

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 1, 2010**

PETER'S FIRST SERMON

Acts 2:22-41

I remember the first sermon I preached after graduating from seminary in 1983. It was at Central Presbyterian Church in Downingtown, PA. I doubt that anyone else remembers anything about that sermon, but I do. I also remember the first sermon I ever preached here at Faith back in 1997. I wouldn't be surprised if no one else remembers it. But I do. I was preaching for a call. And right after I preached that day, the members of Faith voted to extend a call to me to become the pastor of this church.

No one else may remember anything about my "firsts" as a preacher, but Peter's first sermon, the sermon he preached to the Pentecost crowd in Jerusalem, the message recorded here in Acts 2, was truly unforgettable. It is unforgettable both because of its content and because of its result. Luke tells us in verse 41 that some three thousand new believers were added to the number of Christ's followers that day, as a result of Peter's sermon. Do you have any idea how much I would love for that to happen as a result of my preaching? It would be a privilege beyond words to be used by God in that way.

One of the things that makes Peter's first sermon so remarkable is the fact that he had no formal training in preaching. When I was a student at Princeton Seminary (please don't hold the fact that I went to Princeton against me), you couldn't graduate with a Master of Divinity degree without taking at least two courses in preaching. You could take more than two, but you couldn't graduate with less than two.

Peter didn't have a seminary degree. He had received no formal training in preaching. True, there *is* this one *minor* detail, which is that Peter had spent three years with Jesus as one of His disciples. But that is a minor detail, isn't it? Not! It is a not-so-minor detail that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem would acknowledge a little later as Peter and his fellow-apostle John continued to speak and act boldly in the name of Jesus. Here is what Luke says in Acts 4:13: "When they (the Jewish leaders) saw the courage of Peter and John, and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus." They weren't scribes or teachers of the law. They had no formal education. They had not been to Harvard or Yale or Princeton. But they had been with Jesus. They had been His companions, His students, His disciples, for three years. Which is of far more value than any seminary degree. Trust me.

Peter had been with Jesus. He had a personal relationship with the crucified and risen Savior. But that is not all Peter had going for him when he stood up to preach on the day of Pentecost. The second thing Peter had going for him that day was that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit whom God graciously poured out on all the believers on Pentecost empowered Peter to preach precisely the sermon God wanted the Pentecost crowd to hear. The Holy Spirit had all of Peter that day. And God used Peter and his message to draw three thousand people to Himself in faith.

Who could ever forget a sermon like that?

There are three qualities of Peter's Pentecost sermon that I want you to notice today.

1. BIBLICALLY BASED

Notice first that Peter's sermon was biblically based, as every sermon ought to be. What Peter said was rooted in the Scriptures. It was grounded in the Word of God.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter was able to relate what was happening right then and there – the wind, the fire, the languages – to the teaching of God's Word. Peter wasn't just giving his personal opinion. No. He explained what had taken place in their midst – not only the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, but the events of the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus – in the light of God's Word.

Peter had a biblical framework for understanding the world. Because he did, he had a biblical answer for all the Pentecost pilgrims in Jerusalem who were wondering: "What is going on here? What does it all mean?" He explained the miracle of Pentecost itself in verses 16-21 through the prophecy of Joel in the Old Testament (which we read last week). Then he spoke to them about Jesus, about His life and ministry (verse 22), His death on the cross (verse 23), His resurrection from the dead (verses 24-32), and His exaltation to the place of highest honor at the right hand of God the Father in heaven (verses 33-36), connecting the writings of David in Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 to the now accomplished facts of His resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Peter may have been an unschooled, unsophisticated, ordinary fisherman in the eyes of the religious leaders, but he had learned the Scriptures from Jesus. His Pentecost sermon – his very first sermon – was biblically based. It was rooted and grounded in the inspired, infallible, unerring, authoritative Word of God. Which is an essential quality of every good sermon.

2. CHRIST-CENTERED

The second thing to notice about Peter's sermon is that it is Christ-centered. The main subject is Jesus. It is really all about Jesus. It is about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is about who He is, what He has done, and what it all means for us.

Styles of preaching change over time. But if we are true to our calling in Christ, the message does not change. Rick Warren does not preach the same way Charles Spurgeon did in the 19th century. I don't preach the same way Jonathan Edwards did in the 18th century. But to the extent that we are faithful to preach the whole gospel and the whole counsel of God's Word, the message remains the same. It has to be about Jesus. It has to point to Jesus. It has to communicate clearly and without confusion who Jesus is – that He is the promised Messiah, the Son of God, the only Savior of sinners, and the Lord of all things. And it has to tell about what He has done for us and our salvation in His incarnation, His life and ministry, His suffering and death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, His resurrection from the

dead (because, as Peter says in verse 24, “it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him”), and His exaltation in heaven as Lord of all.

On subsequent occasion, in Acts 4:12, Peter would say: “Salvation is found in no one else (but Jesus), for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” There is no other way. There is no other name. Without Jesus there is no gospel. Without Jesus there is no salvation. Without Jesus there is no way to get to heaven. Without Jesus there is no forgiveness of sins and no peace with God.

