

# EVANGELICAL PREACHING. PETER PATTERNS AND PARADIGMS

ADRIAN C. MOCAN\*

**ABSTRACT.** One of the most important activities of the early Church was certainly the proclamation of God's Word. In addition to the liturgical and Eucharistic syntax, preaching still occupies and should occupy a central place in the life of the Church. The first recorded sermon of one of the apostles is found in the book of Acts, chapter two. This sermon was delivered by apostle Peter on the day of the Descending of the Holy Spirit (at Pentecost). In this paper we will analyze the discourse of the apostle Peter because he fascinated by homiletical structure, argumentative system, and also by the impact on listeners (about three thousand people after this message decided to become Christians). Beyond a simple reading of the pericope from Acts chapter two, we will use the tools of exegetical and theological investigation to analyze the homily of apostle Peter and identify some specific elements that together build a homiletical pattern. The purpose of our approach is the fact that evangelical preaching has, as a fundamental element of specificity, the relation to the biblical model. One of the evangelical paradigms being the famous protestant phrase *sola Scriptura*. In order to succeed in constructing an understanding of evangelical preaching, we will turn to the famous example of the sermon in Acts chapter two, wherein some key elements in this great apostle's biography come to the fore.

**KEY WORDS:** Peter, Acts, preaching paradigm, death, resurrection

## **Introduction**

Peter was certainly the most prominent of the twelve apostles in the gospels, and also an important leader in the early days of the Church. His original name was Simon in Greek, or rather Simeon, a popular Jewish name. Originally from Bethsaida, he was the son of a certain John, who seems to have been an abbreviation of the name Jonah (John 1:42, 44; 21: 15-17, see Douglas 1987: 772). It is believed that Peter received a good elementary education for those times, being able to converse in both Greek and Aramaic. By the time Jesus called him to be his disciple, he earned his living by working as a fisherman together with his brother Andrew and quite possibly in partnership with the sons of Zebedee. He was married and lived in Capernaum. Also, it is likely that he was first a disciple of John. At the meeting with Jesus, he receives the name Cephas, in Aramaic, or Petros in Greek, which means "stone" (in the sense of a small stone, not a rock). In chapter sixteen from the

\* ADRIAN C. MOCAN is PhD candidate in Theology at "Aurel Vlaicu" University in Arad, Romania. E-mail: adi\_mocan2003@yahoo.com.

Gospel of Matthew, there is a controversial fragment in which Christ changed Peter's his name from Simon to Peter, a name that will remain with him throughout the New Testament (on this phrase, the primacy of the *bishop of Rome* is based in Catholicism, since in the Catholic tradition Peter is the first Roman bishop to have ever transmitted a special authority as leader of the whole Church, or the Vicar of Christ). As we have previously shown (Mocan 2011: 59-101), this text from Matthew 16:13-20 marks a crossroad in this gospel, because from now on, Jesus' disciples began to gradually separate as a community of God from the rest of the people of Israel, therefore this was a process that ultimately led to the formation of the Church.

A serious exegetical, terminological and theological analysis of the passage from Matthew 16 and the debate over the papal primacy was meant to be the purpose of my concern in the same work (see esp. Mocan 2011: 89-90). The utmost conclusion of my research then was that I was positive to the fact that this passage does nothing but strengthen the idea that on Christ, more precisely on the basis of His quality as the Son of God, the Church is founded. The one who builds the Church is the Savior himself, thereby asserting the Christological character of the Church. *Petra* (*i.e.*, stone) on which the Church is built and strengthened is most likely what *Petros* (*i.e.*, Peter) confessed in Caesarea in Philippi: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!". Or in other words, *petra* (stone) is Peter in the confessional act. The preaching of the gospel is, according to Christ's statement, paradigmatic for the Church, and the gospel must have at its core the confession of the divinity of Jesus. Also in chapter sixteen, beginning with verse nineteen, Christ makes the following promise to Peter: "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven... ."

From an evangelical perspective, as I have summarized in the same book (Mocan 2011: 88-89), the interpretation of these words is as follows: "The keys symbolize the authority of a true and correct confession of Christ the Savior." In the same book, I argued using Frank E. Gaebelain's point of view, that "Peter received the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, the authority and the power to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:23), a vision that either opens the Kingdom to some or closes it to others who are reluctant in receiving this proclamation. Christ will receive those who have accepted the message and add them to the Church, but the same gospel will close the Kingdom and exclude those who reject it" (see Gaebelain in Gaebelain and Carson 1984: 373, also quoted in Mocan 2011: 90). This perspective on preaching is viewed as paradigmatic in evangelical theology.

