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The Plan of God and Preaching in Acts

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Key words: Bible; New Testament; Acts; preaching; theology.

1. Introduction

The aim of this short study is to point out the theological significance of preaching in Acts within the overall purpose of Luke.¹ Many studies have analysed the speeches in Acts for insights into the author's theology, but have not appreciated the function of the speeches or preaching for Luke's purpose. Preaching in Acts is not only an illustration of the content of Luke's theology, but it is also an illustration of that theology in the way it functions within the narrative, both in the immediate and overall context of the author's work. It is on the latter, the way preaching functions within the overall context of Luke-Acts, that this study focuses.²

2. The Plan of God and the Basis of Preaching

In order to appreciate the significance of the speeches one needs to understand the theological perspective of Luke-Acts. Modern research in Luke-Acts has highlighted the salvation-history perspective of the author. Conzelmann emphasised the Lukan division of history into three periods, the period of Israel, the period of Jesus, and the period of the church. The author sees Jesus as the long awaited Messiah who came to fulfil the hope of Israel and to bring light to the Gentiles.³ As

- 1 I am assuming of course that Luke-Acts comprises one work with a coherent theme and purpose. I will also refer to the author of Luke-Acts as 'Luke' without making a comment on the historical identity of this person.
- 2 Tannehill drew our attention to the different functions of the speeches within their immediate narrative settings in his article 'The Functions of Peter's Mission Speeches in the Narrative of Acts', *NTS* 37, 1991, 400-414. My concern here is to point out the function of the speeches within Luke's broad theological theme of the plan of God.
- 3 *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York, 1961). Though nearly all scholars have found fault with Conzelmann's interpretation of Lukan eschatology, his threefold division of salvation-history has received a better reception. See J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, *AncB* 28 (New York, 1981), vol. 1, 18-22.

such the fulfilment of prophecy plays an important part in Luke-Acts. Prophecy-and-fulfilment is the thread that binds the narrative together both theologically and narratively.

Furthermore, this prophecy-fulfilment paradigm in Luke-Acts is the outworking of the divine plan,⁴ the *boulē tou Theou*.⁵ Therefore, Luke-Acts is about this plan of God: firstly, the narrative describes the intent of the plan, and secondly, the narrative describes how it is accomplished or worked out. The intent of the divine plan is revealed to the reader in the birth narrative of Jesus: it is to bring down rulers from their thrones and to lift up the humble (Lk. 1:52); it is to fill the hungry with good things and to send the rich away empty (Lk. 1:53); it is to bring light to the Gentiles and glory to Israel (Lk. 2:32). Therefore, the plan of God is both negative (judgment) and positive (salvation). It is to restore all things to their proper place.⁶ In Luke 7:30 the intent of the divine plan is in view. The Pharisees and experts in the law rejected the divine plan for themselves, i.e. the message of John the Baptist—'Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low' (Lk. 3:5). But, as mentioned above, Luke also describes how the divine plan is accomplished in his narrative. God's plan is accomplished through the suffering⁷ and resurrection of Christ, and, importantly for this study, through the *preaching* of the disciples (Lk. 24:46–49).⁸ The first two parts of this outworking are contained in Luke, the last in Acts.⁹ Thus, both intent and outworking are subsumed under the divine plan.

