

Preaching Like Peter:  
Applying the Speeches in Acts 2, 3, 4, and 5 to a Mainline Protestant Pulpit

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School  
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2018

ABSTRACT

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## Abstract

This thesis looks to Peter as a model of witnessing to Christ through the act of preaching. Its primary material are the speeches delivered immediately after the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, 3, 4, and 5. A study of the similarities those speeches reveals the basic components of Peter's model: the involvement of the Holy Spirit; building the sermon on recent miraculous events; presenting a clear, concise, and consistent version of the *kerygma*; making use of Scripture as evidence; and finishing with a call to response. To apply Peter's model to a mainline Protestant pulpit, the author utilized her observations in the preparation and delivery of a Christmas Eve sermon. The effectiveness of that application was measured through an anonymous follow-up survey and a comparison of January attendance with the previous year, as well as the author's own impressions. Although the application of Peter's model did not translate into a miraculous increase in attendance, the survey responses and the author's positive experience indicated that it is both possible and beneficial to follow Peter's example in contemporary preaching.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I feel deep gratitude to those who have made this thesis possible.

To my advisers, Drs. Ross Wagner and Jerusha Neal – who were generous in sharing their time, wisdom, guidance, and support. The content that follows is significantly improved because of their involvement.

To Ben Dillion, whose editing gave polish to the finished product.

To the people of Andrews United Methodist Church – who gave me not only the time for this endeavor, but were wonderful cheerleaders in the process.

To my mom, Margaret Wood – who told me in 2003 that I should get my doctorate from Duke, years before Duke Divinity School began a D.Min. program. It turns out you were right... again.

To my dad, Emory Wood – who never hesitates in his support.

And to my husband, Alan – who encouraged me to enroll in a D.Min. program, even if it meant attending the school with the wrong color blue.

# 1. Introduction

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NRSV).*

With these departing words, Jesus gives a commission – one that applies to more than just the disciples standing with him as he ascends. “[W]itnesses here refers to the whole group of Jesus’s followers,” write Boring and Craddock, “including those who later become disciples without having been eyewitnesses to Jesus’s ministry.”<sup>1</sup> All Christians are called be Jesus’s witnesses. For some of us, that call arrives with specificity: to preach.

I was an elementary school student when this call first hit me. I took a break from playing tic-tac-toe on the back of the church attendance pads to pay attention to the sermon. As my eyes fell on the pastor, a disconcerting idea came over me: I was supposed to do what he was doing.

My young mind reeled to interpret what I had experienced. Although this was a United Methodist congregation in the 1980s, my home church had never had a female pastor. Did this mean God was calling me to be a nun? (I hoped not.) And even if I could be a pastor, I was sure God wouldn’t call me to do anything that included public

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene M. Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 367.

speaking. I was a shy child with no interest in having all eyes on me for a twenty-minute monologue.

Yet I couldn't shake the idea. I felt sure that I was supposed to go and tell people about Christ. Having attended church twice a week for most of my life, I had been taught about Jesus's final instructions to the disciples in passages like Acts 1:8. The part about being Christ's witnesses "to the ends of the earth" especially stuck to my young imagination; I felt that I, too, was supposed to literally go somewhere else to tell people about Jesus. I even carried a secret guilt for not running away from home to immediately obey that call.

That feeling took more concrete form at age fifteen. "Youth Sunday" was coming and some young soul was needed to deliver a sermon. A lack of volunteers placed a target on the girl who showed up to every youth event, and after much prodding I reluctantly agreed. I stepped into the large pulpit of my home church with shaky index cards and a literal prayer. I preached the only message I knew: a personal testimony about my own journey toward faith in Jesus Christ.

To my great surprise, the congregation responded positively. Lo and behold, they had even understood my intended point! I began to trust that God could empower me for the terrifying task of public speaking, and that God really was calling me to preach.

Throughout college, seminary, and a first job as a camp director, I delivered six to twelve sermons a year. Having a month or two between preaching engagements gave

me the luxury of time not available to a church-appointed pastor. My sermons seemed to write themselves much as that first attempt did; I simply reflected on some recent experience of Christ and then witnessed to it from the pulpit.

This was an important stage of gaining confidence in front of a congregation and exploring the craft of preaching. My experiments with humor, body language, and storytelling led me to discover what Augustine identified long before me: my message was more likely to be heard if I “delighted” the congregation.<sup>2</sup> This confidence had an unintended side effect, however: I was becoming distanced from my original call and thinking less intentionally about the Christ-commissioned purpose of preaching.

Eventually I answered the call to be an elder in the United Methodist Church. In this role, I’ve been preaching almost every Sunday for seven years, and that experience has allowed me to gain competency in this ministry of Word. I have been surprised, though, that the increasing years of practice have not decreased the time needed for sermon preparation; in fact, I’m putting in more time than ever before. As time passes, that original call to be Christ’s witness keeps tugging on me. I feel the weight of its importance; I want to use my weekly monologue to say what is truly most important in the way that is most effective.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine identifies the three functions of eloquence: “so as to teach, to delight, to sway.” Quoted in Richard Lischer, ed., *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 284. Quoted from Augustine, *Teaching Christianity [On Christian Doctrine]*, trans. Edmund Hill, OP, ed. John E. Rotelle, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, New City Press (1990–97).

In my denomination, there is no set script for Sunday morning. Our ordination process involves a preaching review, but once approved for full connection we are set loose to preach whatever and however we want. We can bore our congregations to death or amuse them into complacency. We can rigorously follow the lectionary or develop sermon series with self-help themes. We can spend our twenty minutes translating ancient Greek or retelling movie plots.

I find this freedom to offer a liberating space for the Holy Spirit to work so that the message can fit the needs of the congregation. I also find this freedom poses a danger: my ego can drive me to delight the congregation until I am primarily bearing witness to myself. I am not called to be a stand-up comic or a motivational speaker. I am called to be a preacher – a witness to Jesus Christ.

The state of the church implies that we preachers may indeed be faltering in our task to bear witness. Membership in my United Methodist Church of the United States has been declining at a rate of 1.9% since 2013. Average weekly worship attendance declined by 2.9% between 2014 and 2015.<sup>3</sup> We are slowing down in our important work of being Jesus's witnesses to our neighbors down the street, not to mention the ends of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Heather Hahn, "U.S. church sees numbers slide in 2015," *United Methodist Communications*, November 18, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/u.s.-church-sees-numbers-slide-in-2015>.

The responsibility to bear witness does not fall solely on clergy, of course. Jesus's commission was for all Christians, just as all Christians are called to be ministers. My denomination's *Book of Discipline* clearly states that "[l]ay members of The United Methodist Church are, by history and calling, active advocates of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Every layperson is called to carry out the Great Commission."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it's largely from the clergy that those lay members learn how to verbalize their faith. If the preachers aren't bearing witness effectively, many lay members will follow their poor example.

I saw this trickle-down effect during a recent visit to the camp I had directed during my twenties. An assistant director conveyed her surprise at how the college-age summer staff members struggled to articulate their faith. They could explain the "how" of Christianity just fine: how to work together as the body of Christ, how to overcome challenges with God's help, or how to serve one another as Christ commanded. They stumbled over the basic "why" of our faith: why one would become a follower of Jesus Christ in the first place. In other words, they struggled to fulfill Jesus's first and basic commission to be his witnesses to the world.

But before I judge their speck, I need to examine the log in my own eye. Many of these staff had heard me preach; I must not have provided them with a model to follow.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶ 126.

This revelation caused me to reflect over my preaching in general, and then matters became worse; I couldn't think of a particular sermon that would give them a solid example of making a case for Christ. It seemed that I, too, needed clarity about my call to be Christ's witness through preaching.

Anna Carter Florence makes an observation that tells me I am not alone in this need. As a professor of homiletics, she has noticed "the sheer number of preachers who report that they are no longer sure what the homiletical 'rules' are."<sup>5</sup> In a postmodern world that challenges "orthodoxy, tradition, and leadership," we preachers are left unnerved about what we are supposed to be claiming from our pulpits, and on what authority. For the benefit of our call as preachers (as well as our sanity), we must gain clarity on what we are supposed to be saying for Christ.

If Christ asked us to be "witnesses," then we might start by defining that term. In its Biblical usage, *martys* is a "juridical term," one that "originally signified a person who had personal knowledge about something and could speak about it before a court of law."<sup>6</sup> The NRSV points to this legal meaning when it translates derivatives of *martys* as "testimony."<sup>7</sup> Thomas Long builds on this courtroom image by identifying the two "credentials" that make a witness: one who "has seen something, and...is willing to tell

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), Kindle edition, Introduction, The Authority Question: "Can I Really Say That?"

<sup>6</sup> Allison A. Trites, "Witness," *NIBD* 5:877.

<sup>7</sup> See Acts 4:33, 7:33, 13:22, and 22:18.

the truth about it.”<sup>8</sup> Both Long and Florence use Paul Ricoeur’s work to further explore the qualities of a witness:

1. The witness is not a volunteer...but only the one who is *sent* to testify.
2. The testimony of the witness is...about God’s claim upon life.
3. The purpose of the testimony is proclamation to all people.
4. The testimony is not merely one of words but rather demands a total engagement of speech and action.<sup>9</sup>

These definitions help to clarify what it means to be Christ’s witness. Yet as someone related to a myriad of attorneys, I also know that the actual act of witnessing is more complicated than simply reporting the facts. A witness can tell the truth but essentially waste her time on the stand with unimportant details. In a trial, witnesses are coached by attorneys so their efforts don’t end up failing to convince the judge or jury.

If preachers are public witnesses for Christ, then we could certainly use a good coach – someone to help us identify the important evidence and present it in a way that convinces. Jesus himself would be the ideal man for the job, but his thirty-three-word commission in Acts 1:8 lacks the specificity I am searching for. Fortunately, after that commission the story focuses on one person in particular who repeatedly serves as Jesus’s witness: Peter. Once the Holy Spirit has filled the eleven and led them to speak in other languages (Acts 2:4), Peter is moved to give an extended speech. When he

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Long, *Witness*, 42–3. See also Florence, *Preaching*, chapter 4: “Basic Terms.” Originally found in Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 131.

addresses the Pentecost crowd in Jerusalem, he delivers what Boring and Craddock call “the first Christian sermon.”<sup>10</sup>

This sermon is no one-time fluke. Over the next three chapters, Peter will witness to Christ by giving a speech again, and again, and again. The man who couldn’t find the words to claim Jesus around the charcoal fire now cannot stop the words from flowing out of his mouth. What’s even more interesting is that these four speeches – found in Acts 2, 3, 4, and 5 – follow almost identical outlines. If being a good witness is sticking to your story, Peter does an exemplary job.

Maybe that is exactly the point. In the beginning of Acts we hear the disciples called to be Christ’s witnesses...and then in Peter, we are given a clear example of what that looks like.

This thesis will seek clarity for the call to preach in Peter’s embodiment of the commission to be Christ’s witness. I will begin with a thorough exploration of Peter’s first four speeches.<sup>11</sup> The similarities among them bring out some essential qualities of bearing witness to Christ that later chapters will address:

1. The Holy Spirit’s involvement is essential and primary;
2. The beginning builds on recent miraculous events;
3. The *kerygma* is presented in a clear, concise, and consistent manner;
4. Supporting evidence is provided through Scripture;

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<sup>10</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, 371.

<sup>11</sup> There are other missionary speeches in Acts that would be worth careful study. Peter gives a speech to Cornelius in Acts 10, and Paul gives several of his own speeches later in the book. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on Peter’s first four speeches because they have the most in common.

5. An invitation to response is made when the audience is ready.

Careful consideration of each of these qualities will develop into reflections on how Peter's example might be applied to preaching today. Because we do not wear Peter's first-century Jewish shoes, some work of translation and adaptation will be required. We can be encouraged by noticing that even Peter saw a need to adapt; although he gave a very *similar* speech to each audience, he did not deliver an *identical* speech every time.<sup>12</sup>

After carefully studying Peter's preaching model, I put it to the test by applying it in my own context. I am the pastor of a 320-member congregation in a small, remote town in the mountains of western North Carolina. Although we never attract crowds to rival Jerusalem at Pentecost, there are certain times of the year when our church is especially full of both the Christian faithful as well as nominally religious visitors. One of those days is common to almost every congregation: Christmas Eve.

I had a bit of apprehension about trying something new on such an important day in the life of our church. I also knew if there was any value to my observations, then I should be able to put them to the test. With Peter as my model, I planned, wrote, and delivered my Christmas Eve sermon differently than I ever had before. The results did more than confirm that Peter's example *can* be followed in today's mainstream

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<sup>12</sup> And his speech to Cornelius in Acts 10 – the only one delivered to a Gentile – differs even more.

Protestant pulpit; they improved my preaching in ways that will extend far beyond that one service.

But before we get to those new preaching practices, we need to pause to consider whether Peter can be a homiletical example at all. There are some significant issues with using a first-century man from a Biblical account to inform twenty-first century preaching. Let's make sure Peter is indeed a rock we can build on.

## 2. The Case for Peter

That Peter is a dominant witness for Christ in the narrative of Acts is virtually uncontested. “Peter is portrayed as carrying the load of the preaching of the good news in the first half of Acts,” notes Ben Witherington.<sup>13</sup> Out of 365 (or more) verses of spoken word in Acts,<sup>14</sup> 104 come straight from Peter’s mouth. His first two speeches lead to the conversion of thousands into faith in Christ and life in Christian community.<sup>15</sup> Both the quantity and quality of his work call for emulation. Even so, there are two major obstacles to using Peter’s early sermons as models for contemporary preaching: authorship and context.

### 2.1 Another Author?

First is the fact that the first four speeches in Acts may not actually be *Peter’s* example, because they are not the apostle’s exact words. To state the obvious, Luke did not have the advantage of reviewing video footage and transcribing what had been said. As Jerry Horner observes, “Commentators have long debated the place of this and other

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 1. Compare with Marion Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 119.

<sup>14</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> See Acts 2:41–42 and 4:4.

speeches in Acts, questioning whether the written record gives an accurate and reliable account of what speakers actually said.”<sup>16</sup> Boring and Craddock agree:

While some of [the speeches in Acts] may contain elements of older traditions, they are not verbatim reports of what was actually said on any given situation, but Lukan compositions that interpret the meaning of the story. This was the common practice of first-century historians, who made no use of footnotes, parenthesis, or quotation marks, all of which are modern paraphernalia of a later age interested in investigative reporting.<sup>17</sup>

John Duncan states firmly: “Since the advent of the historical-critical study of Acts, interpreters have increasingly acknowledged that the speeches assigned to Peter, Stephen, James, Paul, and others are not verbatim transcripts of historical addresses delivered on particular occasions by the characters in question.”<sup>18</sup> If Peter’s speeches are not truly Peter’s speeches, what is the value in looking to them as a model for preaching?

Acts may not have provided us with transcripts, but neither did it make things up out of thin air. Witherington says firmly that “there was no *convention* of creating speeches in antiquity,” and although it’s always possible that some writers broke from common practice, “Luke claims in Luke 1:1–4 to be following the Greek tradition.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jerry Horner, “The credibility and the eschatology of Peter’s speech at Pentecost,” *Pneuma* 2, (1980), 22–31, here 23.

<sup>17</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, 364.

<sup>18</sup> John M. Duncan, “Peter, Paul, and the Progymnasmata: Traces of the Preliminary Exercises in the Mission Speeches of Acts,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 41 (2014): 349–365, here 349.

<sup>19</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 117.

That tradition did allow for rewording speeches to fit the author's style or narrative purposes, but not for complete fabrication.<sup>20</sup>

While the speeches in Acts may not have come word-for-word out of the mouth of Peter, there is still a strong likelihood that they represent the "general thrust of early apostolic preaching, which [Luke] then reworked in order to integrate them into his larger narrative project."<sup>21</sup> Horner argues strongly that Luke preserves "the *substance* of the first recorded sermon in the Christian Church":<sup>22</sup>

That Luke was acquainted with the content and manner of the apostles' preaching can hardly be questioned. He himself had seen and heard Paul's speeches, and although he may not have heard the others, he was in close contact with Peter, Mark, Philip, and others who had personally experienced the earlier years of the church at Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup>

Others may not agree so adamantly, but many find significance in the commonality among the speeches in Acts. Thor Strandenaes contends that "Luke based his transmission of the missionary speeches on the oral and written sources which were at his disposal, as well as on his own memory (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1), and he followed a missionary speech prototype when recording the speeches."<sup>24</sup> Marion Soards agrees that Luke used the speeches to present his readers with "the essential unity of early

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Duncan, "Peter, Paul, and the Progymnasmata," 350.

<sup>22</sup> Horner, "The credibility and the eschatology of Peter's speech at Pentecost," 26 (emphasis mine).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>24</sup> Thor Strandenaes, "The missionary speeches in the Acts of the Apostles and their missiological implications." *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 99 (2011): 341–354, here 344.

Christianity."<sup>25</sup> He builds his argument on the work of Henry Cadbury, who wrote that the speeches "indicate at least what seemed to a well-informed Christian of the next generation the main outline of the Christian message as first presented by Jesus's followers in Palestine and in the cities of the Mediterranean world."<sup>26</sup>

C.H. Dodd labels this "outline of the Christian message" as *kerygma*, "the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world."<sup>27</sup> *Kerygma* may be best understood in contrast to *didaskalia*, which is teaching intended for Christian believers (often in "cases of ethical instruction").<sup>28</sup> Dodd points out that Peter's first four speeches (Acts 2, 3, 4, and 5) cover "substantially the same ground...and taken together they afford a comprehensive view of the content of the early *kerygma*."<sup>29</sup> The speeches are not the *kerygma* verbatim, but are "based upon a reminiscence of what the apostle actually said."<sup>30</sup>

Luke Johnson believes that the speeches "obviously represent Luke's sense of what should have been said on the occasion."<sup>31</sup> If they are what *should* have been said, then should other Christians bear witness in a similar way? Boring and Craddock think so: "The evangelistic sermons of the early preachers are intended as summaries of the

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<sup>25</sup> Soards, *Speeches*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Sacra Pagina V* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 10.

