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The Apostolic Speeches in Acts and Seminary Teaching Methods

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Introduction

This paper is intended to reflect on the interplay between the various types of speeches given by Peter and Paul, and what we do in the seminary as Scripture professors, to evaluate how the style of those speeches varies from context to context, and to assess the reactions of the apostolic audiences. How does our teaching help prepare our seminarians to follow in the footsteps of Peter and Paul? Conclusions then will be drawn on our goals in the classroom.

The concept of turning directly to the Word of God in search for inspiration is flowing from Benedict XVI's renewed invitation in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*¹ to make every effort to share the word of God as an openness to our problems, a response to our questions, a broadening of our values and the fulfillment of our aspirations.² He also underscores how important it is for the People of God to be properly taught and trained to approach the sacred Scriptures in relation to the Church's living Tradition: "Sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others."³

¹ Published in the year 2010.

² Cf. *VD* 23.

³ *Ibid.* 18, 47.

Also, we gladly follow his appeal to pay closer attention to the theological dimension of the biblical texts⁴, so often neglected in past decades by biblicists. The Pope encourages all of us, teachers of the Sacred Scriptures: “We need to urge a broadening of the scope of reason!”⁵ But let us now discuss some of the more salient aspects of apostolic teaching in the early years of the Church as mirrored in the Acts of the Apostles.

Common traits of apostolic discourse in Acts

In the Acts we are dealing with summaries of speeches, except perhaps in the case of Stephen’s speech, Paul being the eye-witness source for Luke. Discourses make Acts interesting because when people talk we learn something about their personalities. We might say that the contents of Peter’s speeches give us the first theological reflections upon the *magnalia Dei* – the great works of God (cf. Exo 14:13; Deu 10:21; 11:2; Psa 70:19; Sir 17:8; Acts 2:11)!

There is a geographical progress of the witness to Jesus Christ, and the great speeches of Acts are in accord with this scheme: beginning in Jerusalem (chs. 2-7; first three speeches 2:14-40 to Jews and proselytes; 3:12-26 to Jews; 7:2-53 to Sanhedrin), proceeding further to Judea and Samaria (chs. 8-11; Peter’s speech to the proselyte Cornelius and his household, 10:34-43), and finally going to the ends of the earth (chs. 13ff; three speeches by Paul to the gentiles 13:16-41; 17:22-31; 20:25-28; two before kings 24:10-21 [Felix]; 26:2-23 [Agrippa]; two before Jewish audiences, 22:1-21; 28:25-28).

Authors like F.F. BRUCE⁶ and H.N. RIDDERBOS⁷ suggest the following categorization of these apostolic speeches according to their oratory schemes:

1. *Evangelistic* speeches, chs. 2; 3; 4; 5 to Jews; 10 Cornelius; Paul to Jews in 13; to pagans in 14; 17.
2. *Deliberative* speeches, chs. 1:16ff (election of Matthias); 15 (Jerusalem council).
3. *Apologetic* speeches, chs. 7; 11:4ff; 22:1ff (addressing hostile and excited Jewish crowd which then breaks up in a riot); 23:1ff; 24:10ff; 25:8ff; 26:1ff (no speech is as personal in tone as this one, sparkling with its direct appeal to the Gospel); 28:17ff.
4. *Hortatory* speeches, 20:18ff (Paul to the elders in Miletus; to some extent also apologetic, implying that heretical adversaries had attacked him in his absence).

One cannot help but notice the careful construction of these speeches with a recurring pattern as *praeparatio evangelica*:

- I. *Exordium* (concrete occasion)
- II. *Testimony*, Christological kerygma in six steps:
 - a) His ordaining by God
 - b) His miracles

⁴ *Ibid.* 34.

⁵ *Ibid.* 36.

⁶ Cf. *Speeches*.