- 4 The Greek word *boulē* is variously translated as 'counsel', 'plan', 'purpose', 'resolution', 'will', etc.
- 5 See R. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia, 1986), vol. I, xiii. For the most recent detailed study on the plan of God in Luke-Acts, see J. T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge, 1993). It is interesting to speculate on the background of this Lukan motif. One might draw attention to a similar motif found in Isaiah (e.g. Is. 43:13; 55:10–11), see Edgar W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis, 1991), 52–82. And, in fact, the Hebrew word *'ēšā* in Isaiah is translated by *boule* in the Septuagint. Luke's frequent use of the Jubilee motif in Isaiah (e.g. Lk. 4:18–19) may suggest that his plan-of-God theme derives from the same quarters. But this is a question for another occasion.
- 6 This interpretation of the divine plan reflects the 'reversal of fortunes' motif described by Danker. See F. W. Danker, *Luke, Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia, 1987), 47–57.
- 7 In Acts 2:23 the outworking of the divine plan is in view, i.e. Jesus' death was according to the determinate plan of God.
- 8 Luke uses a variety of words for preaching, including *didaskhein*, *marturein*, *hērussein*, and especially *euaggelizesthai*.
- 9 Tannehill makes the following observation on Luke 24:46–47, ' "Thus it is written" is followed in 24:46–47 by three coordinate infinitives (in the Greek) which refer to suffering, resurrection, and preaching in Jesus' name as important steps in the realization of God's purpose attested in Scripture. The story of God's purpose in the world is not complete with Jesus' resurrection. It includes the preaching to all nations, and this preaching is important enough to be narrated, not just previewed.' *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. I, 294.

Therefore, the divine plan is not only an important theological theme that runs throughout Luke-Acts, it also provides the theological basis for the preaching of the disciples in Acts.

3. The Plan of God and the Demand for Preaching

An important emphasis of Luke-Acts is the inevitability of the fulfillment of the divine plan. This is seen in the frequent use of the impersonal verb *dei* ('it is necessary' or 'must') in Luke-Acts. Christ must suffer (Lk. 9:22; 17:25; 21:9; 22:37; Acts 17:3), he must preach the kingdom of God (Lk. 2:49; 4:43), and Scripture must be fulfilled (Lk. 24:44–46; Acts 1:16). In the same way, repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations (Lk. 24:47). The preaching in Acts, therefore, is part of the overall plan of God. Marion L. Soards in his recent book has hinted at this when he said, 'Thus, one sees that the activity of the members of the early church—apparently in bearing testimony to God's plan, especially at work in Jesus Christ—is part of the ongoing operation of God's plan.'¹⁰ In other words, the preaching does not merely serve to report the Christ-event, it plays an integral part in the outworking of the divine plan. Often in Acts the term 'must' is directly linked with preaching or witnessing. For example, in Acts 5 the council commanded the apostles not to teach in Jesus' name, but their response was that they must obey God, i.e. they must teach (Acts 5:29). Likewise, Paul is called because he must carry the Lord's name before the Gentiles (Acts 9:6, 15–16). In Acts 19:21 the Lukan Paul says, 'I must also see Rome'. And in Acts 32:11 the Lord said to Paul, 'you must also bear witness in Rome.'¹¹ As Jesus had to suffer, so too the disciples must preach. Luke's speeches therefore are crucial for his theological theme, they are not merely literary devices to vivify the narrative, or a convention of contemporary historiography. Without the preaching, God's plan would remain unaccomplished.

In this connection, having appreciated the theological importance of preaching in Acts, it is significant to look more carefully at the context of the speeches themselves.¹² It appears that there are 16 major speeches in Acts.¹³ Most frequent are the speeches of Peter (six speeches) and Paul (eight speeches); Stephen and James have one

10 *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville, 1994), 187.

11 Note that in both these verses *dei* stands in an emphatic position.

12 For a more detailed analysis of the speeches see Eduard Schweizer, 'Concerning the Speeches in Acts', *Studies in Luke-Acts*, eds. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Philadelphia, 1980), 208–216.