Christian message and models of preaching for Luke's own and later times."<sup>32</sup> In that way, even if Peter's speech reflects much of Luke's own wordsmithing we might still find it useful as a "typical, though not exhaustive example of the bases of early post-pentecostal successful and convincing preaching."<sup>33</sup>

Hans Conzelmann firmly challenges this line of thought, however: "The speeches are not presented as exemplary sermons.... They do reiterate the apostolic kerygma, but are not intended to serve as examples of homiletical style." As evidence, Conzelmann points out that the speeches were written for a Jewish audience; because the Jewish mission was concluded by the time of Luke's writing, the need for that kind of argument had expired. They are literary constructs, he says, not homiletical.<sup>34</sup>

Others remain open to the idea that the speeches in Acts are intended as homiletical examples. Dibelius says, "This type of Christian sermon certainly seems to have been customary in the author's day (about 90 A.D). This is how the gospel was preached and ought to be preached!"<sup>35</sup> The repetitiveness of the speeches serves to show that Luke "considered [this type of speech] as a type common to all Christians."<sup>36</sup>

Willimon is willing to suggest that Acts may have had "a very practical, homiletical

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<sup>32</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 364.

<sup>33</sup> John J. Killgallen, "'With many other words' (Acts 2,40): theological assumptions in Peter's Pentecost speech," *Biblica* 83 (2002), 71-87, here 72.

<sup>34</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xlv.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 165.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

purpose – to tell the story of Christ and his new community in such a way that the values of the founder and his immediate successors might be emulated today.”<sup>37</sup>

It also seems noteworthy that the speeches in Acts are significantly shorter than those composed by Luke’s contemporaries.<sup>38</sup> That difference in length makes them easier to memorize; was that an intentional part of the design? It may be within the realm of possibility that Luke’s purpose for these speeches was that his audience would draw on them when they had opportunity to witness to Christ. If that is true, pastors today ought to turn to Acts for study as they would the collected sermons of Luther, Wesley, or Spurgeon!

## **2.2 Another World?**

An attempt to study these speeches for homiletical purposes reveals the second obstacle to their contemporary use: context. Simply put, Peter lived in a distant world – in terms of time, geography, and culture. When Peter speaks in Acts 2, 3, 4, and 5, he addresses crowds that are pre-Christian but nonetheless motivated by religion. The Pentecost crowd of Acts 2 and 3 had travelled to Jerusalem for a religious festival and included both Jews and those who had converted to Judaism.<sup>39</sup> In the speeches of Acts 4 and 5, Peter speaks directly to the Jewish religious leaders – those we might assume to

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<sup>37</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>38</sup> Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 181.

<sup>39</sup> Acts 2:10: “Jews and proselytes.”

be more committed to their beliefs and practices than the “ordinary folk” of the previous passages.<sup>40</sup>

Today’s mainline Protestant context is different. Nancy Ammerman’s 2013 study of 95 Americans identifies four common spiritual populations in our culture; those categories give an accurate description of those I see in and around Andrews UMC. She found 26 people in her study to be “spiritually serious,” those who “express a high level of commitment to their individual spiritual lives, engage in multiple spiritual practices, and often attend activities in a religious community.” Another 35 were “typical members” who “have more moderate levels of spiritual interest and practice and attend less regularly – at least monthly, but not weekly.” The category “marginal members” comprised 19 people in her study; they “have a moderate level of spiritual interest and practice, but hardly ever attend religious services.” Finally, 14 were “disaffiliated,” exhibiting no spiritual interest or practice and no attachment to a religious community.<sup>41</sup> An average Sunday at Andrews UMC brings a mix of the first three categories. They are people who might hope for a good sermon and familiar hymns but are not necessarily expecting a life-changing experience.

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<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, “Learning and Living the Golden Rule: Religious Communities and Morality,” in *Christianity and the Roots of Morality: Philosophical, Early Christian, and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Petri Luomanen, Anne Birgitta Pessi, and Ilkka Pyysiainen (Boston: Brill, 2017), 217–238, here 220.

Peter's speeches, by contrast, are dramatically life-changing, starting with the miracles that precede them. At Pentecost, sixteen different ethnicities understand the disciples' speech without the help of a translator. Peter's speeches in Acts 3 and 4 are instigated by the healing of a lame man. In Acts 5, the speech is prompted by an angelically-assisted prison breakout. These miracles serve as pretty exceptional warm-up acts for Peter's sermons. The events that precede today's typical mainline Protestant sermons are most often the activities of a routine worship service, kept in neat order by a bulletin. The lighting of the altar candles, even when done exceptionally well, is nothing compared to tongues of Holy Spirit fire.

From my view up front on Sunday mornings, I watch 115 people (or so) quietly waiting to hear the word. Their expressions look much like a classroom of students; some are watching the pulpit attentively, but others are looking around at the stained glass windows or the bulletin. It's easy to assume that they do not expect evangelistic preaching. Ammerman's 2005 study found that "conversion" is a top goal for only 12% of mainline Protestant congregations.<sup>42</sup> A multi-generational Main Street church seems unlikely to be in that minority.

I wonder, though, if the people of Andrews UMC would surprise me with their receptivity to preaching more like Peter's. At least in part, my assumptions about their

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<sup>42</sup> Compared with 75% of conservative Protestant churches and 50% as the average of all American congregations. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 25.

expectations come from the preaching I heard as a child. The sermons I remember were mostly *didaskalia* and failed to capture either my attention or the excitement of believing in Christ. As a pastor, I have consciously rebelled against that kind of dry presentation. But is it possible that I have unconsciously assumed that all mainline Protestant churchgoers want teaching, not *kerygma*?

Perhaps my congregation is not as different from Peter's crowds as they first seem. The people of both Andrews UMC and Pentecost gather out of religious duty. Both groups arrive with expectations based on years of prior experience. Wouldn't it be wonderful if a mainline Protestant congregation had their souls awakened like the Pentecost crowd – by the unexpected arrival of the Holy Spirit?

And why shouldn't they?

Despite issues of authorship and context, I contend that Peter's speeches in Acts have a lot to teach a twenty-first century preacher. No, they are not the literal words out of Peter's mouth; but they do represent a pattern indicative of the early witnesses for Christ. No, we cannot cut-and-paste Peter's speeches for next Sunday's sermon material. But their consistent presentation of the gospel does make a compelling case for the essential components of *kerygmatic* preaching – a form our congregations may be surprisingly hungry for.

### 3. Finding Peter's Formula

The art of homiletics seems to lend itself to formulas. Thomas Long identifies outlines as the “traditional approach” endorsed by “most homiletical textbooks of the past few generations.”<sup>1</sup> In seminary we joked about the “three points and a poem” format that Willimon bluntly describes as “no one’s definition of fun.”<sup>2</sup> Anna Carter Florence reminds her readers of the “old sermon form designed to enhance the listener’s retention of the message”: tell them, tell them, and tell them again.<sup>3</sup> These formulas can feel tired, yet they linger in circulation; maybe we preachers keep going back to them in part because they make our task less intimidating, as if all we have to do is insert the right components.

What if these homiletical formulas are as old as preaching itself?

That the early Christian missionary speeches follow a formula is a frequent observation of Biblical scholars;<sup>4</sup> it is especially obvious in the first four speeches delivered by Peter in Acts. The specific outline of this formula is less universally agreed upon. In 1956 Martin Dibelius identified a five-part pattern for this “stereotyped repetition of the same outline”: “an introduction showing the situation at the time is

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<sup>1</sup> Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 93–4.

<sup>2</sup> Willimon, *Acts*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Kindle location 1687 of 2654.

<sup>4</sup> Quoting Romans 8:31–34, Dodd writes, “We once again have the sense that a formula is being cited, a formula closely akin to that cited in 1 Cor 15:1.... This formula is deeply rooted in the *kerygma*.” Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 15.

followed by the kerygma of Jesus's life, passion, and resurrection...mostly with emphasis upon the fact that the disciples were witnesses.... To this is added evidence from the scriptures...and an exhortation to repentance."<sup>5</sup>

In 1962 C.H. Dodd identified six parts:

1. The time has come – it is now the “age of fulfillment.”
2. This fulfillment comes through the ministry of Jesus Christ, as proven by
  - a. His genealogy, through David.
  - b. His own actions in ministry.
  - c. His death by crucifixion.
  - d. His resurrection.
3. Through the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted.
4. The Holy Spirit's presence gives further evidence.
5. Soon, Christ will return.
6. So now you must repent, be forgiven, and receive the Holy Spirit and salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Edvin Larsson's 1983 work arranges the parts into four main categories:

1. Addressing the audience.
2. An explanation of the situation which has caused the speech.
3. The missionary speech (the kerygma).
  - a. Short summary of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, or an account of God's work and its relevance.
  - b. Proof from Scripture or scriptures.
  - c. An admonition: call for repentance.
4. Normally supplemented by a report on the result of the missionary speech.<sup>7</sup>

Hans Conzelmann's 1987 work expands the formula to six or seven parts: (1) an appeal for a hearing; (2) the connection between the situation and the speech; (3) the

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<sup>5</sup> Dibelius, 10; also referenced in Soards, 165. I found Soards's work to be incredibly helpful, and credit him with guiding me to many excellent works on the speeches in Acts.

<sup>6</sup> Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 21–23.

<sup>7</sup> Edvin Larsson, *Apostlagarningarna* 1–12, quoted in Strandenaes, “The missionary speeches,” 342–3.

beginning of the actual body of the speech, often with a scriptural quotation; (4) Christological kerygma; (5) scriptural proof; (6) an offer of salvation, with repentance the condition; (7) sometimes, an interruption.<sup>8</sup> Eduard Schweizer expanded this “general scheme” all the way to nine parts in his article from 1957,<sup>9</sup> but I am not convinced we can take this exercise to such a detailed level without compromising its plausibility.

Using the format of the gospel parallels, I made my own attempt at separating Peter’s first four speeches into corresponding sections (see Appendix A). The exercise felt like putting together a worn-out puzzle. Most of the Scriptural pieces do snap next to each other with a satisfying neatness, but a few require enough finagling and extra pressure to raise the question of whether they’re really intended as a match. My experience led me to partly agree with what Soards says bluntly of the speeches in Acts: “All such outlines are artificial.”<sup>10</sup> While the existence of a formula is obvious, I do not imagine Luke writing these early speeches with a checklist in front of him.<sup>11</sup> Their pattern is strong but not identical, which seems likely to represent more of an internalized standard than a rigid format.

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<sup>8</sup> Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, xliv.

<sup>9</sup> Eduard Schweizer, “Concerning the Speeches in Acts,” in *Studies in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 213.

<sup>10</sup> Soards, *Speeches*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Dibelius actually raises this question – whether Luke wrote with older texts in front of him as a format. He leaves the question unanswered, however. See “The Speeches in Acts and Ancient Historiography,” 166.

If that is indeed how this formula helped Luke write Peter's speeches, it might be most helpful to us today in that same spirit. Several years ago I read Andy Stanley's preaching book, *Communicating for a Change*, which presents a simple outline for preachers to follow: I – We – God – You - Us.<sup>12</sup> I found it surprisingly effective and began to use it when writing my sermons.<sup>13</sup> It's not unusual for my sermons to conclude in Stanley's fashion, with a vision of how the message affects all of "us." I do not, however, chain myself to his methods, which prescribe never making a point about "we" without first discussing an issue related to "I."

The best homiletic formulas help the preacher in this fashion: as a guide and inspiration, not an overly-restrictive constraint. It's possible that the earliest witnesses to the gospel worked in that same manner. Acts 2, 3, 4, and 5 present four speeches that follow the same pattern. Could their formula change the way we preach today?

Let's examine each of the parts and find out.

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<sup>12</sup> Andy Stanley, *Communicating for a Change* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2006), 120.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Talbot Davis of Good Shepherd UMC in Charlotte, NC encouraged me to read *Communicating for a Change*. He said the reason he read it was because he wanted to figure out why Stanley's sermons always made him cry. That's pretty convincing evidence of effective witness.

## 4. The Holy Spirit Moves First

As mentioned above, Acts paints Peter as quite a preacher. The stories of his ministry rival the crusades of Billy Graham! When reading about Peter as a kind of rock star evangelist, we might forget about his less-than-stellar speaking record in Luke. Going back to Luke can often aid in understanding Acts – and in this case, Luke gives evidence that Peter was not a naturally skilled orator.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, Peter bumbles over his words. At the spectacular moment of the Transfiguration, he suggests making dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah – “not knowing what he said” (Luke 9:33). After Jesus teaches them to keep watch for the Son of Man, Peter remains confused: “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?” (Luke 12:41). Peter’s one shining verbal moment – identifying Jesus as “The Messiah of God” in Luke 9:20 – is overshadowed by his lowest moment of all. As Jesus is being interrogated by the religious leaders, Peter is asked if he knew Jesus. Peter lacks the guts to simply say “Yes” (Luke 22:54–62). Peter is not courageous; he is not clear; he is not a wordsmith.

And then the Holy Spirit arrives.

“Who could have predicted the one who now speaks?,” Willimon wonders about Pentecost. “Yet here, before the half inquiring, half mocking crowd, Peter is the first, the very first to lift up his voice and proclaim openly the word that only a few weeks before

he could not speak, even to a serving woman at midnight.”<sup>14</sup> Just as God breathed life into Adam, the Spirit has “breathed life into a once cowardly disciple and created a new man who now has the gift of bold speech.”<sup>15</sup>

The speeches of Peter could not happen without the Holy Spirit, and the narrative does not let the reader get far from this fact. Peter’s first speech is born directly out of the Pentecost event. “For Luke, [Pentecost] is clearly a crucial event which sets in motion all that follows,” says Witherington. “Without the coming of the Spirit there would be no prophecy, no preaching, no mission, no conversions, and no worldwide Christian movement.”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the Holy Spirit continues to work far beyond the linguistic miracle. In Acts 4:7, Peter is asked what was likely a trick question: “By what power or what name did you do this?” “This” could refer to the healing of the man in 3:1–8, or to his teaching about Christ in and around the Temple. The Holy Spirit fills Peter and leads him out of that tight spot to “define the ‘this’ of the council’s leading question in kerygmatic terms.”<sup>17</sup> In Acts 5, Peter says that the disciples are witnesses to the crucified, raised, and exalted Jesus – “and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him”

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<sup>14</sup> Willimon, *Acts*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 130.

<sup>17</sup> Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. X (Nashville, Abingdon Press: 2002), 89.

(v. 32).<sup>18</sup> Johnson calls this statement “provocative,” given that Peter has already been identified by 4:8 as being filled with that Spirit. But by this point in the narrative, the reader knows how the trial will play out: “The question whether the apostles would be – could be – subdued by the political power of the Sanhedrin has been answered by God in their *empowerment with the Spirit* and their spectacular display of prophetic activity.”<sup>19</sup>

#### **4.1 The Preacher Seeks the Spirit**

This is our first and possibly most important lesson on what is required to be an effective witness of Jesus Christ: the involvement of the Holy Spirit. It’s a fact I myself know to be true because of my original skepticism that God would call me to preach. I was shy, underconfident, and ill-equipped for my first sermon. When I completed the task with a degree of success, I knew it was possible only because of the Holy Spirit’s involvement. That is a lesson I must remember every time I preach, but as I gain more and more experience in the pulpit, I am also increasingly at risk of thinking that good sermons come from my own skill. I cannot preach without the help of the Spirit; I should never preach without leaning on the Spirit.

If the need for the Holy Spirit in preaching is obvious, the application of that knowledge can be elusive. The Spirit cannot be manipulated into arrival or forced into

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<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 102 (emphasis mine).

work. We cannot schedule it to arrive “at 9:00 am on Tuesday, in the pastor’s study.”<sup>20</sup> We cannot demand that the Holy Spirit work with a special power on high-pressure Sundays like Easter. Gaventa is aware of this fact when she notes the common ground between Luke’s and Paul’s understanding of Spirit-filled speech: “What Paul and Luke share is an awareness of the Spirit’s power and *its unpredictability*.”<sup>21</sup>

If impossible to control, at least the Holy Spirit is universally available. Pentecost is no private party.<sup>22</sup> “There is no indication that this phenomenon was only experienced by the Twelve, as some sort of empowerment for leadership,” Witherington notes. “To the contrary, what follows in Peter’s speech suggests the Spirit empowers the witness of all God’s people, including those of lowest social status.”<sup>23</sup> This is reinforced by the way Peter offers the Holy Spirit to new converts – no waiting period required.<sup>24</sup> That Spirit calls all who receive it to bear witness. When someone is called to witness specifically through preaching, the Holy Spirit comes as Witherington says it did at Pentecost: “empowering... them to do their job – to witness to Christ.”<sup>25</sup>

Awareness of this need for the Holy Spirit has caused me to reexamine the disciples’ first move after their commission in Acts 1:8. Jesus tells them to be his

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<sup>20</sup> Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Kindle location 1672 of 2654.

<sup>21</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 76 (emphasis mine).

<sup>22</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 2:38.

<sup>25</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 132.

witnesses “to the end of the world,” and they go...to an upstairs room to hide out! This has previously struck me as cowardice or reluctance, but now I am noticing what they do in that upper room: they “constantly devot[e] themselves to prayer” (1:14). The disciples were not reluctant to be sent; they were being incredibly faithful to Jesus’s instructions. They knew they couldn’t be his witnesses until the Holy Spirit arrived.

Although no one can schedule an appointment with the Holy Spirit, anyone can follow the disciples’ example by setting aside this kind of intentional time for prayer. One hopes that all pastors would be people of prayer (for the purposes of sermon preparation or otherwise). This pastor will confess the reality: it can be profoundly tempting to skimp or skip on prayer. Tasks like making a committee agenda or meeting with a congregant can seem more pressing. Eugene Peterson argues that prayer is one of the “angles” of pastoral ministry – largely invisible to the congregation, but absolutely essential for true pastoral work.<sup>26</sup> Each day pastors must commit themselves to wait for the Spirit first – first thing in the morning, first thing in the office, or first thing before sitting down to write a sermon. Like the disciples, we must remember that our first step is always to wait in prayer.

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<sup>26</sup> Prayer is but one of three angles: “Pastoral work has no integrity unconnected with the angles of prayer, Scripture, and spiritual direction.” Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 18.

## **4.2 Seeking the Spirit Together**

But note: the disciples do not go off to pray individually after the ascension. Gaventa points out a special emphasis on their being “all together in one place.”<sup>27</sup> Time to pray “together” is built into a pastor’s life – prayers before meals, prayers for the sick, prayers for the congregation. Most of these are said by the pastor for others, however. Pastors could use many more prayers by others for them, and especially for the Holy Spirit’s presence as they preach.

Some pastors do this in front of the congregation immediately before the sermon; that is a fine tradition, and I have seen it done in many positive ways. I myself have worried that my short prayer might come off as false modesty, too closely resembling what Jesus spoke against in Matthew 6:5.<sup>28</sup> For most of my ministry, the more meaningful prayers have been those said in a smaller group.