⁷ Cf. *Speeches*.

c) His death and resurrection (sometimes being portrayed as a divine repudiation of those who reject Jesus as Lord and Messiah)

d) His exaltation in heaven

e) the apostles' authority as His witnesses

f) the agreement of Scriptures (scriptural proof of the kerygma's veracity)

III. *Paraenesis* (offer of salvation):

a) call to conversion in the light of judgment

b) promise of the forgiveness of sins

c) call of the Jews first, then of Gentiles

IV. *Interruption*, occasionally the speaker is interrupted, but only after everything essential is stated.⁸

Peter's speeches in particular concern themselves with four topics:

1. *Eschatology* (time of fulfillment has dawned, "plan and foreknowledge", "must", no emphasis on nearness of parousia, all attention on magnitude of what has already happened; 1:16; 2:16; 3:18; 4:28).

2. *Apostolicity* (appeal to the uniqueness and the authenticity of eye- and ear witnesses, linking the apostles to the history of salvation itself, as supreme guarantees of the proclamation of the Christian kerygma).

3. *Christology* (a clear picture of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, His person and His work: His "Servant" mission (Isaiah), miracles, death and resurrection, exaltation, outpouring of the Holy Spirit, agreeing with Scriptures (cf. the Augustinian *Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet*), exceeding prophecies and messianic expectation; lively variety of Christic titles).

4. *Paraenesis* (speeches set in direct speech to stir up audiences to repentance⁹, bring them to faith and to the forgiveness of their sins, demanding a personal decision "save yourselves!"; in His name there is σωτηρία).

Seven concrete illustrations

I. Peter's speech prior to the enrollment of Matthias (1:16-22)¹⁰

The apostle's speech opens with his compound *salutation*, ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί ("Men, Brothers"), addressing 120 believers, 1:15, which occurs also in 2:29.37; 7:2; 13:15.26.38; 15:7.13; 22:1; 23:1.6; 28:17. As Seminary Biblicists we are very aware of the familial nature of the classroom setting, given that these future priests are growing into their respective diocesan presbyterate or religious families.

⁸ SOARDS, *Speeches* 11.

⁹ *Ibid.* 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 26-31.

Then follows a reference to the *Holy Spirit*, 1:16, which is typical of many speeches (1:5.8; 2:17.18.33.38; 4:25; 5:32; 6:3; 7:51; 10:38; 11:12.15.16; 15:8; 20:22.23.28; 21:11; 23:9; 28:25). Many professors begin their classes with a prayer to the divine Spirit for assistance and light.

The mention of *David* through whom the Holy Spirit speaks, 1:16, is certainly a familiar feature of several speeches (2:25.29.34; 4:25; 7:45; 13:22 [2x]; 13:34.36; 15:16). Here we learn again the necessity to search for possible bridges between the Old and the New in God's revelation.

Peter now offers a *free rendering* of the LXX rendition of Psa 68:26 in 1:20 making it *applicable* to Judas' fate. Also, the quote of LXX Psa 108:8 is employed in a manner which points to the "divine *necessity*", precious hints for us as to how to employ the scriptural sources.

Next, there is the pronounced expectation to have someone (Matthias) act as "*witness*" (second of eleven occurrences of μάρτυς in the speeches) to the *resurrection*, a core kerygmatic notion perpetuated in most speeches: 2:24.31.32; 3:15; 4:2.10.33; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30.33.34.37.41; 17:3.18.31.32; 23:6; 24:15.21; 26:8.23), also a crucial concept in Acts, and therefore of the early Church. If the testimony of Christ's resurrection was so pivotal for the early Church, then it is also today especially for us, seminary Scripture professors.

Now, as Benedict XVI states in the above-quoted letter: "A significant contribution to the recovery of an adequate scriptural hermeneutic can also come from renewed attention to the Fathers of the Church and their exegetical approach."¹¹ Let us, therefore, add the fact that patristic authors recognized that "the criteria given by Peter for such a replacement [eye-witness of Jesus' earthly life, cf. 1:21f] are notably different from those mentioned by Paul later on in his letters [i.e., not being an eyewitness of Christ's earthly life]: Paul and Barnabas are called 'apostles' only twice in Acts (14:4.14), though Paul will often speak of his call to be an apostle as coming from Jesus himself."¹² This margin of interpretation and freedom in explaining the biblical sources is also an invaluable hint for us as teachers.