Therefore, the preaching of the gospel is a sacred duty of Christ's disciples (by extension, of all Christians nowadays), who are represented in the Matthew pericope by Peter. The responsibility for the proper preaching of the gospel is paramount, because on it depends the life or death of those who

listen; it is the key to the eternal life or eternal death of those who listen to it (see Stagg 1999: 232; also Mocan 2011: 89). Not only was Peter's name changed by Jesus, but his profession, too: he would no longer be a simple fisherman, but a "fisher of men", and eventually a leading disciple. A small group was formed within the apostolic community, consisting of three apostles: Peter, James and John. The three seemed to be "close" to Christ and have more extraordinary experiences than the rest of the apostles, such as the transfiguration on Mount Tabor or Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter was therefore chosen by Christ in order to be a leader of the disciples, but he was also a man with native leadership qualities. We learn that he later became a "pillar" (*i.e.*, a leader) among the apostles and in the Church, being recognized and respected by the entire ecclesiastical community (see this idea and excerpts of this paper in Romanian in Mocan 2020: 155-162). Peter has also written two epistles that bear his name, both of which are part of the canonical scriptures. Some historical sources tell us about his martyr death under the ruling of Nero (Douglas 1978: 773).

This was Peter who stood up and spoke, giving the first sermon after the descending of the Holy Spirit. This sermon may not have been given to us in its entirety in the second chapter of Acts. Luke probably summarized Peter's homily, but this does not detract from its importance and uniqueness. Many exegetes believe that Peter's discourse is archetypal and creates a homiletic model valid for all the preachers of the gospel. The Pentecostal theologian F. L. Arrington reckons that "the proclamation of the gospel was central to the early Church. Peter's sermon is the essence of the Christian message" (Arrington 1988: 26).<sup>7</sup> That being said, for us as evangelicals, Peter's speech establishes a defining pattern. We can also see the extraordinary impact of his preaching, especially because he was considered an "uneducated and ordinary man", rather accustomed to boat shovels and fishing gear. John A. Bengel argues that the power and the impact of Peter's sermon came from the fact that his message was Christ-centered, Jesus Christ being the essence of all the apostles' speeches (see Bengel 1981: 755). Next we will analyse the exhortation of the great apostle and we will conclude by portraying his principles and through associating them we will discover an ethos of Petrine preaching.

### **Peter and the *Life of Christ***

Peter's sermon begins quite abruptly, with the explanation of the fresh phenomenon of the outpouring of Holy Spirit (all the supernatural phenomena that accompany it attract a large and curious audience). An explanation that boils down to the fulfillment of an eschatological messianic prophecy in the Bible book of Joel and thus concludes the introductory part of the sermon with the saying of the last days, "And it shall be, that whosoever shall call on

the name of the Lord shall be saved.” After making this allegation, the preacher Peter once again demands the attention of the listeners through a formula of direct and simple politeness: “Ye men of Israel, hear these words!” By “Ye men of Israel” he addresses not only the Jews who lived in Jerusalem but also all the Jews who came to Jerusalem on the occasion of the Jewish feast of Pentecost. What he is going to say is not a change in the subject of the sermon, but on the contrary, it is a supplement and an explanation. In these moments, Peter will explain who this Lord is, in whose name anyone who invokes him through faith, will be saved. That’s why he goes on and declares that he is “Jesus of Nazareth”. This is a reference to the historical Jesus, who lived on Earth and who was none other than the Messiah, whom the Jewish people expected as the fulfillment of all the messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. Peter makes the specification “of Nazareth” because there were certainly several men with this name in Israel and because Christ was known to the crowd and under this title, Jesus the prophet of Nazareth (see Adeney 2001: 81-85). The apostle continued his speech: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, even as ye yourselves know.”

We see how Peter refers to the memory and knowledge of the listeners, the speech taking a direct and personal note (the speech being dialogical and personal has a greater impact on those who listen). Certainly among those who listened were people who experienced these miracles and benefited from them. For this category of listeners, the words of the sermon probably had a great emotional effect (Adeney 2001: 85). Peter says that Jesus was proved by God. This proving was made by “miracles, signs, and mighty works”. The word “true” (*apodedeomenon*) indicates to God having shown what he claimed *to be* (Bengel 1981: 755). The Pharisees and Sadducees never believed that Jesus was what He claimed to be, that is, Christ (the Messiah) and the Son of God incarnate. Apostle Peter says that God proved or validated this through the miraculous manifestations of Jesus’ work. We find the same Petrine argument in the sermon at Cornelius’ house, “... Jesus of Nazareth, who God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). The miracles performed by Christ and experienced by the listeners of the sermon were intended to authenticate the truth about His person and work. The argument, the speech on the day of Pentecost, highlights the fact that God was the one who participated in these miracles, thereby preparing the way for the greatest miracle: the resurrection of Christ (Adeney 2001: 9).