When in need of that kind of prayer support, our colleagues in pastoral ministry are among the best prayer partners. This also follows Peter’s example – not only as a disciple who prayed with the others after the ascension, but also as the one who was “standing with the eleven” when he gave his speech at Pentecost. Peter was not a lone ranger.

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<sup>27</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 74.

<sup>28</sup> “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.”

Unfortunately, some clergy are exactly that. The Clergy Health Initiative found that 16.1% of North Carolina pastors were “somewhat dissatisfied” or “extremely dissatisfied” with their relationships with other clergy. Jones and Armstrong reinforce that statistic: “Numerous studies over the past two decades have documented a longstanding problem with clergy loneliness.”<sup>29</sup> That lack of peer support can affect every area of a pastor’s ministry, including preaching. We need colleagues to support us, especially in prayer.

Building those relationships takes time and effort, especially in systems where relocation might keep one’s closest friends at a geographic distance. Congregational responsibilities easily consume all the free blocks on a pastor’s calendar. Who has time to travel to see their ministerial friends? The benefits, however, prove that time with other clergy is worth prioritizing. The Clergy Health Initiative reports that “the pastor’s relationships with his or her ministry peers and conference leadership...can combine to bolster clergy’s confidence and satisfaction in living out their calling.”<sup>30</sup> Jones and Armstrong attest that “even healthy and faithful pastors become excessively needy if

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<sup>29</sup> L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 74.

<sup>30</sup> Duke Clergy Health Initiative, “Summary Report: 2014 Statewide Survey of United Methodist Clergy in North Carolina,” 12. Online at <https://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives/clergy-health-initiative/learning#research>, Accessed 3 November 2017.

they are lonely and isolated.”<sup>31</sup> For that reason, it is “*crucial* that pastors cultivate holy friendships with other pastors, their peers.”<sup>32</sup>

Prayer from other ministry professionals isn’t all a preacher needs, however; preachers need prayer from their own congregation. This is a lesson I learned from Rev. Talbot Davis, lead pastor of Good Shepherd Church in Charlotte, NC. Davis was the first colleague to tell me about a pre-worship prayer team. The Good Shepherd team met early on Sunday to walk the chairs (it being a large contemporary sanctuary) and pray for the unknown people who would fill them that morning. Inspired, I asked a few members of my congregation to meet me in our sanctuary thirty minutes before the Sunday School early birds normally arrived. We began a tradition of holding hands and going to God together before wandering the pews in prayer.

Sometimes these pre-worship prayers explicitly name the preacher or the sermon, but often not. As I reflect on the behavior of the disciples just before Pentecost, I am convinced there is one prayer we ought to be saying every single week: “Come, Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is the most important person to arrive at worship – more than swarms of visitors, more than those with deep pockets to feed the offering plate, more even than the organist, liturgist, or pastor who will lead the service.

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<sup>31</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 76 (emphasis mine).

After reflecting on the necessity of the Spirit in preaching, Peter has had a surprising effect on me: having never done so before, I now find that I want to say a public pre-sermon prayer and that it feels completely authentic. When I ask the Holy Spirit to inspire my words, I'm no hypocrite. I desperately need that Spirit every single time I preach.

What is true in Acts is true for us today: "Everything hinges on the Spirit's ability to set proclamation in motion."<sup>33</sup> Nothing happens without the Holy Spirit. Nothing.

And then...something begins to happen. The first words of a sermon are said.

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<sup>33</sup> Willimon, *Acts*, 31.

## 5. Building on Recent Events

The hardest part of a sermon can be deciding where and how to start. Most preachers would agree with Long that “sermon introductions merit special attention.... Every step of the sermon embodies a task, true, but the task of the introduction is unique and crucial to the outcome of the sermon.”<sup>34</sup> Anyone who has struggled with how to write those opening lines might be especially interested to see how Peter chooses to begin each of these four speeches. That interest might be further piqued when we realize that Peter starts with the same topic every time: a recent event. Perhaps Peter will save us from all those hours spent staring at a blank screen!

But before we get our hopes up, we should consider the specific nature of these recent events:

**Table 1: Peter Addresses Recent Events**

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Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning (Acts 2:15).	...why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? (Acts 3:12).	...if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth... (Acts 4:9-10).	We must obey God rather than any human authority (Acts 5:29).
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<sup>34</sup> Long, *Preaching as Witness*, 133.

Peter begins his speeches by addressing a recent *miraculous* event. Willimon's comment about Pentecost applies in all four cases: "As in his gospel, Luke uses a miracle as an occasion for proclamation."<sup>35</sup> In Acts 2, it's the Holy Spirit's arrival. In Acts 3 and 4, it's the healing of a crippled beggar. In Acts 5, it's a prison break that allowed Peter and John to go back to the temple to teach about Jesus.

Preachers today don't often have such dramatic material to work with. I wish I had the ability to heal our terminally ill parishioners. I'd love to have our annual reenactment of Pentecost with red ribbons disrupted by actual tongues of something like fire. Who would doubt a message that began by responding to miraculous events like that?

An even closer look at Peter's opening lines gives us a definitive answer: someone always finds a reason to doubt. Peter begins not just by bringing up a recent miracle, but also by addressing skepticism around that miracle. At Pentecost, some sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine" (Acts 2:13). At the temple, the response of the crowd is more positive, but nonetheless includes "wonder and amazement at what had happened" (Acts 3:10). The rulers, elders, and scribes want to know, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7). When the captain of the temple and the chief priests get word that Peter and John escaped the locked and

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<sup>35</sup> Willimon, *Acts*, 31.

guarded prison, they were “perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on” (Acts 5:24).

We contemporary preachers might think that Peter had an advantage in his preaching because of all these miracles that warmed up his audiences – and probably he did. But it appears that even these amazing feats were not enough to completely eliminate all doubt. Peter addresses that doubt head-on and uses it as he builds his case. Here we find an easy connection point to contemporary preaching. Skepticism is something we have plenty of in our twenty-first century context – especially when anything happens that might be considered a miracle.

I experienced an incredible event recently that may or may not be seen as a miracle. In July 2017, a long-time and much-respected church member approached me with a bold idea. Just six weeks later, we’d celebrate the tenth anniversary of our “Family Life Center,” a \$1.6-million, two-story building with amenities like a full basketball court and commercial grade kitchen. Its construction had been a huge leap of faith for a congregation with an average attendance of 115 and whose annual budget hovers around \$200,000. The church felt called to add this facility not just for the congregation’s needs, but largely for our small rural community.

Thanks to grants and bequests, Andrews UMC was able to move forward with the project with a 50% down payment. Taking out a loan for the remaining \$800,000 was

still a frightening financial move, and unfortunately the 2007 recession made matters quickly worse. Before long, the church was cutting staff positions simply to stay afloat.

Ten years later, when this leader in the church approached me with his fundraising idea, only about \$34,000 remained on the loan (which is itself rather miraculous). I was skeptical that we could raise that much money above and beyond our general budget in less than two months. I didn't see any harm in trying, however, and it did make sense to try and capitalize on a big anniversary. After much prayer among the leadership of the congregation, we decided to see if we could at least get close to eliminating our indebtedness by the tenth-anniversary celebration.

Within ten days we had met our goal.

I literally laughed as I reported the contributions at the very first meeting of our fundraising task force. "What do we do now?," I asked with a smile.

We prayed, discussed, and decided it was possible that God was giving us the green light to do more. The sound quality in our facility had been a chronic issue, impairing its use for the kind of community-wide functions it was built to host. About \$17,000 would allow us to install an integrated sound system and echo-dampening panels. The next Sunday, we reported the good news of our early success as well as a new challenge to raise \$17,000 more.

In the end, our relatively small congregation raised a total of \$58,000 in six weeks - \$24,000 more than our original lofty goal. That may not be tongues of fire, but it is most definitely a miracle.

An outsider hearing this story might draw all sorts of alternative conclusions. This isn't a miracle; it's a case of a congregation that hadn't had a capital campaign in ten years. This isn't a miracle; it's simply the generosity of two donors who contributed a combined \$30,000. Either could be valid objections to labelling this event with the word "miracle."

Following Peter's example as a preacher, my job is to address that skepticism and claim this fundraising victory as the work of the Holy Spirit. Some in the church have credited my leadership for the success. To that point, I have testified that I am not a natural fundraiser; in fact, a two-year attempt at that profession was a miserable exercise in falling short.<sup>36</sup> And although a few large donations certainly made a difference, the timing of those pledges pointed to something bigger than our own human efforts.

I remember one meeting when I felt a wave of anxiety as we discussed the campaign. Were we being greedy, asking for too much? I prayed silently but very seriously during the meeting, asking whether our goal was truly God's will.

Immediately afterward, a member of that committee pulled me aside privately. "My

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<sup>36</sup> In my last two years, my role at Wilderness Trail, my first full-time job, I became the "Executive Director," which involved a shift from programming to fundraising. Despite my love for that organization, I never met my fundraising goals – not even close. It was a gruesome and humbling experience.

husband and I plan to give \$5,000 to this," she said. That would be the third-largest contribution to the campaign; its size and timing gave me the affirmation I had just asked God for. Yet again, all I could do was laugh out loud at God's ridiculous goodness.<sup>37</sup>

When the tenth anniversary took place, I chose the words for the liturgy and the sermon carefully. I didn't want us to celebrate an overdue capital funds campaign, a few generous donors, or any one person's leadership. I claimed the event as a miracle and gave the credit to God. The sanctuary full of members, visitors, and special guests cheered in agreement!

That's not to say I did it all perfectly. Looking back on that day through the lens of Peter's example, I get the feeling I missed an opportunity. I preached to the worshipping body about what God would call us to next – a good message, I think, but one Dodd would classify as *didaskalia*, teaching. It never occurred to me that this miracle might set the stage for a more evangelistic message. Peter, after all, used each of these miracles to introduce the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Is this how Sarah felt when she laughed at the news that she'd conceive a post-menopausal baby (Genesis 18:12)?

## 6. A Clear, Concise, and Consistent Presentation of the Gospel

With the crowd warmed up, Peter now proceeds to present the gospel message. This core of his sermon is short, sweet, and to the point, making it easy to understand, remember, and pass on. It even comes ready to preach in three points: (1) Jesus the Christ (2) whom you crucified, (3) but God raised up. We might think of each part as a coupling of two ideas that are surprising or difficult to hold together. Those pairings bring out the truth of Christ's identity and purpose.

### 6.1 *Jesus the Christ*

First, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah:

**Table 2: Kerygma Movement 1, Jesus the Christ**

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You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know... (Acts 2:22).	The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus... (Acts 3:13).	...by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth... (Acts 4:10).	The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus... (Acts 5:30).
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That Jesus is both divine and human is a difficult concept, but one important enough to have an early creed built largely for its defense.<sup>38</sup> Each speech has its own

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<sup>38</sup> The Nicene Creed; see, for example, Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume I, The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 164–5.

way of claiming Jesus's humility and elevation. At Pentecost Peter comes right out and foregrounds Jesus's human status: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man..." (Acts 2:22). Acts 4 also emphasizes Jesus's humanity by mentioning his hometown (v. 10), showing that he was a flesh-and-blood man who grew up in a certain place at a certain time in history.

Witherington points out that Jesus's hometown was a "controversial point that would have ruled out his being Messiah in some minds."<sup>39</sup> Rather than hide it, Peter claims it. The speeches in Acts 3 and 5 aren't as explicit, but nonetheless imply a lower (human) status by telling us that Jesus was a "servant" whom God "glorified" and "raised up" (3:13, 5:30).

That Jesus was "glorified" and "raised up" shows that Jesus was more than simply a man. He's the one called "Christ," Messiah (4:10). Peter's Pentecost speech, more than the other three sermons, elaborates on this point, saying that Jesus was "attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22). This language reinforces the Joel passage Peter already used.<sup>40</sup> It also reminds Peter's audience of evidence they apparently already knew but which "did not secure the response it merited."<sup>41</sup> The reading audience will know those "mighty works and wonders" from

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<sup>39</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 144.

<sup>40</sup> Soards, *Speeches*, 33; and Wall, "Acts," 66.

<sup>41</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 78; and Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 372.

Luke's gospel account,<sup>42</sup> where we're told how Jesus healed out of compassion, befriended the outcasts, taught with deep wisdom, and performed surprising miracles. Taken alone, those actions might indicate only that Jesus was an above-average human, like the prophets. Peter invites his audience to reexamine Jesus's signs and wonders with this new information: God has "raised him up" (2:24, 32) and fulfilled the promise of the Holy Spirit (2:33). These events show that Jesus was and is the Son of God.

Jesus's identity as a man and more than a man is important for Peter, and important for the presentation of the gospel today. Jesus was a man; not only the gospels, but also the Jewish Roman historian Josephus documents his existence (*The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3). Despite knowing that Jesus's human life was a historical fact, two thousand years can make him feel more like a fictional character. Our congregations may need to be reminded that Jesus was a man with a body, relationships, and practical life issues. He sweated, felt itchy, and got hungry. He had a birthday. The work he did caused pain to his body. His friends and family sometimes caused pain in his soul. He was as real a person as ever was. This can encourage our prayer life, knowing that when we bring an issue to God – through Jesus – God knows just how we feel.

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<sup>42</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 371.

At the same time, Jesus was more than a man: “God has made him both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). C. Kavin Rowe notes that this statement, “when read in a certain way, suggests that Jesus became κύριος and χριστός only at his resurrection and exaltation; that is, God made Jesus something the latter was not before.”<sup>43</sup> Rowe argues for interpreting this passage within the context of the entire Luke–Acts narrative, so that “the emphasis is placed upon God’s continuous action in the life of Jesus despite the latter’s rejection and death.”<sup>44</sup> Jesus was not a human who became Lord and Messiah; Jesus was always Lord and Messiah.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit confirms Jesus’s identity. At Pentecost, Peter gives Jesus the credit for “pour[ing] out this that you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33). We of the twenty-first century did not witness that original pouring out of the Spirit, but our own experience of the Spirit points to Jesus as the Christ: when Jesus’s parables stir our souls, or when we feel the release of forgiveness made possible through Christ’s sacrifice, or when we experience Jesus’s love for all of humanity through acts of servanthood. When the Holy Spirit arrives in our own midst, we can be convicted again of the truth of Jesus’s identity as proclaimed by Peter.

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<sup>43</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 190.

<sup>44</sup> Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 194.

## 6.2 You Crucified

In the next movement, Peter tells his audiences about the death of this Jesus the Christ:

**Table 3: Kerygma Movement 2, "You Crucified"**

...this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law (Acts 2:23).	...whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. <sup>14</sup> But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, <sup>15</sup> and you killed the Author of life... (Acts 3:13–15).	...whom you crucified... (Acts 4:10).	... whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree (Acts 5:30).
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It makes sense that Peter would mention Jesus's death in every speech; the resurrection cannot be announced without first acknowledging the fact that Jesus died. What's surprising is that attached to this the point is some variation of "you crucified him" (2:23, 3:13, 4:10, 5:30).

If this accusation had occurred only in the Acts 4 and 5 speeches, its inclusion wouldn't be as noteworthy. In those cases, Peter is addressing the religious leaders who were likely involved in handing Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion. Peter also accuses his hearers of crucifying Christ in Acts 2 and 3, however, and those were large crowds in Jerusalem for the festival; the list of diaspora Jews at Pentecost emphasizes this point. It's likely that some of these travelled to Jerusalem for Passover, as well,

which suggests that some of them may have been in the crowd shouting for Barabbas. But does that apply to everyone hearing Peter's speech? Did all of them personally have a hand in crucifying Christ? As a preacher, I try to avoid making assumptions about my congregation by lumping them all together as believing or acting one way. Why does Peter make an offensive statement like this?

Witherington allows that this accusation is partly directed at the Romans who implemented this capital punishment ("those outside the law," v. 23), but that doesn't leave the general Jewish population off the hook. "The culpability of Jews, in particular some Jews of Jerusalem who are being especially addressed in this speech, is asserted by the words 'having affixed him to a cross, you killed.'"<sup>45</sup> Gaventa points out this may "refer more pointedly...to Jesus' death as a lawless act brought about by the Jews."<sup>46</sup> Boring and Craddock take this idea even further, saying that Peter "charges the people assembled from all nations with crucifying Jesus. Even though only a few people were directly responsible for the crucifixion, Luke understands it theologically as the guilt of humanity as a whole that led to Jesus's death."<sup>47</sup>

In other words, Jesus wouldn't have had to die if it weren't for our need for his redemption. If we were perfectly obedient to God's law, there would be no need for a sacrifice for our sins. If we loved God with our whole being and loved our neighbors as

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<sup>45</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 145.

<sup>46</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 78.

<sup>47</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 372.

much as we loved ourselves, then we'd already be right with God; we wouldn't need a means of justification. So Peter says to each person in the crowd: YOU crucified him.

When I preach about the crucifixion, I tend to link that event with God's forgiveness. In doing so, I have been jumping over an essential point, along the lines of moving from Palm Sunday to Easter without observing Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. Preaching Christ crucified without connecting our own sin and guilt to his death contributes to the "cheap grace" that Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against.<sup>48</sup> Christ may not have literally been crucified by me or for my particular sins, but Christ was crucified because of the sin of humanity that we all share.

Preaching about sin and guilt is distasteful territory for many mainline Protestant preachers today. I can speak for myself: until studying Peter's speeches in Acts, I seldom (if ever) spoke of mortal sin in such a direct way as to say, "it's as if you personally crucified Christ." I live in a small rural town of 1,800 citizens that has no fewer than nine ultra-conservative churches. Many of our regular attendees at the lone United Methodist Church have come to us out of an aversion to fire-and-brimstone preaching. Wouldn't they be turned off if I started talking about *sin*?

It's interesting, though, that John Wesley started the Methodist movement with preaching that had no qualms about naming sin. In his book on Wesley as preacher,

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<sup>48</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 93.

W.L. Doughty identifies “Sin and Repentance” as among Wesley’s basic doctrines. “As Wesley toured the country and became familiar with the barbaric character of masses of the people, he realized that nothing was possible toward their regeneration until they had a sense of sin and consequent need.”<sup>49</sup> Like Peter, Wesley address sin in his initial presentation of Christ. Describing how he first began to preach in a place, Wesley said it is “after more and more persons are convicted of sin [that] we may mix more and more of the gospel in order to ‘beget faith’”<sup>50</sup> In other words, people must be convicted of their sin before they can be taught deeper truths about Christ.

