ACTS AND MISSION 6: THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Our job is to point people to Jesus, but in order to do that, we have to start with where they are, not with where we think they should be. This means that we have to listen and learn.Â
Category: Observations

It's been about three months since the last post in this occasionalÂ series and you might want to take a trip back to revisit what I said then.

Today, I want to briefly consider Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost which can be found in Acts 2:14:41. The context is that the disciples, filled with the Spirit, have burst out onto the streets of Jerusalem, declaring God's glory. Not surprisingly, the crowd wonder whether they are drunk. At which point, Peter stands up, denies they have been drinking (it was too early in the morning) and starts to preach. What then follows is an excellent example of how to present the message of Jesus in a particular setting.

Essentially, the sermon is fairly simple. Peter quotes three Old Testament passages; Joel 2:28-32, Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1 and explains how each of them points to Jesus. He then calls upon his hearers to turn to Jesus for salvation and about 3,000 of them do. It's an impressive first sermon of the post-ascension era.

However, what I'd like to focus on is the big picture of what Peter did, rather than on the details. The key to this sermon is that Peter was a Jew, speaking to an audience of Jews who were in Jerusalem for the feast. Both Peter and his hearers would have been soaked in the Old Testament Scriptures. Filled with the Spirit, Peter didn't need to dig out his concordance and dictionary to find OT passages which spoke about Jesus - he knew them already. Not only that, but they would have rung immediate bells with his hearers, too. Peter started from the basis of a shared common ground with his hearers.

We see a similar pattern at numerous points in the book of Acts and even in the Gospels. On the EmmausÂ road, Jesus essentially gave a guided Bible study explaining who he was. In Acts 7, Stephen does a similar thing, using the OT to give a comprehensive picture of how Jesus fits into God's plan and Philip uses the same approach when talking to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. However, the key in all of these passages is that Jesus and his followers were addressing people who were already committed to the Scriptures. Essentially, their approach was; if you believe the Bible, then this is what it says about Jesus - believe in him, too.

Of course, this sort of approach only really works when you dealing with people who share a commitment to the Bible - which in today's world is a relatively rare occurrence. However, Acts also gives us an example of a somewhat different approach. In pagan Athens (Acts 17: 16-34), Paul doesn't engage the Athenians by starting with the Old Testament (a book which they probably had never encountered). He kicks off his discourse by referring to the various altars that he had seen in the town, and then with a diversion via Greek poetry, he introduces Jesus. In the Acts account, Paul never actually quotes Scripture, though he makes allusion to a number of concepts which are rooted in the Bible.

Now, I've given the impression that there are two different approaches here; but in fact, there is only one. In each of these cases, the speakers started from a point that their hearers understood and then

moved from there to point people to Jesus. With those who understood the Jewish Scriptures, Jesus and the others started from that point, but for the Athenians, Paul found another point of contact. There are two things to draw from this. The first is that our primary role is to be witnesses to Jesus (Acts 1:8). Our job isn't to point people to the Bible, to our church or what-have-you (though these might be good intemediary points), our job is to point people to Jesus. The second is that we need to understand something of the background of the people we are talking to. We have to be able to find points of contact so that we can, eventually, point them to Jesus.

All too often, I hear (generally middle-aged) evangelical Christians proudly saying that they don't know anything at all about some cultural phenomenon or other. It might be a TV programme, something on the Internet etc. However, if we don't know about the things that our neighbours, colleagues or family members are watching or thinking about, then we will find it ever so difficult to make conversation and to point them to Jesus in a relevant way. Paul didn't boast that he knew nothing about Greek religion, he walked around the city and learned about it so that he could be a witness to Greeks in a way that would draw them in.

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