### **Peter and the *Death of Christ***

Peter's sermon about Christ continues with the following words: "handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge". In other words, it was God who allowed Christ to be handed over to the Jewish leaders: "you executed by nailing him to a cross at the hands of Gentiles". The phrase *the hands of Gentiles* refers to the Romans, who were part of the Gentiles, who disobeyed the divine Law. None of this was a mere coincidence (Adeney 2001: 9). The passions and the cross of Christ being part of the divine plan (Williams 1964: 68). The sufferings, death, and resurrection of Christ were prophesied hundreds of years ago and were to be fulfilled (Arrington 1988: 30). Nevertheless, the apostle says in his sermon, God's plan does not nullify man's responsibility. Probably among the listeners of this preaching were some of those who formed the social elite of the Jews of that time. The elders of the Jewish people killed Christ, but all the people are partakers in this murder, through a common guilt. The people, ignoring the *signs and works* done by Jesus, opened the door of death, pushed Him in, and slammed the door behind Him, according to David Gooding (2006: 71-72). Peter speaks very boldly, sharply and clearly, all these being the qualities of an impactful sermon. The Australian theologian Leon Morris argues extremely convincingly about the centrality in preaching the reconciling work of Christ's sacrifice (Morris 2000: 1965/ 2000: 109).

### **Peter and the *Resurrection of Christ***

"You executed him... But God raised him up, having released him from the pains of death, because it was not possible for him to be held in its power", Peter tells the thousands of pilgrims who were listening to him preaching. This tension between what people do and what God does shows Peter's quality as a good rhetorician, it penetrates from the beginning of the speech, to the end, and keeps alive the attention of those who listen to him. The entire Petrine discourse presents the antithetical duality between what God has done and what man has done. God sent the Messiah to the people, and they crucified him. People killed him, but God resurrected him by untying his "bonds of death" (an expression that can also be translated as "the pains of death", see Arrington 1988: 27). Peter tells them that Christ overcame death „because it was not possible for him to be held in its power." The lesson given by God through Christ in relation to death is that this is not a supreme disaster for the good, nor an impregnable barricade of protection for the wicked. Death is not the end. Jesus proved that the extinguishing of life on earth is not a permanent institution for both Him and those who will believe in Him (1 Cor. 15:21, 22; see Gooding 2006: 71-72).

In Peter's sermon we find two imperative authorities on which his statements are based: the Holy Spirit (who had just been given) and the written

Word of God (Gooding 2006: 73. That is why in what follows (Acts 2: 27-31), Peter quotes the Bible in Psalm 16:8-11 written by David, and identifies Christ as the descendant of David, who will reign forever, according to God's promise, to the greatest king in the history of Israel (Gooding 2006: 75). We know about David that he was also a prophet, as Peter says in the quoted prophecy, and we are not only learning about the Messiah, but Messiah himself is speaking in his own right. The promise reveals that he would face death, but that he would finally triumph over it (Gooding 2006: 75). Christ receives from God a total salvation from death, his soul being freed from Hades and his body freed from the grave, saved from putrefaction (Adeney 2001: 12). Peter's sermon continues his argument by proving that it was not possible for Christ to be held dead. Why? The first consideration must have been utterly shocking to some faithful Jews, Jesus was Man and God at the same time, and divinity cannot be kept in the grave. Then, the second argument is the character of God who cannot abandon the One who trusts in Him (McDonald 2004: 413<sup>1</sup>). The third reasoning is based on the promises of the messianic prophecies in Scripture that were to be fulfilled in Christ (Adeney 2001: 10).

In case anyone who listened to the sermon wonders if David was referring to himself in Psalm 16, Peter answers by arguing, "Brothers, I can speak confidently to you about our forefather David, that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day." In support Peter's assertion there are many extra-biblical, historical documents especially found in the writings of Josephus Flavius, which describe how the tomb of David was built, of which we learn that it was made up of several rooms. One of them was opened by the high priest Hyrcanus, who took 3000 silver talents from within in order to pay off Antiochus Pious when the latter besieged Jerusalem. Josephus Flavius also tells of another chamber that was allegedly opened by King Herod, who looted a large quantity of gold ornaments from it; but no one dared to desecrate the rooms where the bodies of David and Solomon were placed, because the entrance to the inner place was carefully sealed (Adeney 2001: 13).