This unashamed use of “sin” forces me to consider whether naming sin might be effective in my own United Methodist pulpit. In fact, I can testify to its necessity because of my own experience with the liturgical confession of sin as a youth. On the first Sunday of each month, our pastors prepared us for communion by prompting us to pray for God’s forgiveness collectively: “We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love.”<sup>51</sup> My arrogant teenage heart rebelled. “What if I haven’t sinned this month?” I thought, annoyed at the assumption of my guilt. I’m embarrassed to admit that sometimes I went so far as to sit silently in protest instead of praying those words out loud.

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<sup>49</sup> W.L. Doughty, *John Wesley: Preacher* (London: The Epworth Press, 1955), 86.

<sup>50</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., repr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 491. Quoted in Michael Pasquarello III, *John Wesley: A Preaching Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>51</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 12.

Reflecting on this, I'm surprised that the relatively thorough confession in our hymnal failed to convict me of my sin; it lists everything from not loving God with our whole hearts to not hearing the cry of the needy. Did I really think I had done all that? Or was I lulled into complacency by the monotone, unemotional way we read that prayer together?

This experience teaches me that, as a pastor, I cannot assume that reciting a monthly prayer of confession in unison will convince my congregants that they are sinful. Presenting the confession in alternative forms might help break through that rote repetition. Jesus says that the greatest commandments are to love God and love our neighbor. Have we fallen short of loving perfectly? John Wesley taught that Christians are to do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God. Have we done harm, failed to do good, or neglected our relationship with God? If the answers to any of those questions are "yes" – as they almost always are – then we have sinned.

My youthful arrogance had not worn off by the time I reached seminary, when I was first exposed to the idea of "corporate" sin. George "Tink" Tinker, one of my professors and a Native American, explained the idea to my first-year class. Again I resisted the assumption that I was guilty of sin. "I didn't have anything to do with the mistreatment of Native Americans," I thought, digging in my mental heels. Thankfully, Tinker was patient in his explanation. He pointed out that our current society is built upon our history, which includes the violent removal of Native Americans. He provided

the gracious space for me to look into my sinner’s heart, and what I saw horrified me: the actions of men who saw American Indians as an “infestation” to be “exterminated” had eventually contributed to a life I love as a privileged, white American.<sup>52</sup> Without having been physically present for the original events, I shared my country’s guilt.

We all sin, period. I cannot escape sin. We cannot escape sin. Despite our best efforts (and sometimes from a lack thereof), we are in desperate need of God’s forgiveness every day. Part of our job, as preachers, is to bring people face-to-face with that reality.

A sermon that stopped here – with the problem of sin – would leave a congregation mired in guilt. Thankfully, Peter and Wesley kept on preaching – as we must also – to the next beautiful topic of the resurrection.

### **6.3 But God Raised Him Up**

**Table 4: Kerygma Movement 3, "God Raised Him"**

But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power (Acts 2:24).	... whom God raised from the dead (Acts 3:15).	...whom God raised from the dead (Acts 4:10).	God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior... (Acts 5:31).
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<sup>52</sup> George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 98.

Soards identifies Jesus's resurrection as the fact the kerygma "ultimately stresses"; it's "the point to which Peter's previous address said the apostles were to be witnesses."<sup>53</sup> "'God raised' (v. 24) is the main subject and verb," says Gaventa, "so that the assertions preceding in vv. 22–23 are subordinated to this primary action."<sup>54</sup> That Jesus was a man (but more than a man) and crucified (by you) are both important points, but the resurrection is the main point to which the disciples are to bear witness. This "central message of the first Christian sermon...remains at the heart of the Christian faith," say Boring and Craddock.<sup>55</sup>

It's noteworthy that Peter does not say that Jesus raised himself. God raised Jesus. "As with the miracles, in the case of the 'resurrection' God is the one who acts," says Conzelmann.<sup>56</sup> This may seem like a small point, but it becomes an important one when Trinity Sunday comes around. Jesus is not a second deity, but the second person of the Trinity. "To God be the glory," as the old hymn goes; "So loved he the world that he gave us his Son."<sup>57</sup> God's action validates a life and ministry that the world rejected.<sup>58</sup> If humanity's sin put Christ on the cross and in the tomb, God's raising Jesus is a

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<sup>53</sup> Soards, *Speeches*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 78.

<sup>55</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 372.

<sup>56</sup> Conzelmann, *Acts*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> "To God Be the Glory" by Fanny J. Crosby (1875); see *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 98.

<sup>58</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 372.

triumph over our sin. “God’s act in raising Jesus overcomes the human evil of crucifying Jesus, so that humanity’s sin is not the last word.”<sup>59</sup>

But how does one preach the resurrection to a twenty-first century audience? There is no empty tomb standing as evidence, no eye-witness accounts by those still living. Even if there were, however, it’s likely that a claim that someone had been raised from the dead would not be easily believed. Acts tells us that even with that kind of contemporary evidence, there were still many who doubted the resurrection. The religious leaders are “much annoyed” by the teaching of the resurrection in Acts 4:2. When Paul preaches about the resurrection, some “scoff” (Acts 17:32). The Sadducees, of course, did not believe in a resurrection of the dead at all (see Acts 23:8).

The proof Peter offers is that “to this we are witnesses” (Acts 3:15). He makes that same claim to be witnesses explicitly in Acts 2:32 and 5:32; in the Acts 4 speech, it is implied by his defiant statement, “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (v. 20). The resurrection is difficult to believe; Peter presents himself as a credible witness to an incredible fact, testifying to what he has personally experienced.<sup>60</sup>

Preachers today can find “proof” for the resurrection in claiming their role as another kind of eyewitness. We may not have been standing by the empty tomb when it

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> On the two-fold meaning of witness as both beholding and testifying, see Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 78.

was discovered, but we have discovered the risen Christ in our own lives. What have we seen and heard that tells us that Jesus Christ was raised by God and lives today? Our personal testimony is more than just important to the case for Christ; Florence claims that “there is no proof for testimony other than the engagement of a witness,” and therefore “no proof of a sermon other than the engagement of a preacher.”<sup>61</sup> As Peter saw Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection with his eyes, we must explain how we have experienced those same things in our souls.

#### **6.4 Kerygma vs. Didaskalia**

This three-part *kerygma* is the message the Spirit wrote and placed on Peter’s heart: Jesus – a man, but more than a man – was crucified by you but raised by God. This is what the crowd needed to hear so they could understand and decide to follow Christ, and it is what people need to hear today in order to begin their faith journey. When preaching to a congregation, however, this basic message may be needed on some days more than others.

As mentioned above, C.H. Dodd categorized apostolic preaching as *kerygma*, “the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world.”<sup>62</sup> It comes from the verb *keryssein*, “to proclaim,” as in “a town crier, an auctioneer, a herald, or anyone else who lifts up his voice and claims public attention to some definite thing he has to

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<sup>61</sup> Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Kindle Location 51 of 2654.

<sup>62</sup> Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 7.

announce.”<sup>63</sup> *Keryssein* is “[t]he most common word in the New Testament used to describe the act of preaching,” according to Weatherspoon.<sup>64</sup> It’s a “parable in one word,” bringing to mind the image of a king’s chosen herald riding through the kingdom proclaiming a royal message.<sup>65</sup>

*Kerygma* is different from *didaskalia*, which Dodd labels as teaching that is “in a large majority ethical instruction.”<sup>66</sup> The related verb *didaskein* also occurs frequently in the New Testament, says Weatherspoon, and “is always translated ‘to teach.’”<sup>67</sup> Dodd tellingly observes that most of today’s preaching is this “more or less informal discussion of various aspects of Christian life and thought,” and his claim from 1962 certainly feels true today.<sup>68</sup> Undoubtedly there is an important place for the “teaching” kind of preaching; those who desire to follow Christ faithfully ought to be hungry for lessons on how to live into his Way. But if all preaching is *didaskalia*, where is the opportunity for non-believers to first come to Christ?

John Wesley distinguished between the two kinds of preaching, as well. In his 1745 Conference the question was asked, “Do we preach as we did at first? Have we not changed our doctrines?” The response:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Jesse Burton Weatherspoon, *Sent Forth to Preach: Studies in Apostolic Preaching* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 62.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Weatherspoon, *Sent Forth to Preach*, 71.

<sup>68</sup> Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 8.

At first we preached almost wholly to unbelievers. To those, therefore, we spake almost continually of remission of sins through the blood of Christ, and the nature of faith in His blood. And so we do still, among those who need to be taught the first elements of the Gospel of Christ. But those in whom the foundation is laid, we exhort to go on to perfection.<sup>69</sup>

There is a time for *kerygma* and a time for *didaskalia*. The error is not in preaching *didaskalia* at all, but in too seldom preaching *kerygma*.

Pastors might legitimately argue that their pews are filled with believers. Doesn't that make *didaskalia* the preferred content? This logic is faulty on two points. One is that several factors make *kerygma* relevant on almost any Sunday. Clergy should hope, pray, and work for there to be seekers present every week. These may come in the form of visitors, but they also may be long-time attendees who remain unsure about their faith. Even for those who already believe, hearing the gospel presented in a clear, concise manner will allow them to gain confidence to explain the faith to others. *Kerygma* is never a wasted effort.

Second, if one's congregation is typically filled with already-Christians, then one must look for opportunities to preach to not-yet Christians. If we follow Peter's and Wesley's examples literally, we preachers will march out into some public place and begin preaching. That idea is repellant to me, and not only because it's far outside my comfort zone; I doubt the effectiveness of this kind of invasive public preaching today.

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<sup>69</sup> Doughty, *John Wesley: Preacher*, 89.

In a secular culture with plenty of entertainment options, I do not imagine a shopping center crowd stopping to hear me deliver a sermon (not in a positive way, at least).

There are other means for reaching the non- and nominally Christian, however. Many churches share videos of their worship services via podcast or YouTube. While this is a helpful practice, I contend that those who are genuinely uninterested in or repelled by the Christian faith would be unlikely to give themselves to an entire fifteen- or twenty-minute sermon. If social media is to be used as a first invitation to the faith, the more effective route would likely be a five-minute (or less) clip that resembles many of the short videos popular on Facebook or Instagram. This doesn't give much time to present the gospel, but Peter's *kerygma* doesn't take much time: Jesus, a man who lived a more-than-human life, was killed because of our sin but raised from the dead by God.

Thankfully for us preachers, there are times when non-believers come to us. Christmas Eve is one of those times. During those services, Adam Hamilton intentionally preaches "a twenty-five minute sermon [short for Hamilton] that is clearly designed to speak to the unchurched about the need for and meaning of Christmas."<sup>70</sup> As I reflect back on previous Christmas Eve candlelight services, I remember with joy how those services were the best-attended of each year – and then with regret as I recall

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<sup>70</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Unleashing the Word: Preaching with Relevance, Purpose, and Passion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 63.

many sermons that did not intentionally include a presentation of the gospel for non-believers. What a missed opportunity!

As preachers, we would do well to consider which worship services in the year draw the most visitors. Some of these days are universal: Christmas Eve, Mother's Day, and Easter Sunday bring in large, mixed crowds in most congregations. At almost every funeral and wedding there will be people who have not set foot in a church in a long time. Other times of high visitation are specific to each congregation. Andrews, NC is a mountain town where many people own vacation homes. Holiday weekends that can negatively affect church attendance turn into a surge for us, as extended family members and weekend guests come with our regular attendees. At these moments, I have a chance to preach an evangelistic message to someone who may not have heard a compelling case for Christ before.

Hamilton also points out our capacity to attract non-believers. To this purpose, he carefully schedules an intriguing sermon series to immediately follow a high-attendance day like Christmas Eve. An example is a "Most Frequently Asked Questions" series Hamilton launched in early 1997, created from 1,400 responses to a questionnaire handed out on Christmas Eve. That January, attendance increased by forty percent.

Obviously, what works for the pastor of one mega-church will not work for every context. Hamilton's example should compel more typical pastors to ask, "What topics would draw people to worship who do not usually attend? When can these be

scheduled to coincide with high-attendance services? And how can these topics be used to present the gospel for non-believers?"

Presenting the gospel in an evangelistic way is an essential part of preaching like Peter. Even the most compelling case for Christ, however, will likely leave listeners with objections to be addressed. Let's move now to how Peter chooses to address those questions: with Scripture.

## 7. Scripture as Supporting Evidence

A good case includes multiple layers of evidence. Peter's witness to Christ is no exception. In addition to the recent miracle referenced at the beginning of each speech, Peter also makes use of Scripture as evidence for Jesus's identity. The way Peter uses these passages reminds preachers that Scriptural support must be chosen and interpreted carefully if it is to be truly convincing.

### 7.1 Relevance

A common issue among preachers is which Scripture passage(s) to use in a sermon. Some pastors start with a topic and allow the Spirit to direct them toward relevant Scripture. Others follow the Lectionary, but even then, they must decide which of the four passages will give the sermon its primary direction.

For that reason, it's interesting to see which passages Peter uses to support Jesus as the Christ. At Pentecost Peter gives an "exact" quotation of Psalm 16:8–11 from the LXX.<sup>71</sup> As he goes on to interpret the passage, he draws on Psalm 110:1, which Witherington identifies as "one of the truly key texts from the Psalms for early Christians."<sup>72</sup> Peter's point is this: David isn't talking about himself when Psalm 16 says, "you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption."

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<sup>71</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 145. In the LXX, the Psalm is numbered 15 rather than 16.

<sup>72</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 146.

David's tomb stands as visible evidence of the fate of David's flesh.<sup>73</sup> David must have been talking about someone else, and that someone else is Jesus Christ.

In Acts 3 Peter compares Jesus with another great Biblical figure: Moses. Gaventa points out that "there may well have been extensive eschatological expectation of this 'prophet like Moses,'" which would make references to Deuteronomy 18:15–19 and Leviticus 23:29 helpful in building a case for Christ.<sup>74</sup> In Acts 4 we're back to the Psalms, with an application of Psalm 118:22 to Jesus's identity.<sup>75</sup>

Notice that Peter does not regurgitate Scripture at random in order to make his defense of Christ. Peter's speeches draw on passages that appear to have been well known at the time and were likely already associated with the Messiah. Quoting obscure texts is unlikely to carry weight with the non-religious. In a culture of diminishing Biblical literacy, our best Scriptural support is likely to come from passages that are commonly known and free of baggage.

An experienced preacher will quickly notice that those qualifications leave us with a limited Scriptural pool. Even John 3:16, while well known, is associated with sign-toting Christians and may generate a cynical reaction among the non-religious.

When preaching *kerygma*, can Scripture be used as supporting evidence at all?

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<sup>73</sup> Josephus gives support that David's tomb was in existence in the first century. See *Ant.* 7.393, 13:249, and 16.179–83, as well as Witherington, *Acts*, 146.

<sup>74</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 89.

<sup>75</sup> Psalm 117 in the LXX.

## **7.2 Interpretation**

Peter's example shows that some interpretive work can make the Bible relevant as supporting evidence for Christ, even with its baggage. Peter does not simply quote Psalm 16 at Pentecost; he pairs it with a lengthy explanation that David died and was buried and did not ascend to heaven, meaning that "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Psalm 16 would not have been effective evidence for Peter's witness without these explanatory remarks.

Taken together, Scriptural reference and interpretation make a much more convincing argument. Preachers cannot assume their congregations will understand why a Biblical passage supports their message. Even basic Biblical background – such as the identity of a major character like David – cannot be taken for granted in a time of decreasing Biblical literacy. When adding a Bible reference to support a sermon's message, preachers must ask themselves questions like: "Why is this supporting evidence? What does the congregation need to know in order to understand how it supports this sermon?" Taking a few moments to connect those dots can strengthen the sermon's argument while also promoting Biblical literacy as a nice side-benefit.

Peter's use of Scripture is an important part of his example to contemporary preachers, but it is far from a homiletical revolution. Long points out that "Biblical preaching is the normative form of Christian preaching"; it is "the most common

practice, the customary pattern."<sup>76</sup> Rigid adherence to this common practice could drive a preacher to study a pile of commentaries in isolation and, come Sunday, to present a Scriptural book report. Like Peter, a pastor must be on the lookout for what Scripture has to say to his congregation at this particular time. Long describes this role as being sent by the congregation to the Scripture in order to report back about the Presence encountered there.<sup>77</sup> As a good witness, the pastor's sermon then provides the most relevant evidence for his listening audience.

But how far should a pastor go in making Scripture relevant?

### **7.3 Altering the Text?**

The Pentecost speech makes the most significant use of Scripture, beginning with an application of Joel 2:28–32<sup>78</sup> to Pentecost. Only here (among the four speeches in question) does Peter use Scripture in his defense of the recent miraculous event. Perhaps that's because tongues of fire and supernatural translation are more difficult to explain than a healing or a prison escape. Johnson observes that "this speech phenomenon is ambiguous," and the description is "extraordinarily circumspect."<sup>79</sup> In other words, Peter has a tough case to make in order to convince the crowd that this confusing

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<sup>76</sup> Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 48–9.

<sup>77</sup> Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 44–5.

<sup>78</sup> Joel 3:1–5 in the LXX.

<sup>79</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 45.

activity isn't drunkenness, but the promised Holy Spirit. His testimony isn't enough to explain what has happened.

Joel 2:28 anticipates a day when God will "pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." Boring and Craddock remind us that "in first-century Judaism, many Jews believed that the Spirit of God had been active in previous generations, 'biblical times,' but was no longer present and would return only at the eschaton."<sup>80</sup> This return is what Joel was prophesying, and is what Peter is claiming has been fulfilled.

The way Luke records the Joel quotation is not cut and dried, however.<sup>81</sup> Luke seems to have made alterations to the text of Joel as it is found in surviving manuscripts of the LXX. These changes include: adding a new introductory phrase ("And it will be in the last days..."); a repetition of the statement, "and they shall prophesy"; and changing the order of "young men" and "old men." Chris Blumhofer notes that these seemingly minor alterations become "particularly striking" given Luke's "exact" quotation of Psalm 15:8–11 and 109:1 later in this same speech.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 371.

<sup>81</sup> I say "Luke" rather than "Peter" because, according to Boring, 371, this quotation reflects the LXX, which "would not have been the bible used by the Aramaic-speaking Peter in Jerusalem but was the Bible of the Gentile church in Luke's own day."

<sup>82</sup> Blumhofer, "Luke's Alteration of Joel 3.1–5 in Acts 2.17–21," *New Testament Studies* 62 (2016): 499–516, 499.