Peter's speech completed with a *prayer*, 1:24b-25, employing the striking verb ἀναδεικνύναι ("to *designate* clearly"), which occurs one more time in Luke 10:1 where Christ appoints and sends His disciples. The prayer asks the Lord to show whom He has *chosen* (ἐκλέγεσθαι), a request that implicitly assumes the providential guidance of human events through divine direction of human decisions. One relevant mission of our's in the classroom is to teach our seminarians how to prayerfully find moral and doctrinal certainty in the Sacred Scriptures.

There is no report on any *reaction* or *reception* of the apostle's speech and prayer, other than the *action* of casting lots and introducing Matthias into the college of the Twelve. Apostolic teaching, preaching and praying inspires action in this case. We now turn to Peter's discourse on the day of Pentecost.

¹¹ VD 37.

¹² ACCS 14.

II. Peter's speech at Pentecost (2:14b-36, 38-39, 40b)¹³

By way of introducing ourselves to this speech let us listen once again to *Verbum Domini*: “The faithful need to be helped to see more clearly the link between Mary of Nazareth and the faith-filled hearing of God’s word.”¹⁴ Well, Pentecost was prepared by the prayer of the apostles gathered around Mary the Mother of Jesus, 1:13f. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine how Peter’s speech was imbued with her spirit and sentiments as well. The *Marian hermeneutic* is of obvious benefit for the instruction of the Church’s future priests!

The Church Fathers call this “the first of the missionary or evangelistic discourses in Acts.” It is presented in two parts: (1) 2:14-21, after a peroration Peter explains the phenomena witnessed by the crowd through an apocalyptic interpretation of Joel’s vision, proving that a new era of prophecy has been inaugurated. Here we realize how sensitive both the apostles as well as the early patristic authors are to the role of scriptural authority, especially of the ancient prophets.¹⁵ (2) 2:22-36, Peter then links the event to the resurrection of Christ as prophesied in Psa 16 and 110: He is the Lord, pouring out His Spirit.¹⁶

But let us highlight some of the details involved. We might qualify vv. 14-36 as *judicial rhetoric*, combining *refutation* (vv. 14-21) and *indictment* (vv. 22-36); vv. 38-40 could be characterized as *deliberative rhetoric*. Prior to Peter’s opening address he “stood” (σταθείς) and “lifted up his voice”, the stance of a Greek orator (cf. 5:20; 11:13; 17:22; 27:21), accompanied by an appeal for *hearing*, 2:14.22 (cf. 7:2; 13:16; 15:13; 26:3).

His Christological kerygma refers to Christ as “a man” (άνθρωπος), 2:22 (cf. 17:31), reminding us of the all-important reality of His *incarnation*. In v. 23f “the plan of God” is emphasized, God’s control in determining events, especially the future, including a sharp juxtaposition of human and the divine actions: another key for expounding the word of God. As mentioned already above, so also here is *David* cast as an authority 2:25.29.34 (4:25; 13:34f). Vv. 32-34 then expand Christ’s *resurrection* by the idea of His *exaltation* and *enthronement* by God in the Spirit, the latter being the ultimate evidence or witness to God’s will and work, cf. 5:32; 7:51; 11:15-17; 15:8; 20:23.

One of Luke’s narrative techniques appears to be the *interruption* of apostolic speeches (e.g. Acts 7:54; 10:44; 22:22). The crowd reacts, 2:37, breaking into the speech, “cut to the heart” – *compuncti corde* (cf. 3:26; 4:1; 7:53f.56f; 10:43f; 17:31f; 26:23f.27f). As professors of the Bible we, too, should be ready to pause at any moment in order to internalize, to deepen and rethink our interpretation. In 2:38 we have the Petrine call to repentance and baptism in the remission of sins, coupled with a promise, the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. In fact, his response is fourfold, vv. 38-41: repentance, baptism, forgiveness and reception of Holy Spirit, different from John the Baptist’s response, incidentally!¹⁷ In instructing our seminarians we should never neglect to point to the necessity of a concrete *moral application* of the message to the personal life of the hearer and believer (cf. 15:20).