Concluding his argument regarding the resurrection of Christ, the apostle boldly and confidently states that "we are all his witnesses", that is, we are proclaimers of this resurrection. Thomas G. Long defines preaching itself and the preacher using the same term, *i.e.*, confessor (witness) of the divine truth (1989: 42-47). It is perhaps the case that by saying "we all", Peter pointed out to the one hundred and twenty who had just been filled with the Holy Spirit.

### **Peter and the *Ascension of Christ***

As sure and clear as he spoke of Christ's death and resurrection, Peter now speaks of the risen Christ, claiming that His ascension was both physical and

bodily. At the same time, the other dimension of the ascension of Christ is the honor and status that God has given him, “that God has made this Jesus... both Lord and Christ.” In case any of the listeners would have continued to wonder if David, in Psalm 16, had not referred to himself, Peter counter argues, thus dispelling any possible doubt, saying in verses 34 and 35: “For David did not ascend into heaven, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my lords :it at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet...’.”

The strongest proof of the reality of Christ’s ascension to heaven was not the appearance before the crowd, but the descent of the Holy Spirit to the earth who testifies of Him. At the same time, the ascension of Christ to heaven and His involvement in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is further proof of His divinity (Gooding 2006: 76-77). The reception in glory, proclaims Peter, is made by God the Father addressing to Him the words: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” The words „until I make...” show a period of time that will pass until the enemies are placed under the feet of the exalted Christ (Gooding 2006: 77).

In the final part of his sermon, Peter concludes the entire speech with a sentence: “that God has made this Jesus...” and as a final challenge he adds: “whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ...” (see Bengel 1981: 759). God gave Him, raised Him, lifted Him and, to sum this up, what is man to do now but return to Him?

Having noticed and analyzed each stage of Peter’s sermon and the way he constructed his argument, one can clearly gather some of the particularities of his homily. These specific elements construct a Petrine homiletical typology that is based on several paradigms. First, Peter’s message is Christ-centered (meaning that it is based exclusively on the presentation and proclamation of the person and work of Jesus Christ). It is also obvious that this apostle is a very good communicator of the gospel. The arguments being the following: the way he introduces his speech by appealing to the elements familiar to his listeners, then, the very logical argument, based on Old Testament prophecies, his simple and clear language but especially by presenting, throughout the speech, a dual antithetical tension (between what people do and what God has done). The fact that, at the end of Peter’s sermon, we have three thousand converts, has to do primarily with the mysterious work done by the Holy Spirit, in the souls of those who listened, but in equal measure as well, with the fact that in the center of this homily is the Savior Jesus Christ. Spurgeon used to say that the standard of any sermon is its Christocentrism, because the role of the preacher is to always preach Jesus Christ (Spurgeon 1998: 69).

**References**

- Adeney WF (2001) *The Pulpit Commentary*. Rio: Ages Software.
- Allen RJ (2013) *Acts of the Apostles*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Arrington FL (1988) *The Acts of the Apostles*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988.
- Bengel JA (1981) *Bengel's New Testament Commentary. Matthew-Acts*. Grand Rapids, MA: Kregel.
- Douglas JD (1978) *Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Gaebelein FE (1984) Matthew. In FE Gaebelein and DA Carson (eds) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* 8: 373. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Gooding D (2006) *Fapte: credincioși adevărului*. Cluj-Napoca: Logos.
- Long TG (1989) *The Witness of Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster.
- McDonald W (2004) *Comentariul biblic al credinciosului*. Oradea: Imprimeria de Vest.
- Mocan AC (2011) *Biserica și Împărăția în Evanghelia după Matei*. Oradea: Societatea Biblică din România.
- Mocan AC (2020) Hristocentrismul predicii apostolului Petru din ziua pogorării Duhului Sfânt (Fapte 2:22-36). In EM Emandi (ed) *Interacțiuni*. Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut.
- Morris L (1965, reprint 2000) *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Spurgeon C (1998) *Sfaturi pentru predicatori*. Bucharest: Stephanus.
- Stagg F (1999) *Teologia Noului Testament*. Translated into Romanian by C. Dupu. Bucharest: Gnosis.
- Williams CSC (1964) *The Acts of the Apostles*. London: A & C Black.