What was true of Peter in his preaching was also true of Paul and all the other apostles. It was all about Jesus. They had no message other than Jesus Christ crucified and risen. This same message must always be at the center of our preaching here at Faith, and our ministry and witness as a Christ-centered fellowship of believers, because Jesus is the main thing. And the main thing, you know, is to keep the main thing the main thing.

3. A SERMON THAT DEMANDS A RESPONSE

The third thing I want you to notice is that Peter’s sermon required a response. A personal response. Luke says in verse 27 that when the Pentecost crowd heard Peter’s proclamation of Christ, they were “cut to the heart.” The Holy Spirit was doing His work in their lives. They were conscience-stricken. They were convicted of their guilt before God. To convict us of our sin and guilt is part of the Holy Spirit’s work (John 16:8). Seized with this overwhelming sense of their sin and guilt, they said to Peter and the other apostles: “Tell us, what should we do?”

They understood that the message of the gospel requires a response. What did Peter say? He told them to do two things. He said: “Repent and be baptized – in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38).

What are *we* to do in response to the truth about Jesus, and the truth about us? “Repent and be baptized.”

To repent is to turn around. It means to change the way you think and the way you live. It involves a change of mind and heart that leads to a change of direction in your life. The first act of repentance is to recognize and admit that the way you’re going in life is the wrong way. That the attitude of your heart toward God is not right. That the way you are living your life is not pleasing to God.

The second act of repentance is then to turn and go in a different direction. To turn from your self-chosen way and begin to go God’s way. Is the Holy Spirit calling you to repent today? Are you going God’s way? Are you living your life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Or are you resisting His way? Are you rebelling against His rule? Who is calling the shots in your life? Is it God or you?

Do you need to take the step of repentance today?

The second instruction Peter gave the Pentecost crowd was to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (2:38). Keep in mind Peter was speaking to an audience of Jewish pilgrims who had never received Christian baptism. They had not received baptism as children. Nor had they previously received baptism as professing believers.

Peter encouraged them to receive baptism as a sign of their repentance, a sign of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their trust in Him alone for salvation. If you have previously received baptism as a child or even as a professing believer, you don't need to be baptized again. You don't need to be baptized more than once. Baptism is one way to give evidence of your faith in Christ. You can bear witness to the sincerity of your repentance and your faith in Christ by the fruit of Christ-like actions and the development of a Christ-like character in your life. The essential point is that true repentance and authentic Christian faith result in a changed life. To the glory of God.

If you truly turn from sin in your life and turn in faith to the Lord Jesus, Peter says, you will receive two priceless gifts. Two gifts all the money in the world can't buy. You will receive, first of all, the gift of forgiveness. The forgiveness of your sins. All of them. You will receive cleansing from the filth of the sin in your life and deliverance from the burden of guilt you carry around.

The second gift you will receive, Peter says, is the Holy Spirit Himself. Not simply to be with you or to walk beside you, as we said last week, but to live in you and to fill you with His power for life and witness and ministry in the name of Jesus.

Friends, these gifts are for you and me. They are for us and for our children. And they are for people who today are far from God, but whom the Lord will call to Himself in grace.

Peter's message on Pentecost was a sermon that required a response. And the response was amazing, as we have already noted. Three thousand new believers came to faith in Christ and became part of the church that day. Three thousand in a single day! Lord, do it again in our day! That is my prayer.

CONCLUSION

I have been reading a new biography of one of my heroes, John Stott, one of the greatest evangelical leaders in the last century. Still alive at the age of 89, he just retired from public ministry a couple years ago. As a teenager at the Rugby School in England (where the game of rugby was invented by a disgruntled soccer player), John heard a talk on the question Pontius Pilate had asked the crowd in Jerusalem after Jesus was arrested and brought to him. Pilate's question: "What shall I do with Jesus?" (Matthew 27:22). It is a question no one can avoid.

It had never occurred to John that he had to *do* anything with Jesus. Hadn't Jesus already done what needed to be done? Yes, He had. The saving work of Jesus on the cross was totally complete and totally sufficient for the salvation of the world. But, as Peter told the crowd on Pentecost, there is still something we must "do" to receive this salvation. Not to

earn it. And not to add anything to what Jesus did, as if His saving work on the cross was not enough.

What must we do? We must turn from our sin and turn in trust and dependence to God. We must open the door of our hearts to receive by faith the gift of salvation that only Jesus can give.

In the privacy of his dormitory room at the Rugby School in 1938, John Stott opened his heart to the Lord Jesus, and became a new person in Christ. As did three thousand who heard Peter's sermon on Pentecost. Have you done that?

Peter's sermon was biblical to the core. It was about Jesus. And it called for a response.

The question for each of you today is this:

Is there something you need to do in response to this message from God's Word?

Is there a step of repentance, or faith, or recommitment you need to take today?

Don't miss out on this moment today. Don't ignore or resist the promptings of the Holy Spirit in your life. God used Peter's sermon to change the lives of three thousand people. He can use it to change yours, too.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.