¹³ SOARDS, *Speeches* 31-38.

¹⁴ 27.

¹⁵ ACCS 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 35.

III. Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin (7:2-53.56.59b.60b)¹⁸

Luke, in having the Church's Protomartyr recount the call of Abraham, marks here the initial breaking point between the old and the new Israel. Stephen traces the history of God's people through three of its greatest figures, Abraham, vv. 1-8, Joseph, vv. 9-19, and Moses, vv. 20-40. Then he points to Israel's chronic infidelity, vv. 41-50, concluding with a stinging indictment of his hearers, vv. 51-53.¹⁹ Church Fathers have noticed and reconciled the discrepancies between the books of Scripture, the New Testament being the rule for interpreting the Old. Here they stress the *allegorical* reading of the call of Abraham and his descendants. Stephen's martyrdom is understood in the light of the fate of the ancient prophets and of Christ Himself: "preachers must become both the fire and the gentle dove of the Holy Spirit" (Augustine).

In 6:10 the author of Acts records that the deacon's opponents could not withstand "the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke" – the *irresistibility* of the word of God. The speech's overall rhetoric is *counter-accusation*, a kind of judicial rhetoric. It is the most prominent example of the use of the past in an address in the form of explicit citations of Scripture as well as allusions to stories pertaining to the biblical history of salvation. Comparable *summaries* of history are found in Deut 6:20-24; 26:5-9; Josh 24:2-13; Neh 9:6-31; Psa 77; 104; 105; 135; Wis 10; Sir 44-50; Jdt 5:6-18. For us as exegetes in the classrooms of our seminaries, one of the teaching methods should be from time to time to present salvation history in a *nutshell*.

Stephen begins to narrate the story of God with Israel by referring to the "God of glory", 7:2 (cf. Psa 28:3), anticipating the narrative conclusion in 7:55, where he gazes into heaven and sees the "glory of God", a central theme in the entire speech. Consequently for us, the main purpose of our biblical instruction will always have to be *doxological*.

Moreover, the inspired orator before the Sanhedrin *combines* in one quotation, 7:6f, Gen 15:13f and Exo 3:12, moves the story forward by *telescoping* events, certainly an intriguing hermeneutic cue for a commentator on Scripture.²⁰ The manner in which Gen 37-50 is told gives the narrative a *polemical* tone, 7:9-16: there exists a contrast between the negative actions of Israel's early ancestors on the one hand, and the positive counteraction of God on the other. Remarkable is also that no apparent effort is made on the part of the speaker to conciliate his accusers and judges.

Vv. 17-43 signal a new turn in the story resounding the *crucial themes* of divine necessity and control. Events now proceed in relation to God's promises so that human time and life are evaluated in relation to the will and work of God. Curiously, the answer that God appointed Moses to be judge and ruler never occurred to him as he flees into the desert of Midian. Stephen here utilizes another paradigm, that of *ignorance*, vv. 27f (see also 3:17; 13:27; 14:16; 17:30). He then leads into the quotation of Amos 5:25-27, v. 42b, a *method* of signaling the *citation* of selected texts. And again, by citing Isa 66:1f in vv. 49f, Scripture explicitly serves as *evidence* of

¹⁸ SOARDS, *Speeches* 57-70.

¹⁹ ACCS 73.

²⁰ See also James' quotation in 15:18 as a *conflation* of LXX Amos 9:12 with Isa 45:21.

the veracity of a claim made by the speaker, simultaneously declaring God's freedom and ultimate authority over all creation.

