Acts and in the Gospel Message,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (1986): 146.

importance of the gospel, but he (perhaps unintentionally) touches on two of the gospel's essentials: Jesus Christ and salvation. Is that it, however? If Jesus and salvation are preached, has the core of the good news been covered? Although the "core" essential, Jesus Christ, is included, a review of Scripture shows the gospel to be much more encompassing.

Prior to Jesus' death and resurrection, the good news is most tied to the kingdom message (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16), but even then Christ is explicitly included in the good news (Luke 1:13-19; 2:10; Gal. 3:8). After Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, the kingdom message is not lost (see Acts 8:12; 19:8), but Christ, His work, and the proper response to it become central. Wetmore focuses on six passages that he says "specifically [reveal] the *content* of the gospel message" and are important "because they are written with the express *purpose* of stating the content" (Rom. 1:1-17; 2:16; 1 Cor. 15:1-4; Col. 1:21-23; 2 Tim. 1:8-11; 2 Tim. 2:8).³ Based on these verses Wetmore states the "essential" themes of the gospel are (a) Jesus Christ; (b) His humanity; (c) His death via the cross; (d) His resurrection; (e) humanity's sinful state; (f) a need for belief; (g) salvation, justification, reconciliation, and eternal life; (h) "the gospel is given in the Scriptures"; and (i) "we must be continually reminded of the gospel."⁴ A review of the use of the word "gospel" and the phrase "good news" through the Bible also adds obedience (Rom. 10:16; 2 Cor. 9:13; Phil. 1:27; Heb. 4:6); judgment (Rom. 2:16; Rev. 14:6-7); peace (Acts 10:36; Eph. 6:15); heaven (Col. 1:5); Christ's glory (2 Cor. 4:4); Christ's post-resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15:1-19); the resurrection of the saved (1 Cor. 15:1-19); Christ's lordship (2 Thes. 1:8); grace (Acts 20:24); repentance (Mark 1:15); turning from idols (Acts 14:15); and, as mentioned before, the kingdom.

³ Hugh Wetmore, "The Gospel," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990): 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The list is quite extensive; if “essentials” means that the gospel message is incomplete without all of them, then it would be difficult to ever thoroughly communicate the good news.

Additionally, many are so intertwined that “requiring” them could be considered redundant.

Instead, it may be safer to let *The Scofield Study Bible, English Standard Version* summarize it:

The word “gospel” means *good news*. As used in the N.T., the word deals with different aspects of divine revelation. Absolutely essential to man’s salvation is the Gospel of the grace of God (Rom. 2:16, refs.). This is the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world, that He was raised from the dead on account of our justification, and that by Him all who believe are justified from all things.⁵

In summary, the essentials of the gospel are Jesus Christ, His death, His resurrection, and salvation based on His work. It is not that other portions of the good news are unimportant—they just flow from those fundamentals.

What is a sermon?

Unlike the word “gospel,” which has many occurrences in Scripture, the word “sermon” never does.⁶ Clearly the modern use, which generally would include a speaker preaching from a pulpit in the front of a church, does not fit a review of the gospel in the sermons of Acts. For the use of this paper, a liberal view of the term is taken so as to ensure a complete analysis (see table 1 and table 2). As such, it includes almost any time Acts records God’s spokesman(s) speaking to a crowd or individual(s), along with quick summaries of what they said over a period of time

⁵ Doris W. Ridders, ed., *The Scofield Study Bible, English Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University, 2006), 1663.

⁶ The Message uses “sermon” fairly frequently. However, limiting the review of Scripture to only commonly accepted modern translations (not paraphrases) there is no use of that word except for an anomalous one found in Matthew 7:28 in the Holman Christian Standard Bible—which includes the footnote, “Lit *had ended these words*.” The use of “sermon” in that case could be considered an anachronism.

(e.g. Acts 19:8). This document will ultimately focus on those cases where the sermon is evangelistic in nature, and is “complete.” Additionally, any study needs to take into account that “. . . most of us would regard the sermons in Acts as summaries or brief accounts of the message rather than as verbatim reports.”⁷ Even a “complete” sermon is likely a condensed version, so any “lacking” in a complete gospel message may be Luke’s editorial selection (via inspiration), not a choice of the original speaker.

Acts’ Gospel Focus

A review of table 2 shows that the most commonly included portions of the gospel message are Jesus, His Death, His Resurrection, His Lordship, and salvation. The *Believer’s Study Bible* focuses on the resurrection: “In the sermons in Acts, you will find an emphasis on the Resurrection, for the believers were called to be witnesses of His resurrection . . .”⁸

Although table 2 shows that Flora is wrong to posit that “every sermon in Acts celebrates the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead,”⁹ there is no question that that subject is of great import to the Acts gospel witness. That is not surprising since Paul says, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:14).¹⁰ (It should be noted that

⁷ Thomas D. Lea, “The Reliability of History In John's Gospel”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (1997): 390.