To further complicate things, this isn't a one-time occurrence. In Acts 4, the quotation of Psalm 118:22 also differs from the LXX as we have it. For *apodokimao* ("reject"), Luke has *exoutheneo* ("scorn"), "a verb he uses elsewhere to characterize the attitude of leaders (Luke 18:9, 23:11)."<sup>83</sup> Luke also adds the words "by you" after "rejected," making explicit reference to the guilt of the elders, scribes, and high priests he is addressing.<sup>84</sup>

As a preacher who prides herself on a faithful use of Scripture, these changes to the original text – however minor – troubled me throughout my study of this speech. I thought about my own willingness to use different translations to highlight different meanings in a text. Is that so different? Still, when using *The Message*, I wouldn't take the liberty to edit a few of Eugene Peterson's carefully-chosen words!

My adviser, Ross Wagner, had a helpful reaction to that statement: "Why not?" Peterson himself took extensive liberties in writing *The Message*, resulting in what Wagner appropriately labelled as an "expansive" paraphrase. Part of why I like reading and sharing *The Message* is precisely because it presents the Bible in new language that (in my opinion) remains faithful to the intended meaning. Similarly, Blumhofer insists that "Luke's reorientation of Joel 3.1–5 leaves the integrity of the oracle intact."<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps my strong aversion to these changes was rooted in my twenty-first-century

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<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 77–8.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 78.

<sup>85</sup> Blumhofer, "Luke's Alteration," 512.

mores about researching and writing. As established above, the first century allowed a bit more flexibility in writing, such as in the recording of speeches.<sup>86</sup>

I continued to wrestle with this issue right up to my Christmas Eve sermon, when I applied Peter's example to my preaching. Whereas our weekly services focus on a solitary Scripture passage, the Christmas Eve service includes five lengthy Bible readings. I wanted to refer to several of these in my sermon, but opening a Bible and directly quoting each one would feel clunky and interrupt the flow of the message. Because I don't preach from a manuscript, and because these are familiar passages that I know almost by heart, I recited several of them in a way that was close to the text but not an exact quotation. If someone else were to transcribe my sermon that person might even mistakenly put these retellings in quotation marks.

After that experience, I realized that Christmas Eve is not the only time I use Scripture in this paraphrasing way. I regularly quote Scripture from memory, which can result in both unintentional and intentional alterations. My word choice may be somewhat impromptu, but it is far from random; it is informed by hours of prayer and careful study. An easy and common example is the substitution of inclusive language for masculine pronouns. Technically, that would be "mis-quoting" the Scripture – but I

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<sup>86</sup> See, for example, Witherington, *Acts*, 46.

believe that change more clearly communicates the true meaning that an exact quotation would.

Blumhofer seems to think that Luke is doing a similar thing. He argues that Luke's alterations of Joel maintain the "integrity" of the prophecy, while the changes reflect a new understanding of salvation in light of the Gospel. Luke's alteration of Joel emphasizes that "God's eschatological restoration of Israel has begun in the community gathered by Jesus Christ and that the effects of that restoration extend to the nations."<sup>87</sup>

In the end, reflecting on the use of Joel in Peter's speech has given me both permission...and pause. I feel permission in that an alternative retelling of Scripture may help a congregation understand its relevance and deeper meaning even better than a literal quotation. But I also feel pause in recognizing that someone may have the same reaction to my alteration of Scripture as I did to the use of Joel in Acts 2. I should quote accurately when possible and beneficial. When I am not actually quoting a passage, I should give cues to indicate the difference.

However Scripture is presented, there are risks involved. The preacher must decide what passages are relevant, what background information is needed, and even if a different translation or retelling is helpful. In Long's words: "Good exegesis can point us in the right direction, and it can eliminate wrongheaded interpretations of the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 501.

text...but it finally cannot do what is most important: tell us what this text wishes to say on this occasion to our congregation. The preacher must decide this, and it is a risky and exciting decision.”<sup>88</sup>

#### **7.4 Beyond Scripture: “The Past”**

Scripture can be very convincing evidence. When I’m on the receiving end of someone else’s sermon, a thoughtful and thorough use of Scripture can open my mind to new ways of understanding my faith. On the flip side, weak Scriptural support often leaves me skeptical of the preacher’s message. But the way I listen to sermons is a case of “preaching to the choir” (or, better said, “preaching to the preacher”). I receive these messages as one who loves Scripture. My ears have heard the Bible read aloud since before I could even understand its words. My eyes have been running left to right through its pages from the time I was a teenager, when first I took up the habit of daily devotional reading. My heart has a deep love for the Biblical stories because they have initially and continually taught me about God. Scripture is the foundation of my faith and life.

In any given listening audience, there are certainly some like me who turn to the Bible as a primary source of evidence. In a Sunday morning congregation this may even be a majority. But we followers of Christ are called to be his “witnesses” – and witnesses

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<sup>88</sup> Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 77.

are used not only to reassure the believing, but most importantly to convince the unbelieving. The nonreligious are unlikely to be convinced by our savvy use of Scripture. We must consider what other evidence might help those individuals receive our witness to Christ.

Here, Soards offers a helpful insight: he places Peter's use of Scripture under a larger umbrella. "The citation of Scripture is but one form of the *use of the past*," he writes. Peter's audiences were primarily Jewish; the Scriptures of Israel constituted their authoritative and shared history. Soards observes from Acts that "beyond the regular citation of Scripture, other uses of the past include referring to personal experience (2:32), quoting John the Baptist (13:25), and citing pagan poets (17:28)."<sup>89</sup> Given the concern of this thesis to study and follow the example of Peter's first four speeches, that "personal experience" used on Pentecost is especially noteworthy.

In both Acts 2:32 and 5:32, Peter explicitly states that he and the disciples were "witnesses to these things" (quoting 5:32) as part of his case. Acts 4:20 implies that this witnessing is ongoing: "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." Already I have noted how a preacher can follow Peter's example of being a witness to the resurrection in that we have experienced Christ with our own heart and change of life (see 6.3 above). Florence advocates for this kind of testimony, one where

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<sup>89</sup> Soards, *Speeches*, 28.

“the preacher tells what she has seen and heard *in the biblical text and in life*, and then confesses what she believes about it.”<sup>90</sup> This can run the risk of narcissism, and preachers must be careful not to make their sermons too much about themselves – but an appropriate amount of sharing can drive home a preacher’s point.

Andy Stanley offers a way to tell these personal stories that shifts the focal point away from the preacher and onto the collective human experience. He calls this move going from “ME” to “WE.” The preacher begins by “introduc[ing] a dilemma he or she has faced or is currently facing (ME). From there you find common ground with your audience around the same or similar dilemma (WE).”<sup>91</sup> The preacher might begin a sermon like this by recounting an experience of overcoming a challenge while backpacking (ME). Some of the listening audience may see themselves in the story because of their own backpacking experience, but typically not many. Following Stanley’s approach, the next move is to broaden the topic so that almost everyone can relate; in this example, telling a more everyday story about overcoming challenges. This approach allows the congregation not only to see the truth in the preacher’s story, but to recognize that same truth in their own personal experiences. They themselves become witnesses.

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<sup>90</sup> Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Kindle location 42 of 2654 (emphasis original).

<sup>91</sup> Stanley, *Communicating for a Change*, 119.

Peter's speech at Pentecost makes a similar invitation. After claiming to be a witness to the resurrection, Peter points out the work of the Holy Spirit in front his audience's own eyes: "He has poured out this that you both see and hear" (2:33).

Witherington has this to say on vv. 32–33:

Thus Peter himself is in a double sense a witness – one who has seen and one who reports or bears witness. But this is not all, for Peter is also a witness of and about the coming of the Spirit, and so he explains in v. 33 that it was the ascended Jesus who was given the promise of the Spirit...and sent it now on Pentecost. This last fact the audience themselves could attest to on the basis of what they had just seen and especially what they had heard.<sup>92</sup>

During some worship services, the Holy Spirit is present in a way that becomes the gospel's best evidence. On Easter Sunday, the people might stand shoulder-to-shoulder and sing that "Christ the Lord is risen today" with such force, it almost shakes the rafters. A sixth-grade student might step up to serve as liturgist, reading the Scripture as though it really were the Word of life. The pastor might accidentally knock over the communion cup and collect himself enough to turn to the congregation and say with deep feeling, "The blood of Christ, shed for you." In any of these Sunday-morning moments, the Holy Spirit might just show up with enough power to change our lives. The untrained heart might miss it, if a preacher doesn't follow Peter's example and clearly say, "he has poured out this that you both see and hear."

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<sup>92</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 147.

Whether evidence comes from Scripture or some broader definition of “the past,” the bottom line is that some evidence is needed in order to effectively witness for Christ. This doesn’t need to be a lengthy apologetic – in fact, a complicated argument is likely to be more off-putting than convincing.<sup>93</sup> It would be a mistake, though, to think that someone who does not believe in Christ would make the radical decision to become his follower without any evidence at all.

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<sup>93</sup> Bill Hybels argues for a 100-word-or-less testimony that briefly and clearly explains one’s own relationship with Christ. Hybels boils that witness down to a “before,” “how,” and “after” outline. See Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps to Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 120–127.

## 8. A Call To Response

Once a witness has provided testimony, a decision must be made. In a courtroom this comes in the form of a judge and jury reaching a verdict. In a sanctuary a congregation forms a similar opinion: Was the sermon “right” or “wrong”? If they determine it was “right,” the people may be ready to respond.

A stereotypical means for that response during the past century or so has been the altar call, something of which I have little personal experience. I don’t remember a single one during Sunday worship in my eighteen years at First UMC St. Petersburg; the few I did experience took place at youth events. My father, on the other hand, grew up in a Southern Baptist church. He cynically recollects singing “Just As I Am” over and over until some poor soul was willing to come forward as the evangelical scapegoat. I’ve heard others tell horror stories that sound like the theological equivalent of a shotgun wedding with the preacher, chasing folks down the aisle with the threat of eternal damnation.

This has presented me – and I think, many others in mainline Protestant denominations – with an all-or-nothing scenario. Extremely conservative traditions give an example of an invitation to response that I do not want to follow, while my home church modelled an almost complete absence thereof. As is so often the case, the best answer lies not in an either/or decision but in a healthy middle ground. Peter’s speeches

in Acts make a case for the necessity of a call to respond while also giving us some clues as to how preachers might find the right balance for their own style and context.

### **8.1 A Response is Necessary. But What Kind?**

Peter's clearest and lengthiest call for response comes at Pentecost, when the listening crowd is "cut to the heart" and asks, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37).

Witherington says their question is to be expected, because

if Peter's words were really believed, then his audience would realize they had been party to a truly horrible act. They had done something no Jew would ever want to be credited with – acting in such a way as to lead to the death of the Jewish Messiah, the one who was to deliver Israel.<sup>94</sup>

This reaction and question is a huge advantage in that it "moves the sermon to its final appeal."<sup>95</sup> Peter's audience asks him how they might respond; given that permission, Peter moves forward with further instructions.

In Acts 3, Peter makes a similar call for repentance and forgiveness, this time without any verbal clue from the temple crowd. There are some nonverbal clues present that imply their receptivity, however. Acts tells us that the people who witnessed the miracle were "filled with amazement" (3:10). The crowd then "ran together to them," showing that they wanted to hear more from the disciples (3:11). As Peter begins his speech, the people are "astounded" (3:11). While they didn't interrupt Peter to ask him what they ought to do, their actions implied that they would be open to a response.

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<sup>94</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 153.

<sup>95</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 80.

Contrast this with Acts 4 and 5. In those cases, Peter is speaking to the religious leaders – rulers, elders, and scribes (4:5); high priest and council (5:27). This gathering is like a pre-trial hearing. The questions the leaders ask are not genuine inquiry, but designed to back the disciples into a corner.<sup>96</sup> Instead of wanting to hear Peter (and John) say more about Christ, they charge them “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18). They will put Peter and John in prison for disobeying that order, a move Wall calls an “emotional response” to the new popular-level authority the apostles are generating.<sup>97</sup> In short, these audiences are not showing signs of openness to the gospel. It seems no mere coincidence that Peter does not call for a response in those two cases.

Looking at all four speeches in this way encourages us to consider the receptivity to response in our own settings and proceed appropriately. Seldom would our congregations be as stone-cold as the religious leaders in Acts 4 and 5 (although when attempting to preach the gospel outside of a worship context, this possibility should be considered). Our congregations may not be as receptive as Peter’s first two audiences, either; but before we rule that possibility out, we should remember the heckling skeptics from Acts 2. The Pentecost crowd was not exclusively made up of eager would-be disciples!

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<sup>96</sup> Wall, “Acts,” 88–9.

<sup>97</sup> Wall, “Acts,” 105.

While it is rare that a mainline Protestant congregation comes to worship expecting a dramatic conversion experience, at least a minimal level of receptivity is probable on most Sundays. After a year at a church, a pastor should have the necessary clues to gauge the worshipping body's temperature, such as: a sense of the spiritual state of the church attendees; attendance patterns; and what is expected as normal in worship. These clues inform what kind of response is appropriate at particular church on a particular day.

The traditional order of worship makes "Response to the Word" an expected occurrence by placing it after the sermon every week.<sup>98</sup> There are certainly practical reasons that many churches put the sermon near the very end of the service, not least among these being how resistant congregations can be to big changes. The advantages of a response may be worth the collateral damage, however; this post-sermon part of worship trains us (all of us, pastors included!) to expect to act after hearing the Word. Many average Sundays might offer small baby steps: reciting a creed; saying a prayer; giving our offerings. Over time, congregations may become open to more life-changing responses to the Word.

Not every worship service is the same, however; there are days on the church calendar that are exceptional. In most churches, Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday draw

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<sup>98</sup> See, for example, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 34.

large crowds that are at least minimally motivated by religious observance. The special elements included in these services – like candles on Christmas Eve or a trumpet fanfare on Easter Sunday – make them especially moving experiences. At these services, a more significant call to response seems appropriate, especially in light of Peter’s example.

I have not previously included such a call to response, and I think my reasons would resonate with other clergy. Time management is more difficult at these once-a-year services that deviate from our normal order to include special music and extra Scripture readings. Even if time were no concern, I fear turning off the “Christmas and Easter” Christians who attend so minimally with an unexpected altar call. My *modus operandi* so far has been to put together an excellent worship service and hope they come back. But with an attendance of 165 on Easter and 79 the following Sunday in 2017, I have to ask: Is that approach working?

Adam Hamilton’s plan to reach Christmas and Easter Christians also involves offering “the highest-quality worship service possible” and an intentionally *kerygmatic* sermon (as mentioned above).<sup>99</sup> In addition, the Church of the Resurrection announces the upcoming sermon series at the beginning and end of those special services – a series designed to pique the interest of non- and nominally-religious attendees. “If the series of

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<sup>99</sup> Hamilton, *Unleashing*, 63.

sermons is enticing to the unchurched, we will see a significant increase in worship attendance in January over our prior year's attendance."<sup>100</sup>

Notice that an altar call is not part of Hamilton's Christmas Eve plan. "Some unchurched are turned off by what they perceive to be a kind of manipulation in the invitation itself," he writes.<sup>101</sup> Instead, Hamilton makes an invitation at the end of worship once every four to six weeks. At that time, those who want to accept Christ are asked to bow their heads and repeat a prayer after him in their seats.<sup>102</sup> This practice shows an understanding that the many first-time visitors on Christmas Eve are unlikely to be ready for a full commitment. Given another month, those same visitors have become interested attendees, and the invitation is more appropriate.

Hamilton models well that the question for every pastor is not whether to invite a response, but what kind of response fits the day and context. Inviting first-time visitors to come down front and pray after extinguishing their Christmas Eve candles may well be counterproductive at Andrews UMC. It not that, then what other invitations might provide someone a helpful and needed next step toward following Christ?

In his book on the founder of the Methodist movement, Hamilton points out that John Wesley did not make "altar calls," either; that practice didn't begin until the nineteenth century. Instead, Wesley invited his outdoor audiences to attend a religious

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 72.

society.<sup>103</sup> An invitation to Christian community is far from Wesley's invention; although Acts doesn't explicitly report such an offer from Peter at Pentecost, the end result implies that one took place: "all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). More contemporary to Wesley, small groups were in popular use by Christians leaders like Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758).<sup>104</sup> As a known phenomenon, these small groups may have felt like a quite natural next step for even non- or nominally-Christian people. If that approach worked for Wesley in the eighteenth century, what would be the equivalent in the twenty-first century?

Bryan Wilson, a United Methodist pastor in far western North Carolina, serves as an excellent example. Picking up on the popularity of the "Whole 30" and "P90X" diet and exercise regiments, he and some young men in his congregation have embarked on a three-month program for prayer, asceticism, and brotherhood called "Exodus 90."<sup>105</sup> Although this program makes high demands of its participants (No alcohol! Cold showers!), six men in Wilson's small congregation (with an average attendance of 75) are participating.<sup>106</sup> And while Wilson's own charisma may have encouraged those men to

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<sup>103</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 91.

<sup>104</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 69, 77.

<sup>105</sup> <http://www.exodus90.com/>.

<sup>106</sup> As of an email conversation with Wilson on Oct. 31, 2017.

join in, their receptivity to such an endeavor was certainly increased by its similarity to other popular health and fitness programs.

Each preacher, then, must consider the kind of response appropriate for their audience. This includes considering the timing of these invitations; while Christmas Eve and Easter universally attract large crowds,<sup>107</sup> each congregation has its own particular high-attendance worship services. Mother's Day Sunday is likely one, along with any service that includes special participation by the children. Here in Andrews – a community with many vacation and second homes – holiday weekends bring large crowds. The Sunday of Fourth of July weekend can be one of the biggest of the year, sometimes even topping Easter Sunday. These services should be marked as special opportunities for a more intentional call to response, whether an invitation to another event or to Christ himself.

## ***8.2 The Content of a Call to Response***

Eventually that actual, point-blank invitation to Christ must be made – asking someone to make a first commitment to be a follower of Christ. I have already noted Hamilton's example of methods more consistent with mainline Protestant theology and

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<sup>107</sup> Not entirely universal – Rev. Owen Fulghum at The Vine of the Mountains in Waynesville, NC has moved his Christmas Eve service to December 23<sup>rd</sup> because of low attendance on the 24<sup>th</sup>. I think it's fair to say, however, that The Vine is an exception and not the rule.

practice (no requirement to come down front; quietly repeating an individual prayer led by the pastor). For the content of that invitation, let's turn again to Peter.