The deacon's speech finally culminates as he issues his *invective*, directly charging his audience, vv. 52f, by using the style of the kerygmatic relative pronoun *oû* (Lat. *cuius*) v. 52b, which is seen in the speeches that contain the christological contrast scheme (cf. 2:23f). The *reaction* of his audience is that of an angry outburst of furor, v. 54. In teaching the word of God to our seminarians we are in constant need of being reminded that Christ remains that *sign of contradiction* that is set to reveal the inner thoughts of many, Luke 2:34! Stephen's *vision* of God's glory clearly functions to confirm the validity of his speech. Obviously, the ultimate goal as professors is to lead our students to a deeper vision of God and of His Christ.

IV. Peter's speech in Cornelius' house (10:28-47)

The speech before the *conversion* of the Gentile centurion Cornelius and all his household, together with Peter's discourse to the Jerusalem delegation of Judeo-Christians (11:5-17) represent the *form of Petrine kerygma* used by the early Church in her earliest approaches to a wider preaching. These speeches are essentially *epideictic* rhetoric, that is, purely kerygmatic, offering no indictment in a relatively economical style, i.e., without major elaboration. One salient mark is Peter's rhetorical question in 10:47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" In posing this question the apostle challenges the audience, inviting them to draw their own conclusion from what happened and from what was said.

Furthermore, already the Fathers of the Church underscored Luke's literary *technique of repetition* to accent important events in the history of the Church. This appears to be the reason why Peter recounts his vision in 11:1-12, just as Paul repeats his conversion story several times in Acts.²¹ A handy reminder for us teachers of an ancient Roman wisdom: *repetitio est mater studiorum!*

V.) Paul's speech in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia (13:16-47)

In this first of Paul's discourses in Acts a *continuity* between the history of Israel is emphasized before a Jewish audience. Unlike the earlier speeches in this book which tended towards a climax intended to bring repentance, this one builds the case that *Jesus was foreshadowed* in the history of the chosen people. It is a discourse that also witnesses to the abundance of *God's love* towards His chosen people. Thus, the systematic use of Old Testament prophecy seen as fulfilled in Christ aids to unlock each other's potentials. Paul's aim seems to have been to persuade his audience to accept the fulfillment of God's blessings in Christ.

In vv. 26-37 the apostolic preacher surveys Israel's history with a constant *focus* on Jesus, with God being the overarching controlling figure. Mixed into the discourse are an *admonition*, v. 38

²¹ Cf. ACCS 141.

“let it be known to you!”), as well as a bold *warning* to his listeners, v. 40f. At the speech’s pinnacle in vv. 34-41 the *effects of the resurrection* are outlined: forgiveness and justification apart from Moses.²² Paul’s preaching and teaching is well received by many of the Jews, 13:43, but on the following occasion he is contradicted and driven out of the district, 13:49-52, which then prompts Paul and his companion Barnabas to turn to the Gentiles. All of the above features appear to be helpful indicators for an efficacious contemporary teaching method in our seminary classrooms.

VI.) Paul’s Areopagitica (17:22-31)

Paul’s speech before the Athenians is dramatically preceded by a highlight of his own author’s reaction: he is deeply *distressed* at paganism (17:16)! Part of the introduction is also his physical positioning of an orator “in the *middle*” of that center square (17:20). The emotional involvement and intellectual engagement is crucial also in our office as instructors of the word of God to concrete audiences. Does the central positioning of the apostle not also remind us of the necessity of choosing all the appropriate means at our disposal to facilitate communication with our students, like, for instance, using multimedia methods?

Church Fathers discover in the *Areopagitica* a common Jewish mode of speech, that of challenging the surrounding pagan culture with the accent on the uniqueness of God the Creator, in a monotheistic tone, mentioning Jesus late in the discourse.²³ Paul is evidently *fitting* his choice of language, diction and syntax to the classical Greek of his audience in Athens as he appeals to the natural revelation of God as Creator. This reference to the Creator takes the place of Old Testament proofs for Jewish audiences. He diplomatically avoids any *harsh reproofs* of pagan vice designed to gain favorable attention, the tenor being completely unlike his chastising discourse in Romans 1:18-32. All of the above are again precious pointers to the refinement of our own technique of sharing the scriptural truths in the seminary.