⁸ Criswell Center for Biblical Studies, *Believer's Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Acts 2:14.

⁹ Jerry Flora, "New Testament Perspectives on Evil," *Ashland Theological Journal* 24 (1992): 25.

¹⁰ The English Standard Version is quoted exclusively in this paper..

Flora is not unique in its hyperbolic use of “every,” Wilkinson and Boa equivalently state that all sermons in Acts are “built upon the Resurrection.”¹¹⁾

Seifrid instead concentrates on Acts’ lordship language: “Luke repeatedly presents the confident claim of the believing community that Jesus is the Messiah, who requires submission not only from the Jewish people, but also from all the nations of the world.”¹² This part of the gospel is what he sees as causing the Jewish schism in that they were unwilling “to submit to the new ethic demanded by the messianic reign of Jesus.”¹³ Regardless of whether this is true, table 2 shows that Christ’s lordship is one of the most common components of the Acts sermons, although most often it is via the use of the title “Lord” when referring to Him. It is easy to believe that a people who had to experience the Babylonian exile to finally get rid of other-God worship would have a hard time calling a preacher from Nazareth “Lord.”

Using table 2 to substantiate the inclusion of Jesus Christ, His death (also implicit in His resurrection), and salvation into the most common gospel elements of the Acts, this paper will now turn to contextualization and its effect on the gospel message.

Contextualization of the Gospel in Acts

A review of table 1 shows three major groups as recipients of the evangelistic sermons: Jews in Jerusalem, Jews outside of Jerusalem, and Gentiles. Wetmore uses the “three fairly

¹¹ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 354.

¹² Mark A. Seifrid, "Jesus and the Law in Acts," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 30 (1987): 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*

complete presentations of the gospel [that] are recorded” in Acts¹⁴ as examples of how the presentation of the message changes, but not the content of the gospel.¹⁵ In Acts 2:14-40, Peter is preaching to Jews in Jerusalem, and “the message is presented in terms of their Jewish background.”¹⁶ Table 2 shows that not only does Peter touch on the “essentials,” he nearly covers the gamut of gospel points. In Acts 13:16-48 the recipients are Jews of the Dispersion and proselytes, and Paul “rehearses at length the history of the Jewish nation” and “refers often to Old Testament Scriptures.”¹⁷ Table 2 again demonstrates that no essential is missed, and although not quite as comprehensive as Peter’s Pentecost sermon, Paul is very complete in touching on various facets of the good news. Finally, in Acts 17:22-31, Paul is speaking to pagans (with a special focus on the Epicureans and Stoics who invited him). There is no Jewish history, instead “he cites a Greek writer, not a Hebrew prophet.”¹⁸ In this case table 2 seems to imply that Paul’s presentation of the gospel was incomplete—and it was. He was unable to continue once he mentioned the resurrection because many of the listeners found it so repulsive. It would be fair to assume that if he had been allowed to finish, not only would the essentials have been touched on, but most of the columns in table 2 would have been satisfied.

¹⁴ Hugh Wetmore, "The Gospel," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990): 226.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion: Were the Essentials Ever Missed?

Earlier it was stated that “the essentials of the gospel are Jesus Christ, His death, His resurrection, and salvation based on His work.” It was also posited that “*essentials of the gospel never suffered*” and that every “*complete evangelistic sermon* included the Good News about the risen Christ.” Tables 1 and 2 illustrate that this proves true for all seven cases of complete evangelistic sermons.¹⁹ In no case are any of the essentials left out, and more often than not the “core essential,” Jesus, is included in any type of sermon (the same is true of salvation/forgiveness).

No, in every circumstance (and no matter who the preacher was), the essentials were never missed. Additionally, table 2 shows how Acts alone covers almost every gospel topic the Bible includes. In at least one case it is only within Acts that a nugget is found for inclusion in the gospel composition (the “good news, that you should turn from these vain things [idols] to a living God” in Acts 14:15). It is true that the essentials of the gospel never suffered in the sermons of Acts, but the study of the gospel message would suffer without those sermons.

¹⁹ An argument could be made that the sermon after healing the lame man is missing “salvation” and that Paul’s defense before King Agrippa does not include Jesus’ death. However, the former calls Jesus the “Author of Life” (Acts 3:15) and the latter refers to the prophecy that “Christ must suffer” and that he was first “to rise from the dead” (Acts 26:23). Thus, those cells in table 2 are implicitly satisfied.