In Acts 2 and 3 – when Peter is speaking to a receptive crowd – his invitation to Christ begins with a call to repent and be forgiven.

**Table 5: Peter's Call to Response in Acts 2 and 3**

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Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven (Acts 2:38).	Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out... (Acts 3:19).
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The word “repent” is crucial, but it may not be the best to use with audiences today – and certainly not without some explanation. It can have a negative connotation in American culture, a colloquial meaning something akin to “feeling really, really, really bad for something.” Feeling bad about sin is certainly part of repenting; that negative emotion is a sign that we recognize a wrongdoing as wrong. The Biblical usage of “repent” goes beyond this emotion, however, to a positive action. The Greek word used in Acts 2 and 3 is *metanoeo*; it denotes “a complete reorientation of one’s whole being to God.”<sup>108</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, *metanoeo* implied a “change of mind.”<sup>109</sup> It is also appropriate, as Peter surely did, to draw on the Old Testament’s word for repentance:

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<sup>108</sup> Frances Taylor Gench, “Repentance in the NT,” *New Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary Vol. 4* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 762–3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 762–3.

*shuv*, “to turn.”<sup>110</sup> Repentance may start with feeling really, really bad, but it quickly moves to a determination to turn away from the source of that bad feeling (sin) toward God and God’s will.

For the same reasons that mainline Protestant preachers shy away from altar calls, we may also feel reluctant to preach repentance from sin as an invitation to Christ. Delivered incompletely, a message of repentance can sound like bad news: “You’re sinful! You’re terrible! You’re never going to be good enough!” If the sermon stops there, it is neither Good News nor a complete call to repentance; it must continue to a call to make a life-change and receive forgiveness.

The full gift of forgiveness is the power that sets us free from sin;<sup>111</sup> repentance is the necessary first step in the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. I was reminded of that truth by a woman who came to my office one day. I didn’t know her, but she sought me out as a pastor in the community. Caught in a cycle of drug abuse, she told me how she had hurt herself and her loved ones over and over. “I don’t want to do this anymore,” she said desperately. That simple prayer ought to be on the lips of every Christian. We all need forgiveness as much as that woman does, and we all need repentance as much as she does.

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<sup>110</sup> Donald E. Gowan, “Repentance in the OT,” *New Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary Vol. 4* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 764.

<sup>111</sup> A favorite theme of another speech-maker in Acts, Paul: “By this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39).

At Pentecost Peter makes an explicit invitation to baptism as a part of this process. It's no coincidence that baptism begins with a renunciation of sin in my United Methodist tradition; in three movements the candidates (or their parents) are asked whether they renounce evil, accept God's freedom to resist evil, and accept Jesus as Savior.<sup>112</sup> Recognizing God's work in the grace of baptism, we extend this sacrament to infants. I am grateful we do so, but this practice can have unfortunate side effects. For one, "sprinkling" has become the normative method of baptism for children and adults alike. The symbolism of death and new life in Christ is much more evident when baptism is done by full immersion. A second side effect of infant baptism can be the deemphasis of repentance as part of the sacrament. A strong confirmation program is necessary to help children understand their baptism – and the role of repentance in it – as they grow older.

Even with just a little bit of water, the purpose of baptism in cleansing sin remains evident. After confronting one's own sin and deciding to turn away from it, forgiveness is like a sigh of relief for our souls. It provides more than just relief; forgiveness changes the way we're able to live into the future.

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<sup>112</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 34.

I have explained this double-benefit of forgiveness and repentance to my congregation using a story about debt.<sup>113</sup> Imagine you've been spending far beyond your means and have built up a terrifying amount of credit card debt. Desperate, you meet with a financial advisor. She gives you good news in the form of a new plan for the future. You make a budget. You cut up the credit cards. You determine to live on 80%, save 10%, and tithe 10%. Going forward, things will be different.

Despite your wonderful new practices, all that credit card debt still exists. It makes you sick every time you think about it. It's going to take years – years and years and years – to pay it off and get in good financial shape. The effect of your past mistakes threatens to discourage your good efforts to change.

Then your financial advisor says (and I wish this could actually happen), "I called the credit card company and went to bat for you. I convinced them to forgive all your debt."

How different will your future be now? Not only have you decided to live in a new, better way – but your past mistakes have been wiped clean. That is the gift of forgiveness paired with repentance; we are set free from sin and liberated to live for God.

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<sup>113</sup> In a sermon preached to Andrews UMC on April 30, 2017. Full text found at <https://marywbrown.wordpress.com/2017/05/02/what-do-we-do/>.

Non-Christians, new Christians, and longtime Christians alike might wonder how this could possibly work. Even the cleanest slate and the strongest intentions of genuine repentance cannot eliminate the chances of relapsing into sin. Yet Peter's closing remarks in Acts 3 reassure the crowd that this miracle is possible: "When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" (v. 26). In Acts 2, Peter names the source of this ability to turn, and it's the same one that empowered Peter to give witness in the first place: the Holy Spirit. "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven," Peter tells them, "and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38).

It's appropriate that at this point we have come full circle. The Holy Spirit that began the work of testifying is offered to those who receive that testimony. Now it will empower them – not only to turn from sin and focus on God, but also to be new witnesses for Christ "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

## 9. Preaching Like Peter: A Christmas Eve Sermon

These observations about Peter's first four sermons in Acts might be interesting, but can they make a real and effective difference in the way preachers witness to Christ today? Only as the rubber hits the road can we get a sense of the true usefulness of Peter's *kerygmatic* formula. To that point, I allowed Peter's example to inform the plans for Andrews UMC's Christmas Eve service in 2017.

Let's briefly review the example that we'll take into a mainline Protestant pulpit:

*The Holy Spirit moves first.* The most important component in bearing witness to Christ is the involvement of the Holy Spirit as a fulfillment of Acts 1:8. This is true in every aspect of preaching, from the pastor's study to the sanctuary pulpit – and far beyond. Although the Holy Spirit cannot be controlled or scheduled, preachers can and must intentionally incorporate prayer into their rhythms of sermon preparation and daily life. Such a practice not only provides space to hear and sense the Spirit's direction, it also acknowledges one's complete dependence on the Spirit in order to be an effective witness.

*Building on recent events.* Peter's launching point was a recent miracle, even if his hearers were skeptical about it. Although miracles today seldom take place today in the form of physical healings and prison-breaks, miracles do occur – but when they do, they can too easily be disregarded as coincidence. Preachers should identify miracles

that happen in the life of the congregation. In this way, a preacher fulfills the double-meaning of being a witness: “to behold and to attest.”<sup>114</sup>

*A preacher’s presentation of the gospel must be clear, concise, and consistent.* In each of the four speeches, Peter delivered a strikingly similar *kerygma*: Jesus of Nazareth was a man whose actions showed he was more than a man; you crucified him; but God raised him up. These three movements communicate the humanity and divinity of Christ, the guilt of sin, and the triumph of God over human wickedness. A clear, concise, and consistent version of the gospel makes it easier for non-Christians to understand why they might decide to follow Christ. It also helps those already Christian to internalize that message and become witnesses to their friends and neighbors. That message should include the preacher’s witness through a personal experience of the risen Christ.

Peter delivers his message as part of a *kerygmatic*, evangelistic sermon. There is place in the mainstream Protestant pulpit for both *didaskalia* (teaching and instruction) and *kerygma*. Preachers should look over the attendance patterns of their church year and determine what kind of message is most needed on particular days.

*Scripture can be used as supporting evidence for the gospel.* That does not mean quoting random verses will serve as effective proof for Christ. If Scripture is to be used

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<sup>114</sup> Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 78.

as evidence, it should follow Peter's example of choosing a familiar or relevant passage and adequately explaining its meaning. While Scripture is a primary authority for some, it may not carry much weight with non- or nominally Christians. Just as Peter supports his case with personal and collective witness, pastors can also strengthen their witness by sharing a personal experience of Christ or pointing out the presence of the Holy Spirit.

*A call to response is not optional.* We cannot shy away from the responsibility of making an actual invitation to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. This may or may not take the form of a traditional altar call. Peter himself adjusted his call to respond based on the receptivity of his audience. A response is an invitation to do something after hearing the word proclaimed, and that can include actions from reciting a creed to saying a personal prayer to signing up for a small group. Preachers must anticipate the receptivity of their audiences and even be prepared to adjust the plan in the moment if those listening give signs they might be more or less open to the gospel than expected.

With those characteristics in mind, let's take Peter into the pulpit. What better opportunity than one of the best attended services in the church year: Christmas Eve.

### **9.1 The Setting: Andrews UMC**

I am the pastor of Andrews United Methodist Church, the lone Wesleyan congregation in a small, far-western North Carolina town of the same name. Locals joke

that Andrews is “two hours from anywhere”; it’s about a two-hour commute to Atlanta, Chattanooga, Knoxville, or Asheville.

Andrews has a population of 1,798 – smaller than the high school I attended!<sup>115</sup> It is larger than a tiny, one-stoplight town, but not by much; Main Street boasts a total of four traffic signals. Andrews United Methodist Church is situated near the center of town, between the middle two of those stoplights.

The 1920s-era sanctuary is a red brick building with large, pictorial stained glass windows, two steeples, and bells that chime on the hour. Just around the corner is the Fellowship Hall, built in 1968 for church offices, meeting space, and classrooms. In 2007 Andrews UMC constructed its Family Life Center. This building serves as a kind of community center, hosting ecumenical worship services, high school athletic banquets, basketball leagues, and recovery groups.

Sunday worship consists of one service at 11 a.m. with an average attendance of 115 (maximum seating capacity is about 180). The liturgy is mostly traditional but fairly relaxed, and includes a more contemporary “praise song” three to four times a month. A traditional altar rail, altar table, choir loft, and sizable pulpit anchor the front of the church. The seating is composed of pews arranged in a semi-circular shape that makes

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<sup>115</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2016,” accessed February 22, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=andrews%2C+nc>.

every seat in the house feel conversationally close. This suits me well, as I typically preach without notes and like to stand in front of the pulpit.

Andrews UMC identifies itself as “a welcoming congregation of grace and growth through Jesus Christ.” Like many mainline Protestant churches, Andrews UMC has an older demographic. Sixty-five percent of active attendees are over the age of fifty-two. Most of the committed volunteers and leaders fall into this category. This can present issues in preaching; especially when making cultural references, I feel a conflict between the younger generations I want to target and the majority that I do not want to leave in the dark. Having a pastor in her late thirties who has a husband and two small children has helped attract a few new young families.

**Table 6: Generational Breakdown of Active Attendees of Andrews UMC**

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Gen Z	< 20	31	16
Millennials	21-34	20	11
Gen X	35-51	19	10
Baby Boomers	52-70	56	30
Silent Gen.	71+	64	35
<b>Total</b>		<b>190</b>	

## ***9.2 The Plan: Preparing for Christmas Eve***

As is the case in many churches, Christmas Eve is one of the largest and most beloved worship services of the year; the sanctuary is usually very near capacity. Since 2007 Andrews UMC has followed the traditional service of lessons and carols laid out in

the United Methodist Book of Worship, ending with communion and candlelight.<sup>116</sup>

When I arrived there was no time allotted for a sermon. After two years, I told our Worship Committee that we may be missing a chance to preach the gospel to folks who only attended church once or twice a year. They agreed to reduce the number of Scripture readings and hymns to provide space for a sermon, and that change has been well received.

2017 marked my fifth Christmas with Andrews UMC, meaning the congregation and I had built up enough trust to take some risks together. I was still hesitant to try anything experimental at such a high priority service. Was it really possible to follow Peter's example into a mainline Protestant pulpit? Would anyone notice a difference? Could it actually help to bring more people to Christ?

It was time to find out.

### **9.2.1 The Holy Spirit Moves First.**

Although each component of Peter's speeches has affected my preaching, the necessity of the Holy Spirit's involvement has been especially convicting. I've already mentioned the new addition of a public prayer before my sermons. It has been a pleasant surprise to have a practice that once felt inauthentic and awkward become

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<sup>116</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 284–8.

heartfelt and natural. After just a few months of incorporating these prayers, a sermon seems incomplete without an invitation to the Holy Spirit at the beginning.

To intentionally follow Peter's example for my Christmas Eve sermon, I determined to add more times of personal and corporate prayer for the Holy Spirit. Prayer was already an important and regular part of my routine; the difference would be in praying for the Holy Spirit's inspiration as I began to read, study, or write. Previously I had reserved this kind of sermon-oriented prayer for early Sunday morning.

Being a person of routine, I did not think it would be terribly difficult to remember to pray before starting work on my sermon. Most weekday mornings I start my time in the office by closing the door and studying or writing for an hour or so. To follow Peter's model, I would simply pause for prayer before beginning that daily work. Easy.

I was surprised to find how difficult it was to remember this time of prayer, especially considering my daily work on this thesis. For the better part of a month I would forget and instead say a prayer for my sermon later in the day when I realized the omission. Eventually, I had to make "Pray for Sermon" a recurring event on my calendar. By the time Christmas Eve arrived, prayer before working on the sermon was finally becoming part of my routine.

Getting others involved in praying for the sermon wasn't nearly so hard to remember. I began with the worship committee in early November, explaining my renewed conviction about the necessity of the Holy Spirit in preaching and asking them to pray specifically for the Holy Spirit's involvement in Christmas Eve. As different committee meetings rolled around the calendar – especially our annual church-wide “Charge Conference” – I continued to ask for this kind of prayer.

It might have felt somewhat self-serving to ask for so much prayer support if my request were simply for me and my sermon. Making that request specifically for the Holy Spirit felt God-serving and rightfully urgent. It also felt like its own kind of witness. When I pray by myself, no one else knows whether God responds or not. There's no public risk in those private prayers. Asking others to pray with me meant inviting them to watch and see how God might respond. It was an act of faith to pray together.

The only downside of asking for all that prayer might be a neglect of other ways in which the church needs prayer. Going forward, I expect prayer for the Holy Spirit's involvement in the sermons to be a regular request of the worship committee, while other groups might be directed to pray for other aspects of the church.

I also asked the two women who pray with me before worship to more intentionally ask the Holy Spirit to work through the sermon. They were happy to oblige. This small group meets faithfully on Sunday mornings but rarely for special

services, so I asked if they would meet for prayer before the Christmas Eve service this year. One was taken away by family commitments, but the other was willing and able to give that extra time.

After we prayed together on Christmas Eve I walked around the sanctuary saying specific prayers in different places, as is my habit each Sunday. I meandered around the pews, praying for anyone who would sit there – especially for the visitors, who might at that moment be debating whether to come at all. I prayed for the organist as I stood by the organ, for the choir as I moved through the choir loft, and for all the words that would be spoken as I stood behind the pulpit. When I paused in front of the altar table, I looked at the manger scene and prayed, “God, reveal yourself to us” – as in, reveal yourself during worship tonight. Immediately, I felt God responding, “I did” – as in, God had been revealed in Jesus Christ. My heart felt full. My eyes teared over. It was as though the manger scene was shimmering. I was completely taken aback; nothing like that had ever happened during our pre-service prayer time before.

This was not the only exceptional event of the season. On the night before Christmas Eve, I received an unusual voicemail. Rev. Charlsie Sweat, pastor at the historically African-American Baptist church in Andrews, was calling to say I had been on her mind and she wanted me to know she was praying for me. Rev. Charlsie and I share a genuine affection for each other, but her two-hour commute from Asheville

prevents us from seeing each other very often. I hadn't talked to her about my special efforts for Christmas Eve.

I returned her call to tell her, "It's funny that you're thinking of me, because I am preaching a different sermon tomorrow night. I'm going to talk about sin on Christmas Eve, and I'm a little nervous about how people will respond!" Rev. Charlsie told me that twice in the past few days I had come to her mind, and this made it clear to her that she needed to pray for me. She then said a heartfelt prayer for my sermon. Again I was moved to tears. For two months I had been praying for the Holy Spirit to show up, and it appeared those prayers were being answered.

With Christmas Eve on a Sunday, I was prepared for attendance to be lower than usual – either at the 11am or 6pm service. Morning worship was surprisingly full, with about 130 people in attendance. I then expected that evening worship would be smaller, assuming that some people would choose to attend one service or the other.

I was right in one respect: a significant portion of the eleven a.m. crowd did not return at six p.m. I was shocked, though, by how many visitors were present at Christmas Eve – many more than normal! The church was exceptionally full, with about 160 people in attendance. Back at home, my husband commented on the crowd and how many people he didn't know. "We've never had that many visitors before," he said. Only then did it dawn on me that another unusual thing had happened. For two months we had been praying that the Holy Spirit would work through this service. Each time I

asked a group to pray with me, I had mentioned the potential to witness to the visitors who attend this service. Was the Holy Spirit involved in leading so many new visitors to church on this particular Sunday?

As with most miracles, these events can certainly be explained other ways. All the excitement for this service could have made me overly emotional; I was certainly extra nervous that night. It's common for a pastor like Rev. Charlsie to think of a colleague during Christmas, just as I said extra prayers for all my closest clergy friends that same week. And those additional visitors could have come from better advertising efforts, or a well-timed holiday weekend that allowed more people to travel.

All of those explanations are possible, but my personal experience of them gives me confidence to speak like Peter once did. "These are not coincidences, as you suppose" (see Acts 2:15). "Why do you wonder at them, or stare as though by my own power I made this a Spirit-filled service?" (see Acts 3:12). I was there. It wasn't in my mind or the result of anything I did. My congregation and I had prayed hard for the Holy Spirit to show up. Lo and behold: it actually happened.

### **9.2.2 Building on Recent Events**

As I worked on my sermon I wondered what recent miracle might make for a good introductory point. I watched the national and community news for material. I considered big events from our church year, like paying off the debt on our Family Life Center. None of these felt right, however.

Then, in our December staff meeting, we discussed the special nature of the service itself: the songs, the Scripture readings, the dark outside, and the candlelight conclusion. As different staff members fondly remembered their favorite parts, it dawned on me that the Christmas Eve candlelight service was the very miracle I was looking for. The reason this night draws so many visitors is because of how it makes them feel. Visitors might not call that feeling an arrival of the Holy Spirit – but my sermon certainly could!

The danger in pointing to something internal could be making an all-important visitor feel like an outsider. If I referenced parts of the service that hadn't happened yet (like lighting the candles), would it make sense to a newcomer? This service, however, is far from original; almost identical worship happens all across the United States on Christmas Eve. I felt it was safe to assume that most attendees would have some idea of what to expect at a candlelight service.