Responding with incredulity regarding the resurrection, the pagan listeners bluntly interrupt Paul’s elucidations (17:32). However, the author of the Acts of the Apostles clearly *distinguishes* between those who mock and those who seem genuinely interested in hearing more.²⁴ And so it is imperative for us as well to pay close attention to the personal reception of each individual seminarian of ours.

VII.) Paul to Ephesian Elders in Miletus (20:18-35)

Paul’s farewell discourse before the elders of Ephesus is actually the only speech of Paul directed to Christians in the Acts, his last will and testament. While the Areopagitica fits with the sophisticated philosophical audience in Greece, this one echoes Paul’s letters to Christian communities. Particular stress is laid on the apostle’s generous ministry, his outstanding courage, the emphasis on eternal life as being a greater value than temporal life, Paul’s exemplary care for

²² Cf. *Ibid.* 162.

²³ Cf. *Ibid.* 216.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* 221.

the church, his warning against false teachers whom he prophetically denounces as wolves, and last not least the attention to be given to one's own salvation.²⁵ Needless to say that salvation is a pivotal theme in all the apostolic speeches (cf. 28:28). One small technical detail of his discourse would be the employment of an *hyperbolic* phrase of exhortation: "for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears." (20:31).

Conclusion

Let us finally bring these principles together by some inductive reasoning, moving from exhortation to a plan of action for us seminary Scripture professors:

To begin our classes with an invocation of the Holy Spirit for assistance and light can never be considered outdated. The initiatory *prayer* should highlight the *familial nature* of the study classroom, that is, we are about to receive – like children – a message from our loving Father. What the apostles did when they established connections between the Old and the New in God's revelation, we would call today *intertextuality*. Professors ought to appreciate and utilize their *freedom* in quoting, interpreting, and applying biblical texts to contemporary realities without getting stifled in sterile methodical gridlocks as has happened at times with the historico-critical method, to mention but one. Let us also breathe new life into the ancient technique of *allegorical reading* of the sacred texts and not shy away from presenting the narrative of *salvation history*. Furthermore, no one should outmatch us in *boldness* and the use of facilitating *media* in the classroom, paying close attention to the *personal reception* of the word of God by each student.

When it comes to the conveyance of contents, the testimony of Christ's *resurrection* will forever be quintessential. In fact, everything in the Scriptures will point to that key facet of His earthly life (Luke 24:26-27). Another significant task of ours in the lectureroom is to coach our seminarians on how to find moral and doctrinal *sureness* in the biblical texts. This can be achieved by persistently tapping into the resources of the deposit of faith as summarized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Moreover, let us not omit to encourage a tangible *moral application* of the spiritual message to the personal life of the hearer, bearing in mind that the chief objective of our instructions will always have to be *doxological*. We are guides to an ever deeper *vision* of God and of His Christ.

So many other features could be underlined as inspirational for our mission as seminary biblicists. Most fascinating is how the apostles used all their skills to bring the good news (εὐαγγελίζειν) to the people, encouraging them to turn from worthless things to the living God (14:15), and thereby to experience *gladness* (εὐφροσύνη, 14:17). We should be greatly reassured by the *power* of deacon Philip's preaching in Acts 8, and how Paul begins his preaching by proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God (9:20-25), with the zeal of one who had been forgiven much (Chrysostom).²⁶

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.* 249-252.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.* 109.

Finally, we also ought to learn our lesson from Eutychus, the Lucky One, who actually falls out the window and to his death because of Paul's lengthy catechesis (20:7-12). But isn't it marvelous how on that occasion the word, death, resurrection and the Eucharist all come together?!²⁷ In light of this curious event in the early Church Pope Benedict's counsel regarding "the importance of *silence* in relation to the word of God and its reception in the lives of the faithful" appears to be even more pertinent!²⁸

²⁷ Cf. *Ibid.* 244.

²⁸ *VD* 66.

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