13 These are Acts 2:15–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 7:1–53; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 14:14–17; 15:7–11; 15:13–21; 17:22–31; 20:18–35; 22:1–21; 24:10–20; 26:2–29; and 28:24–28. Soards identified 'twenty-seven or twenty-eight speeches, seven or more "partial speeches," and at least three "dialogues" . . .'. *The Speeches in Acts*, 1.

each. A striking feature that these speeches share is what one may call the 'necessity' of the preaching. The preacher is forced to preach, as it were, by the activity of God. The preachers do not deliberate whether or not to preach; the situation demands the preaching, e.g. Peter is compelled to preach at Pentecost (Acts 2), after the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:11), and in response to the accusation of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8–11; 5:29–32). The same necessity is found in the preaching of Stephen and Paul. Stephen is forced to give an apology in response to the accusation of the Jerusalem synagogue that he spoke against the temple (Acts 6:8ff.). Paul is miraculously called and chosen for the specific task of preaching (Acts 9). In other words, the preaching in Acts is initiated by circumstances outside the control of the disciples or, one may say, by the activities of God. Acts, therefore, emphasises the necessity of the preaching of the gospel; God's activity in human experience demands the preaching. As the mission in Acts is always governed by God, so too the preaching. Accordingly, Beker's statement about God's mission in Acts also applies to preaching, 'Since God's sovereign will and plan determine the mission, it is in no way the initiative and work of the human agents, such as Peter and Paul.'¹⁴ In this connection, the genitive in the expression *hē boulē tou Theou* may be taken as a subjective genitive. God is the instigator and accomplice of this plan.

4. The Plan of God and the Content of Preaching

Another important point to note with respect to preaching in Acts is that the content of the preaching revolves around the divine plan. Though the speeches are shaped by the character of the speaker and the specific situation, the basic message of the speeches remains the same.¹⁵ Most prominent in the kerygma of both evangelistic and

14 J. Beker, *Heirs of Paul: Paul's Legacy in the New Testament and in the Church Today* (Minneapolis, 1991), 49.

15 Though one must also note that in general content the speeches correspond to the contingency of the situation in the narrative of Acts. Schweizer has already pointed out the significance of the audience, which 'shows up most clearly when the christological kerygma is replaced by the theological one wherever a typical Gentile congregation is listening,' in 'Concerning the Speeches in Acts', 421. One of Luke's concerns is to appropriate the gospel message for his own time and culture; his Luke-Acts adopts the literary style of the time. In *The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles*, F. F. Bruce makes the observation that 'Luke inherited the tradition of Greek historical writing, handed down from the time of Herodotus and Thucydides in the fifth century B.C. One feature of that tradition was the composition of appropriate speeches for appropriate occasions' (London, 1942), 6. Therefore, Beker may have overstated his case when he said that Paul 'always preaches the same message wherever he goes,' since Luke does try to contextualize the message of his speaker in his specific situation. *Heirs of Paul*, 50.

apologetic preaching is the resurrection: that God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection is not simply an historical event, it is an event with cosmic dimensions, it ushers in a new age (Acts 2:17–21, 32–36). Indeed, the suffering and resurrection of Jesus are central in the divine plan for the salvation of the world (Acts 2:32). The basic content of the speeches in Acts, therefore, describes how God has acted for the salvation of the world. Space does not permit us to deal with the relationship between God's plan of salvation for the world and the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, or the relationship between the kingdom and the plan of God.¹⁶ Suffice it to say that in the preaching the conviction *that* God has acted is inseparably linked with *how* he has acted, viz. through the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, and, one may add, through the preaching of the gospel. This conviction produces the coherence of the preaching in Acts. Therefore, the subject of the preaching in Acts is the divine plan. God has acted to restore all things to their proper place; and God has acted through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and is now acting through the preaching of the disciples. Therefore, Paul's words in Acts 20:27, that he proclaimed the whole plan of God, should be understood in terms of Luke's concept of God's action in salvation-history, not in terms of a body of doctrine.

5. The Plan of God and the Response to Preaching

Finally, in order to complete our appreciation of the theological significance of preaching in Acts, it is necessary to look at the response to that preaching. An exhortation to repentance and faith is an integral part of the speeches. This flows from the conviction that God will judge people on the basis of their response to Jesus.¹⁷ The speeches seek the recognition that God has acted uniquely and decisively through Jesus for the 'salvation' of the world. The response to the preaching, however, is varied; some accept the message and believe, others reject it. But it should be pointed out that the response that people have to the message is also understood to be in the scope of the divine plan. Those who believe the message believe because they were appointed to believe (Acts 13:48; also cf. 16:14; 18:10). And, ironically, the rejection of the message also serves the divine plan, since it leads to the further spread of the gospel. The result of the persecution in Jerusalem is that those scattered went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:1–4; 11:19f.). And, since many Jews reject the message, Paul goes to the

16 See I. Howard Marshall's discussion on Luke's concept of salvation, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, (Exeter, 1979), 94–102.