As I mulled over this idea, the beginning of my sermon seemed to write itself. We would all be present for the same service; we would be hearing the same songs, listening to the same Scripture passages, anticipating the same candlelight moment. It was easy to name that common ground, and then appeal to it in claiming the service as more than just a well-planned hour of worship, but a miraculous appearance of the Holy Spirit.

### 9.2.3 A Clear, Concise, and Consistent Presentation of the Gospel

I have heard some regular church attendees complain about “C&E” Christians – those who only show up on Christmas and Easter. Not me; here are two days when non-Christians and nominal Christians come right to us! For that reason, occasions like Christmas Eve are not the time to preach *didaskalia*, teaching. Sermons on these days should witness to the *kerygma* of Christ so that new individuals might become his followers.

To preach like Peter, the *kerygma* of my Christmas Eve sermon would need to start by proclaiming Jesus’s humanity. This part came easily – it is, after all, a celebration of his birth! My task would simply be to highlight the humanity inherent in that event.

When Peter names “Jesus of Nazareth, a man” he also points out that this Jesus was “attested to you by God with deeds of power” (Acts 2:22). This part of the message also felt natural for Christmas Eve. Although Jesus’s birth was a normal human one, the circumstances surrounding it were exceptional. The Scripture passages read during the Christmas Eve service would recount those circumstances; it would be easy to mention them during the sermon.

The middle movement of Peter’s *kerygma* would be much more difficult to address: “you crucified” Jesus (Acts 2:23). I knew I’d need different words than that blunt accusation; I wouldn’t be able to unpack such a shocking statement in the time allowed. That didn’t let me off the hook for addressing the problem of sin that sent Jesus

to the cross, however. This was the aspect of following Peter's example I was most anxious about. Regular attendees and visitors alike look forward to this peaceful worship service. In our area, many people come to the United Methodist church specifically to avoid hellfire and brimstone preaching. Would I disrupt the norm too far by talking about sin?

Then I noticed a character not present in traditional nativity sets: King Herod.<sup>117</sup> Just beyond the selected Scripture readings for the service comes the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2:13–18. Here was sin, right in the Christmas story. The fact that we exclude it from our manger scenes and “lessons and carols” only made it more useful to my sermon, since we too often address sin by denying or avoiding it. The only issue would be bringing up Herod's violence delicately, since many young children would be present at our one Christmas Eve service.

As I re-read the Christmas story during my own devotional time, I came across “sin” in another part of Matthew's story. The angel explains that the purpose of Mary's baby will be to “save his people from their sins” (1:21). I was surprised to rediscover “sin” so clearly named in the story of Jesus's birth. If it's right there, why did it feel unnatural for me to bring up the topic in a Christmas Eve sermon? Apparently the word had fallen on my deaf ears because I hadn't been looking for it. Thanks to Peter – and

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<sup>117</sup> Although a church member told me that many French sets do include King Herod.

Joseph and Herod – I was compelled and equipped to name the topic I had previously tried to avoid.

Peter’s final movement in the *kerygma* is to name the victory after crucifixion: “But God raised him up” (Acts 2:24). At first, I thought this would be an easy point to include – it’s the ultimate good news! As I began to write my sermon, however, I realized how rarely I preach about the resurrection at Christmas. Peter’s example challenged me to tell the whole gospel. My hope was to do so in a way that honored our focus on the baby Jesus but reminded the congregation of his ultimate destiny.

#### **9.2.4 Scripture as Supporting Evidence**

Christmas Eve was an interesting night to put extra effort into the interpretation of Scripture, given how much Scripture would be read aloud during the service. To increase the challenge, I had less time than usual in which to unpack these Bible passages; my sermon would be more of a 10-to-12-minute homily. How could I adequately address these passages without running out of time or attention spans?

Thankfully, the traditional passages are among the most familiar stories in the Bible. Because these well-known Scriptures would be read before my sermon, I felt I could briefly mention characters and events in the story without providing background information on each. All the readers attended a short rehearsal to make sure they (and the mics!) were equipped to do their best. The readers did their job well, so I felt assured that the congregation had a working knowledge of the Christmas story going into my

sermon. When I decided to wander away from those Scriptures by talking about King Herod, I recognized that as a place that required a little extra background.

As I mentioned above, the experience of interpreting Scripture on Christmas Eve gave me some appreciation for why Luke would have recorded altered versions of Joel 2 and Psalm 118 in Peter's speeches. Perhaps Peter (whether in reality or only in Luke's recollection) was doing some paraphrasing that reflected his interpretation of recent events through Scripture. It certainly felt more natural for me to recollect the Scriptures from memory (even if that meant a few alterations) rather than read them out of a Bible.

This exercise also caused me to consider what the congregation really needed to know about the Scripture. When I came to the word "ponder," for example, I found Strong's definition of the Greek *symballo* enlightening, especially "to bring together in one's mind."<sup>118</sup> When preaching a normal 15-to-20-minute sermon, I often share that kind of information from the original languages. For the purposes of Christmas Eve, however, it seemed unnecessary to get into such detail. (Mostly it seemed self-serving, as an attempt to make myself look smart.) In the end I decided to let that definition inform the way I talked about Mary's "pondering" without explicitly quoting a Greek dictionary.

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<sup>118</sup> "G4820 – *symballo* – Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV)," *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed February 22, 2018, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G4820&t=KJV>.

### 9.2.5 A Call To Response

Putting this aspect of Peter's example into practice felt a bit like getting my bluff called. I had been able to write with conviction about the need to include some kind of invitation to respond in every worship service, as we do each week in our Sunday morning liturgy. Planning that moment for the Christmas Eve service felt much more difficult. It was hard to imagine a response that would fit with the traditions and feel of this beloved night on our church calendar.

Adam Hamilton's example gave me permission to honor my gut feeling; I might be concerned about making a literal invitation to Christ for good reason. I liked his idea of intentionally advertising January activities in the church to catch the attention of those interested in learning more about Christ. I planned a sermon series for the first four weeks of the year around the theme of New Year's resolutions, dealing with topics like food or finances that people commonly want to improve upon. Our cultural narrative helped make this even more effective; as 2017 came to a close, social media was filled with posts hoping that 2018 would be a better year.<sup>119</sup>

Announcing this series at Christmas Eve was not as easy as it might seem. In order to maintain the reverent tone of the service, I typically cut down our opening announcements to the bare essentials. Most of that time slot would be spent welcoming

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<sup>119</sup> National and global news in 2017 included mass shootings, allegations of sexual abuse, nuclear weapons, and a U.S. president with a low approval rating – among other things.

visitors. The bulletin was equally full, with most of its real estate taken up by liturgy. If promoting a January sermon series was the right invitation to response, how could we do so in a way that helped and didn't hurt our worship service?

When I asked the worship committee to pray for the Holy Spirit's involvement in Christmas Eve, I also asked for their insight on this issue. I expected them to simply pray for this idea and – at best – call me later with some thoughts. Instead, a young adult spoke up: "What if we gave them candles to take home with them?" Instantly I knew she had hit on something good; candles, after all, are a big part of what draws visitors to this service.

That idea quickly led to others, and within a few moments we had a great plan. As everyone left the service we would offer candles wrapped as small gifts to take home. Inside would be a slip of paper: on one side, a suggestion for lighting the candle and reading Scripture on Christmas Day; on the other side, an invitation to join us for the January sermon series. This "call to response" felt like a natural extension of the service, but was also much more intentional than anything we had done in the past. As an unexpected side-benefit, we had a very positive response from our regular church members who found lighting the candle a meaningful part of their Christmas celebrations at home.

Studying and writing about Peter's first four sermons involved a lot of individual work. Not exclusively, to be sure; I'm grateful to advisers and colleagues

whose input infinitely improved the observations presented here. But I also spent countless hours alone in front of a Bible or a book or a computer screen (and often, all three) in order to complete this thesis. It's interesting that the application of Peter's example to preaching naturally led me out of that isolation to a kind of "standing with" (Acts 2:14). The prayers and ideas shared in Christian community were as much a part of this Christmas Eve sermon as my own reflection and wordsmithing. Togetherness was an essential component. That was not a conscious intention on my part, but it's beautiful to see how Peter's example led me to the end result of his speech: "All who believed were together" (Acts 2:43).

### **9.3 The Sermon: Not a Normal Birth**

*What follows is the sermon delivered on December 24, 2017 at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at Andrews United Methodist Church. I write a manuscript as I prepare for my sermons, but do not use it during the service. I internalize the message so I can step away from the pulpit; typically, my preaching is close to what I had written. In this case, I went back over the manuscript afterward and edited it slightly to reflect the sermon that was delivered more accurately.*

Tonight we gather in the dark, in the quiet last hours before Christmas morning. Some of us are here to sing the songs and hear the Scripture like we do each year. Some of us are here to sit next to family or see old friends or just to be together with others

who believe. Many of us are here for the special moment when we'll light our candles and sing "Silent Night."

But the reason we are all here, really, is a birth.

A *normal, everyday* birth. Can you believe it?

When God came into the world, it wasn't with a flash of light or by a cherubim-drawn chariot. God arrived the same way we all arrived on this planet: through a nine-month pregnancy and a painful delivery and the first amazing cries of new life.

It was a perfectly *normal* birth.

And yet...there were signs from the beginning that there was something more going on here. A pregnant young woman, not yet married...a man, who would have divorced her quietly except for what the angel said...the shepherds, sent to see a savior born in a manger...the wise men, who came from outside the boundaries of Israel to find a king born under a star...

This was a normal birth...and yet it wasn't.

What kind of birth *is* this?

From the beginning, Mary was trying to figure that out. Luke tells us that she did a lot of "pondering." When the angel first appeared to her – "Hello! Favored one!" – Mary "pondered." When the town started to murmur with amazement at the shepherds' news, we're told that Mary "treasured" their words...but she also "pondered them in her heart." Mary knew something strange was happening, something worth careful

observation. She collected all these things in her mind like pieces of a puzzle and wondered what it meant.

What *did* it mean? What kind of birth is this, that it could be completely normal and yet not normal at all?

When an angel first appears to Joseph to explain his fiancée's pregnancy, it tells him just what will make this birth and this baby exceptional: *He will save his people from their sins.*

This normal birth was the arrival of a not-so-normal baby who would save us all from sin. And we need saving from sin.

You can see it even in this Christmas story. We don't normally place King Herod around our manger scenes – he ruins the peaceful vibe. But he's there. History tells us that this was Herod the Great, a crazy and cruel ruler: crazy enough to feel threatened by an infant; cruel enough to do whatever it took to protect his throne. A little bit later in Matthew 2, after the wise men give him the slip, Herod's rage boils over. Joseph gets a warning in a dream that his little family needs to run – run all the way out of the country, to Egypt.

That kind of sin is in the world, and we need saving from it.

Unfortunately, sin is not reserved for bad guys like Herod. Sin is in us, too. It's in hearts that were created to love God and love neighbor, but are too often filled with greed and lust and hate. Sin is even in average people who really want to do the right

things but keep finding that – no matter how hard they try – they just cannot manage to be good enough.

That sin is why Jesus was born.

It's also why he died.

After this baby Jesus grew from boy to man, sin wanted to crucify him. In a surprise move, Jesus went willingly to the cross. At that moment – when the son of God was on the receiving end of the world's violence – sin was so thick, so heavy, Matthew tells us that the world went completely dark (27:45).

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But then, something happened. You know what happened, because you've already said it several times tonight: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!"<sup>120</sup>

Light came shining out of a place that should be dark – a tomb! Light came shining into all the corners of the world and all the corners of our souls!

*That* is not normal. *That* changed everything.

We are here to celebrate a normal birth, the same birth that brought every one of us into being. We are also here because of something more, something exceptional, something once-in-history. We feel it as we sit in the dark of a winter's night, we feel it

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<sup>120</sup> John 1:5 was a congregational response during the final Scripture reading, John 1:1–14.

in the strange stirring of our souls. You might think it's the songs or the stories or the candlelight that's giving you that feeling, but I'm here to tell you that it's something more.

This baby came to save us from our sin.

Tonight, may we turn from darkness; tonight, may we be drawn to the light like moths to a flame. Let us open our hearts to the Christ child and let his light shine in, revealing sin and giving us forgiveness. May that light repurpose our hearts for what they were made for: to love God, and to love one another.

Amen.

#### **9.4 The Evaluation**

To evaluate the plausibility and effectiveness of following Peter's example in preaching this Christmas Eve sermon – in other words, whether this *worked* – I drew on three sources: a post-sermon survey; January worship attendance compared with the previous year; and my own reactions to using Peter as a model. I myself am a preacher, after all; if I had a negative experience following Peter's example, then it's likely others would, too.

I was honestly amazed to find it a very positive experience. I'm far from a veteran in the pulpit, but I have given enough sermons to be apprehensive about any major changes to my approach. Throughout the process I found Peter to be a

surprisingly practical and even enjoyable “mentor.” The way I experienced the Holy Spirit (as indicated above) was particularly special and encouraging.

I enjoy being creative with my sermons, and I worried that following someone else’s formula would feel forced. Instead, it brought new insight to the story of Jesus’s birth. Hence, I found it most helpful to use Peter as a guide rather than a hard-and-fast rule; I knew the sermon should still be in my own voice and for my own context.

As I preached, I felt a special connection with the congregation and the Holy Spirit. Immediately afterward I felt the sigh of relief that typically comes when I know I’ve done my job as Christ’s witness to the best of my ability. On my walk from the church to the parsonage, I had a smile on my face I couldn’t wipe off. Peter really had helped me preach a different, better sermon on this particular Christmas Eve!

That reaction, however, comes after over a year of study and investment in this topic. To say I was biased would be an understatement. The more tangible evidence would come from others, in the form of their reactions and their church attendance.

To hear honest reactions from the worshipping body, I recruited a variety of attendees to take an online survey after the service. I hoped to get feedback from two longtime members of the church; two worship committee members; one prayer partner; four or five occasional attendees, and four or five visitors. I recruited as many of these as possible via conversation and email before the service; afterward, I sent an email to any visitor who left contact information inviting him or her to participate (see “Appendix B:

Emails to Survey Respondents”). I was very pleased with how many of those visitors quickly agreed! Unfortunately, the final demographics were not as diverse. Among the fifteen survey respondents, seven identified themselves as regular attendees of Andrews UMC; five as infrequent attendees; and three as attending another church regularly. It is possible that some “infrequent” attendees self-identified as “regular” attendees, but still – I had hoped for a few more genuine visitors.

Seven essay questions were designed to gauge whether or not *kerygma* had been heard, Scripture had been effectively used, any response had been elicited, and whether the presence of the Spirit could be perceived (see Appendix C: Christmas Eve Sermon Survey). These were difficult questions to write; I am grateful to have found guidance in Charles B. Hardwick’s article, “Listener Surveys and Theological Questions (or Lack Thereof).”<sup>121</sup> The survey was administered online to protect the identity of each respondent; I hoped this anonymity would encourage truly honest answers.

My prior experience with sermon feedback told me not to put too much stock in general affirmations. It’s not unusual for pastors to hear something like “Good sermon, preacher!” as their parishioners walk out the door. That vague praise can be misleading; it might be said because of a life-changing message...or simply because the service ended on time. Similarly, there was a good bit of general praise in the survey responses.

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<sup>121</sup> Charles B. Hardwick, “Listener Surveys and Theological Questions (Or Lack Thereof),” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics, Atlanta, GA, 2010.

While I appreciated the signs of support, I put more stock in the detailed answers. From them, I was pleased to see that at least some of those in attendance had found Peter's example in my sermon.

The first survey question was, "Did the sermon help you understand the ministry and purpose of Jesus Christ? How?" A regular attendee of Andrews UMC noticed that the *kerygma* continued far beyond Jesus's birth: "The crucifixion is usually not the focus at Christmas, but the sermon served as a reminder of why Jesus needed to be born." An infrequent attendee explicitly named the inclusion of sin in how the sermon described "the innocence of the Christ child – purely coming into a world of sin." Another regular attendee gave more detail to this theme:

Though we often have the story of Jesus' birth painted for us with imagery of shining stars, wisemen [sic] falling to their knees to present gifts, this doesn't always teach the why... why did God send his only son? I feel like the inclusion of Herod, his sins of rage, jealousy and anger at the infant was a perfect way to teach exactly why Jesus was sent to us. Just like we can relate to Jesus' somewhat "ordinary" birth and Mary's pondering, we can relate to Herod's sins. Sure, most of us don't have the kind of evil sin Herod does but we can relate to the words used like jealousy and rage.

The next question was, "If a non-church-going friend asked you what the Christmas Eve sermon said about Jesus, what would you say?" Four of six regular attendee used words like "save," "salvation," or "savior" in their responses, as did two of the infrequent attendees. In a more conservative church that may not be quite as noteworthy, but in my context it was a significant change. I'm fairly certain that the same follow-up question after previous Christmas Eves would not have elicited so much

salvation language. It also interested me that three of the five infrequent attendees pointed to Jesus as the “light” in their answer, while none of the regular attendees did.

Next was the question, “How was the Bible used to explain the Christian faith in Jesus?” Six of the thirteen responses pointed to the “many” passages read throughout the service that combined to tell the Christmas story. Three referenced John 1:1–14 specifically – the final Scripture read and also part of the conclusion of my sermon. Two responses named historical sources; I did intentionally mention historical knowledge about Herod, although it was a brief background comment. A regular attendee who submitted the survey eleven days later was able to recall a good portion of my use of Scripture:<sup>122</sup>

I think it was effective to use bits of scripture throughout to give an outline of the story. The passages from Luke that are based around Mary and her piecing all this together. Next, we heard the scripture or reference to the scripture when Mary is first told, “....name him Jesus. He will save his people from their sins”. After we get that, we learn that the world was SO full of sin after his death that the world went dark. The last scripture I remember, was the most hopeful. In John, it explains that “darkness does not overcome the light”. These three [sic] scriptures could sum up the birth and resurrection of Jesus and basis of Christian faith.

Another regular attendee offered a good reminder of why Scripture cannot be the only evidence for Christ:

I could spout some canned response but it wouldn't reflect much honesty. The truth is that I find the Bible to be very confusing and it continues to be a source of division, exclusion, and violence. People use it to suit their own needs, it can reflect archaic

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<sup>122</sup> I do publish my sermon manuscripts online, making it possible that a survey respondent reviewed the sermon after the service. To try and prevent that, I specifically asked them not to look at the sermon online and instead to work from memory.

political and elitist thought, and its interpretations vary wildly because humans are flawed when it comes to making sense of the supposed divine. It's rather like Communism – theoretically, it looks good on paper, but when you add human response to the mix, the best parts become skewed and the results end up being the opposite of what was originally intended.