Table 1. Sermon Speaker(s), Recipient(s), and Purpose

Sermon	Reference	C?	Speaker	Recipient	Type
To replace Judas	1:16-22	Y	Peter	120 disciples	O
<i>At Pentecost</i>	2:14-36	Y	Peter	Jews	E
<i>After healing the lame man</i>	3:12-26	Y	Peter	Jews	E
<i>1st defense before the Sanhedrin</i>	4:8-12	Y	Peter	Sanhedrin	E
<i>2nd defense before the Sanhedrin</i>	5:29-32	Y	Peter & apostles	Sanhedrin	E
Before Stephen's stoning	7:2-56	N	Stephen	Sanhedrin	E
Description of Paul's preaching	9:20, 22	N	Paul	Jews	E
<i>Before Cornelius' conversion</i>	10:34-43	Y	Peter	Cornelius & Gentiles	E
Defense of his gentile ministry	11:4-17	Y	Peter	Disciples	O
<i>Paul's first recorded sermon</i>	13:16-41	Y	Paul	Jews	E
Before Pisidian Antioch rejection	13:46-47	Y	Paul & Barnabas	Jews	C
To prevent worship in Lystra	14:15-17	Y	Paul & Barnabas	Pagans	O
At the Jerusalem Council	15:7-11	Y	Peter	Apostles and elders	O
The result of the Jerusalem Council	15:13-21	Y	James	Apostles and elders	O
In answer to the jailer's question	16:31	N	Paul & Silas	Roman jailer	E
Thessalonica sermon subjects	17:3	N	Paul	Jews	E
At the Areopagus	17:22-31	N	Paul	Pagans	E
To the disciples of John	19:4	N	Paul	Disciples of John	E
Ephesian sermon subjects	19:8	N	Paul	Jews	E
Farewell to the Ephesian elders	20:18-36	Y	Paul	Ephesian elders	O
Defense before Jewish mob	22:1-21	N	Paul	Jews	E
Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin	23:1-6	N	Paul	Sanhedrin	D
Paul's defense to Felix	24:10-21	Y	Paul	Felix	D
Paul's defense to Festus	25:8-11	N	Paul	Festus	D
<i>Paul's defense to King Agrippa</i>	26:2-29	Y	Paul	Agrippa and dignitaries	E
Paul's encouragement of sailors	27:21-26	Y	Paul	Sailors	O
To the Jews in Rome	28:17-20, 23, 25-28	N	Paul	Jews	E

Note: 'C?' stands for 'Was the sermon complete?' 'Type' is the primary type—'O' for 'organizational,' 'E' for 'evangelistic,' 'D' for 'defensive,' and 'C' for 'condemnatory.' Sermon titles in *italics* are considered both 'complete' and 'evangelistic.'

Table 2 . Gospel Elements in the Sermons

Sermon	Christ's																			
	General	Life	Cross/Death	Burial	Resurrection	Appearance	Ascension	Glorification	Peace	Lordship	Kingdom	Prophecy fulfilled	Grace	Repent	Salvation/Forgiveness	Judgment	Obedience	No other Gods/No idols	Jewish History	World History
To replace Judas	I	I			E							E								
<i>At Pentecost*</i>	E	I	E	I	E	I	I	I	E			E		E	E					I
<i>After healing the lame man</i>	E	I	E		E		I	E	I			E		E		I	E			I
<i>1st defense before the Sanhedrin</i>	E		E		E										E					
<i>2nd defense before the Sanhedrin</i>	E		E		E	I	I	E	E					I	E					
Before Stephen's stoning	I		E		I		I	E												E
Description of Paul's preaching	E														I					
<i>Before Cornelius' conversion</i>	E	E	E		E	E			E	E		E			E	E				
Defense of his gentile ministry	E								E			E			E					
<i>Paul's first recorded sermon</i>	E		E	E	E	E						E		E	E					E
Before Pisidian Antioch rejection	E								E						E	I				
To prevent worship in Lystra														I					E	E
At the Jerusalem Council	E								E					E	E					
The result of the Jerusalem Council												E								
In answer to the jailer's question	E								E						E					
Thessalonica sermon subjects	E		I		E							I			I					
At the Areopagus	I				E				I					E	E	E	E	E	E	E
To the disciples of John	E													E						
Ephesian sermon subjects											E									
Farewell to the Ephesian elders	E								E	E		E			I					
Defense before Jewish mob	E								E						I					
Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin																				
Paul's defense to Felix																				
Paul's defense to Festus																				
<i>Paul's defense to King Agrippa</i>	E		I		E				E					E	E				I	
Paul's encouragement of sailors												E							I	
To the Jews in Rome	E										E				E	I				

Note: 'E' means 'explicit,' 'I', means, 'implicit.' *At Pentecost 'repent' was in response to the post-sermon question, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37) Sermon titles in *italics* are considered both 'complete' and 'evangelistic.'

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