17 The idea of judgement features prominently in some of the speeches, e.g. Acts 10:42 & 17:31.

Gentiles (Acts 13:46). This follows the pattern of the rejection-and-promotion of the divine plan in Jesus himself: God is accomplishing his plan in the world through suffering and rejection.¹⁸ Though suffering is an important theme, Acts is optimistic. Indeed, Luke can be optimistic, precisely because God's plan is realised even through people resisting the message.¹⁹ This again directs us to the inevitability of the fulfilment of God's plan. Käsemann has overlooked this subtlety in Acts when he accused Luke of replacing a genuine *theologia crucis* with a *theologia gloriae*.²⁰ However, Beker has corrected this misunderstanding in pointing out that, 'Even though a theology of the cross is alien to Luke, he develops his own theology of suffering.'²¹ Again Beker says, '... Luke develops an important theology of suffering, characterised by the theme "from suffering to glory (14:22), but also to this-worldly triumph and glory".'²² Of course, 'this-worldly triumph and glory' should strictly be understood in terms of the further spread of the message that God has acted decisively in the suffering and resurrection of Jesus. We see then that the human response to the preaching, whether negative or positive, inevitably leads to the same result, viz. the further spread of the gospel. The plan of God cannot be thwarted.

In sum, preaching in Acts should be understood in terms of the divine plan that runs throughout Luke-Acts; preaching not only conveys the message about the divine plan but is also an integral part of that plan itself.

18 Beverly Roberts Gaventa has illustrated the importance of both 'cross' and 'triumph' in Acts. 'Both of these threads, the triumph of God who will not allow the gospel to be overcome and the rejection of the gospel and the persecution of its apostles, belong to the narrative Luke develops. To eliminate either of them is to miss something essential to the Lukan story.' 'Toward a Theology of Acts: Reading and Rereading', *Int* 42, 1988, 157. Also see Tannehill's discussion, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. I, 288.

19 William H. Willimon made the interesting suggestion that one of Luke's purposes was to encourage the church's preaching. He says, 'Acts is replete with stories of the power of the gospel to break all barriers and to surmount all hurdles, of the "many wonders and signs" which were accomplished by the apostles (2:43; 5:12). These suggest that Theophilus and his church needed encouragement in a time of discouragement for Christian proclamation. Luke ministers to their discouragement with all these accounts of how, despite constant resistance, "the word of God grew and multiplied" (12:24).' ' "Eyewitnesses and Ministers of the Word": Preaching in Acts', *Int* 42, 1988, 164.

20 *New Testament Questions of Today* (London, 1969), 21ff. Also note Marshall's comment, the fact that the gospel triumphs and that the church is confident of its ultimate success by the power of God does not obliterate the fact of suffering, nor does it mean that the *theologia crucis* is transformed into a *theologia gloriae*. *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 211.

21 *Heirs of Paul*, 54.

22 *Ibid.*, 56.

Abstract

Preaching in Acts is defined by the important Lukan concept of the plan of God. This concept provides the theological basis for Luke's understanding of preaching. God has acted for the salvation of the world through the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, and is now acting through the preaching of the disciples. In Acts the disciples must preach as a result of the activity of God. Acts, therefore, emphasises the necessity of preaching. The content of preaching also revolves around the plan of God. In addition, the response to the preaching, whether people accept or reject the message, inevitably leads to the spread of the gospel. Therefore, the preaching of the disciples not only conveys the message of God's plan; it is an integral part of that plan and illustrates its inevitable fulfilment.

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