Appropriately, the next question asked, “If this sermon was a case for Christ, what would be the most convincing ‘evidence’?” That same respondent who found the Bible confusing (at best) said simply, “I really can’t answer this.” Ten responses (across all three categories) mentioned some aspect of the Biblical narrative, like the virgin birth or the wise men knowing to follow the star. Two of these pointed to “the light” in John 1. While that might encourage the use of Scripture as evidence, I think it also reflects that all of the respondents considered themselves churchgoers on some level. Two respondents named something unrelated to the Biblical narrative that provided evidence for Christ: my presentation. “The pastor did a great job in delivering the message,” said a respondent who attends church elsewhere. “First, the manner in which she spoke was very compelling. Second, her natural style and reference to the topic connected.”

Question five asked, “What – if anything – did this sermon encourage or inspire you to do?” These answers were all across the board: “to believe in myself a bit more,” treating others better, reading more Scripture, being more thankful (for Jesus or in general), seeing the light in the darkness, and gaining a deeper understanding or appreciation of Christmas. One response (not coincidentally, at 9:54 p.m. on Christmas Eve) almost recited my closing lines: “To repurpose our hearts for love and to love – release hatred, prejudice, greed.” This variety of responses (some of which are more of a

change of mind than an action) showed me that if I want the congregation to do something after the sermon, I may need to invite that action more explicitly. What *did* I want the congregation to do in response? To some extent, that should be open-ended; each person will respond differently. Yet a more concrete suggestion of what comes next may help elicit a more concrete reaction.

Stanley casts a vision for the response to his sermons in two stages: first, for “YOU” (how this message applies to the individual); and finally, for “WE” (what it would look like if we all lived into this application, together).<sup>123</sup> I’ve found this model a comfortable one to adopt, especially in that it focuses on a vision for the positive aspects of following Christ (rather than a fear of the negative ramifications of choosing otherwise). It could benefit me (and likely other mainline Protestant preachers) to intentionally utilize Stanley’s two closing sections for a season. After gaining more confidence, we can and should develop our own style for inviting a response to the Word.

The next-to-last question was, “What things, if any, did the preacher do in the sermon that allowed you to trust her and consider her message?” All the infrequent attendees pointed to general attributes like trustworthiness, sincerity, and a genuine faith in Christ. Two other infrequent attendees named a connection with the

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<sup>123</sup> Stanley, *Communicating for a Change*, 127–129.

congregation. The regular attendees talked much more about the message itself, its “construction and delivery,” and especially that the content related to their lives. I think this is a noteworthy difference: the trust-building aspect for those who attend infrequently was my personality. This might encourage preachers to walk around and greet new faces before the service, if possible, and to genuinely and carefully use their body language during the service.

Although all the respondents self-identified as church-goers, one “regular attendee” appeared unsure about the Christian faith. This was the only one to identify “sorrow” as a reason to be open to my message:

I have always struggled with the choice of Christian faith, and probably always will question everything about it – no sermon, no matter how well written and delivered, (which this was), can alleviate my own personal doubts. Yet I did appreciate the pastor's perspective that Christmas is also a prelude to sorrow, and the ultimate purpose of Jesus' birth is his sacrificial death. I don't remember having heard anything like that before during this particular season. Generally it's the usual cliches that are voiced in every Christian church that can easily be tuned out, as we've heard it all before.

If I understand correctly that this “sorrow” was related to the topic of sin in the sermon, then this is good encouragement that we preachers can address sin without turning off non- or nominal Christians.

The final question was, “Overall, did you sense God at work through the sermon? If so, how?” I appreciated the honesty of that same unsure churchgoer: “No, but that's just my nature. I am definitely not tuned in to a message from God. But through the pastor's actions and words, her own faith is apparent and it's obvious she believes that everyone is saved, even me.” Everyone else said some kind of “yes,” with

no clear theme in any one category. Five of these had to do with the worship service, such as the candlelight finish or the inclusion of children as readers and soloists. Four others pointed specifically to the sermon. "I felt God guided the sermon," said one respondent who attends church elsewhere. "I felt God aided in delivering a strong message." A regular attendee of Andrews UMC gave more detail:

I know in my own heart I felt God at work during the sermon. I was intrigued by the thought of darkness on Christmas Eve, on all the complex and intense emotions that surrounded this birth. The excitement, one that most everyone relates to a birth. The fear of the unknown that Herod had. The sadness of Jesus' death on the cross and darkness that covered he [sic] world. The hope and light that was restored and that we are to share. There was something so very magnificent and symbolic about the candle for me this year.

I also found a special presence in this particular Christmas Eve. These responses reinforced the feeling I had in my heart: the Holy Spirit was involved in a special way. I expressed that sentiment at a follow-up meeting of the worship committee. The same young adult who suggested giving away candles looked at me with conviction and a little bit of surprise. "I did, too," she said. "There was something different." I'm grateful to know through her and these surveys that it wasn't me alone who had a positive experience with this different approach to preaching. Their responses confirm that following Peter's example in a mainstream Protestant pulpit is not only possible, but makes a noticeable difference.

Our January attendance records tell a more humbling story.

I had hoped that the many visitors in attendance would be inspired by the "New Year: New You" sermon series, lovingly publicized in their Christmas Eve parting gifts.

Visions of full pews (and a higher average attendance to report for 2018!) danced in my head. My pride swelled when the first Sunday of the year brought a decent crowd. Then came three of the coldest weeks in recent history, along with a life-threatening and vaccine-impervious bout of the flu. In the end, our January 2018 attendance was definitively the worst I've experience since arriving in Andrews.

**Table 7: Comparison of January Attendance**

Sunday	2015	2016	2017	2018
1	90	98	80	94
2	112	109	71	54
3	116	77	87	77
4	113	85	99	69

Even in my disappointment, I couldn't help but laugh at myself. That's not to say I regret the extra planning and promotion we did for our January worship services; that work was not wasted, even if it was received by a smaller group than anticipated. But clearly preaching like Peter does not always end with, "And that day about three thousand persons were added" (Acts 2:41). As I related the January numbers (or lack thereof) to my advisers, Jerusha Neal reminded me of how the book of Acts ends. I had forgotten about the bumpy road, so far beyond the scope of this thesis, that followed Peter's first four sermons. The Jewish leadership in Rome responds to Paul's message as our congregations often do today: "Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe" (Acts 28:24). Even so, I am determined to give my best to be Christ's witness, whatever the results may be.

## 10. Conclusion: Peter's Successors

After studying Peter for over a year, I feel a connection that wasn't there before.

When I started, he was lovable but far-off, like a character from a fantasy novel: a person of a different gender from a different time and a different culture. This disconnection was a mild issue, if anything, when I read about Peter as a disciple. While my walk with Jesus is figurative, Peter literally walked with the Christ.

The gap between us widened significantly when I examined Peter's speeches in Acts. I witness to things I feel in my soul; he witnessed to things he saw with his own two eyes. Reciting one of Peter's speeches seemed akin to reciting lines from Shakespeare – beautiful but hard to understand or relate to. When I ran the idea for this thesis by a clergy mentor, he responded, "Peter's method is kind of a string of Old Testament citations – which would flop in my church, as our mental framework and level of biblical literacy are so vastly different from whoever was standing around Jerusalem back in 30 CE." I didn't disagree. It seemed it would take a world of translation to bring Peter into any modern pulpit. And perhaps it has; this thesis is the result of a full year's reflection on Peter.

But spending that much time with someone – even a very different "someone" – has a way of diminishing differences and illuminating the common ground. I have to think that Peter, who facilitated the "astounding" arrival of the Holy Spirit on a group of

Gentiles in Acts 10:45, would honor the spiritual connection I feel. In Christ there is no Jew or...twenty-first century American.

Allowing Peter to co-write my Christmas Eve sermon was a turning point, one that made the Biblical figure feel almost as real as my living, breathing mentors in homiletics. A model that once seemed so foreign now feels not only natural, but essential. How could anyone preach without a reliance on the Holy Spirit, the opportunity of building on a miracle, a clear presentation of the *kerygma*, an inspired use of Scripture, and an invitation to those open to following Christ?

This new affection for Peter has made me think, for the first time in a long time, about the idea of apostolic succession. It's not held much appeal to me before. I'm neither Catholic nor Orthodox; as an outsider looking in, apostolic succession has seemed only for propping up over-inflated claims to authority. But after studying Peter's sermons, I've come to think about that succession in a new light.

Campbell describes bishops in the early church as "successors of the apostles because they were *charged to maintain continuity with the message of Jesus.*"<sup>124</sup> If the emphasis is on a continuity of message, being in Peter's spiritual lineage isn't so much about status as it is a responsibility to be a certain kind of witness. Ordained clergy continue to carry a torch that started with a commission on the mount of Olivet almost

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<sup>124</sup> Dennis M. Campbell, *The Yoke of Obedience: The Meaning of Ordination in Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 32; emphasis mine.

two thousand years ago. We must take that responsibility seriously, lest we discover we've been carrying an extinguished light in wrong directions.

A reconnection with Peter's model of witnessing to Christ can give today's preachers spark and direction for their call. Because all preachers and all congregations are different, that model cannot be applied by exact replication. It's the broad themes that have the most power to guide us in our work.

Given my new feelings of solidarity with Peter, I've wondered: What were his feelings as he began to speak at Pentecost?

I know what my first sermon felt like. I was fully prepared for failure. The size of the congregation added to my nervousness; not only would I fail, I would fail in front of hundreds of people. I still marvel that I even agreed to try. When I finally stepped into that pulpit, it took an enormous leap of faith.

Luke doesn't reveal Peter's interior monologue, but I can't help but think that he felt at least a moment of anxiety. Did his failure to find the right words around the charcoal fire flash through his mind? Did the size of the Pentecost crowd make his stomach drop? As he stepped up from among the eleven, did he marvel at what he was doing? As he opened his mouth to speak, did it feel like a leap of faith?

We don't know the answers to any of those questions. What we know is what happened in the end: "But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them" (Acts 2:14).

Preaching is a terrifying and wonderful call. Every step toward the pulpit can feel like a leap of faith – from study to prayer to writing, to the final moment when we open our mouths. Thankfully, we do not take that leap alone. The Holy Spirit was with Peter, and the Holy Spirit is with us.

May the Spirit Christ sent us empower us to be his witnesses...in Judea and Samaria, and to whichever end of the earth we are sent.

## Appendix A: Peter's First Four Speeches in Parallel

	Acts 2:14-42	Acts 3:12-26	Acts 4:8-12, 19-20	Acts 5:29-32
<b>Peter gets ready...</b>	<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them,	<sup>11</sup> While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. <sup>12</sup> When Peter saw it, he addressed the people,	<sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them,	<sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered,
<b>Address</b>	"Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.	"You Israelites,	"Rulers of the people and elders,	
<b>Reference to preceding event</b>	<sup>15</sup> Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.  <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup> 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women,	why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?  <i><sup>16</sup> And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.</i>	<sup>9</sup> if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup> let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health	"We must obey God rather than any human authority.

	<p>in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.</p> <p><sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.</p> <p><sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.</p> <p><sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'</p>			
<b>Jesus the Christ</b>	<p><sup>22</sup> "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know —</p>	<p><sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus,</p>	<p>by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,</p>	<p><sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus,</p>
<b>You crucified</b>	<p><sup>23</sup> this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.</p>	<p>whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. <sup>14</sup> But you</p>	<p>whom you crucified,</p>	<p>whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.</p>

<p><b>God raised</b></p>	<p><sup>24</sup> But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.</p>	<p>rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, <sup>15</sup> and you killed the Author of life,</p> <p>whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.</p>	<p>whom God raised from the dead.</p>	<p><sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.</p>
<p><b>Scriptural evidence</b></p>	<p><sup>25</sup> For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me,  for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;  <sup>26</sup> therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;  moreover my flesh will live in hope.  <sup>27</sup> For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,  or let your Holy One experience corruption.  <sup>28</sup> You have made known to me the ways of life;  you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'</p> <p><sup>29</sup> "Fellow Israelites, I may say to you</p>	<p><sup>17</sup> "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. <sup>18</sup> In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer...  <sup>20</sup> so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, <sup>21</sup> who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. <sup>22</sup> Moses said, 'The Lord your</p>	<p><sup>11</sup> This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  it has become the cornerstone.'</p>	

<p><b>We are witnesses</b></p>	<p>confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. <sup>30</sup> Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup> Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.'</p> <p><sup>32</sup> This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. <sup>33</sup> Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. <sup>34</sup> For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,</p>	<p>God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you. <sup>23</sup> And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be utterly rooted out of the people.' <sup>24</sup> And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days. <sup>25</sup> You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'</p>	<p><sup>19</sup> But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge <sup>20</sup> for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."</p>	<p><sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit</p>
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<p><b>Call for Response</b></p>	<p>'The Lord said to my Lord,          "Sit at my right hand,  <sup>35</sup> until I make your enemies your footstool."  <sup>36</sup> Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."</p> <p><sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" <sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."</p> <p><sup>40</sup> And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save</p>	<p><sup>19</sup> Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out...</p> <p><sup>26</sup> When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."</p>	<p><sup>12</sup> There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."</p>	<p>whom God has given to those who obey him."</p>
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	<p>yourselves from this corrupt generation.” <sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. <sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.</p>			
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## Appendix B: Emails to Survey Respondents

*In most cases, the initial interest in completing a survey was gathered via conversation or a brief e-mail or text exchange, during which I emphasized that participation would be completely optional. Once a potential respondent agreed to participate, I collected contact information (if I did not already have it) and sent the following message to confirm their involvement and clarify details:*

[Name], thank you for agreeing to take a survey on my Christmas Eve sermon!

As you know, I am working on my Doctor of Ministry degree through Duke Divinity School. My thesis is a study of Peter's preaching in Acts, and finishes by applying what I've observed about those early sermons to my Christmas Eve sermon. To evaluate and draw some final conclusions, I am recruiting 15 (or so) people to give honest feedback on the sermon. Thank you for being one of them!

You will need to attend the Christmas Eve service, which will be at Andrews United Methodist Church at 6pm on Sunday, December 24<sup>th</sup>. **Later that evening you'll receive an email or Facebook message with a link to the online survey. You can complete the survey anytime after the service and before Friday, January 5<sup>th</sup>.**

Here are some other details to keep in mind:

- The survey is 7 questions long; it should take you 15 to 20 minutes but feel free to take as much time as you need.
- The survey will be completely anonymous. You will not be asked for your name; only for your level of involvement at Andrews UMC. There will be more than 1 person in each category which will help ensure your anonymity.
- The survey is also completely voluntary. You can skip questions you don't want to answer or quit the survey at any time.
- Your honest answers will be most important to me. Good, constructive feedback will not only help my thesis, but will also help me become a better preacher. Negative feedback will not cause me to "fail" my thesis!
- Video of the sermon may be posted later; I would prefer you \*not\* watch that video but instead give responses based on hearing the sermon one time. If this means that your answer to some questions is "I can't remember," that is OK.
- Parts of your feedback may be quoted in my thesis, but (since they are anonymous) no names will be attached.

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey! If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me; if you have questions about your rights as a research study participant, you may contact the human subjects committee at 919-684-3030 or at campusirb@duke.edu.

Much love,  
Mary

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*An invitation was also sent to visitors to the Christmas Eve service who left their contact information. That communication was somewhat different:*

Initial email (to be edited slightly for personalization):

[Name], thank you for attending our Christmas Eve service! I will hold you in prayer throughout the week.

I am working on a doctoral thesis, and looking for help from some of our Christmas Eve visitors in the form of feedback on the sermon. Would be willing to complete an anonymous, 15–20 minute online survey between now and January 5? If so, I can send you more information.

Participating in the survey is completely optional. Most importantly... Merry Christmas!

Much love,  
Mary

Second email, if the visitor was willing to complete the survey:

[Name], thank you for agreeing to take the survey!

I am working on my Doctor of Ministry degree through Duke Divinity School. My thesis is a study of Peter's preaching in Acts, and finishes by applying what I've observed about those early sermons to my Christmas Eve sermon. Your feedback (along with 15 or so others) will help me evaluate and draw some final conclusions.

**To take the survey, follow this link:** <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/F35WKQZ>

**You can complete the survey anytime between now and Friday, January 5<sup>th</sup>.**  
Here are some other details to keep in mind:

- The survey is 7 questions long; it should take you 15 to 20 minutes but feel free to take as much time as you need.
- The survey will be completely anonymous. You will not be asked for your name; only for your level of involvement at Andrews UMC. There will be more than 1 person in each category which will help ensure your anonymity.
- The survey is also completely voluntary. You can skip questions you don't want to answer or quit the survey at any time.
- Your honest answers will be most important to me. Good, constructive feedback will not only help my thesis, but will also help me become a better preacher. Negative feedback will not cause me to "fail" my thesis!
- Video of the sermon may be posted later; I would prefer you \*not\* watch that video but instead give responses based on hearing the sermon one time. If this means that your answer to some questions is "I can't remember," that is OK.
- Parts of your feedback may be quoted in my thesis, but (since they are anonymous) no names will be attached.

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey! If you have any questions, please feel free to ask; if you have questions about your rights as a research study participant, you may contact the human subjects committee at 919-684-3030 or at campusirb@duke.edu.

Much love,  
Mary

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*On December 31<sup>st</sup>, a reminder email was sent to all participants:*

[Name], thank you again for being willing to give me feedback on my Christmas Eve sermon!

Because the surveys are anonymous, I do not know whether or not you've completed it yet. Participation is still completely voluntary, but if you are willing to complete a survey and have not done so yet...this is your friendly reminder! I need the responses by Friday, January 5<sup>th</sup>.

The link for the survey is: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/F35WKQ7>

Thank you!  
Mary

## Appendix C: Christmas Eve Sermon Survey

Which best describes you?

- I regularly attend Andrews UMC (once a month or more)
- I attend Andrews UMC, but infrequently (1–6 times a year)
- I regularly attend another church
- I don't go to church very often

Did the sermon help you understand the ministry and purpose of Jesus Christ? How?

If a non-church-going friend asked you what the Christmas Eve sermon said about Jesus, what would you say?

How was the Bible used to explain the Christian faith in Jesus?

If this sermon was a case for Christ, what would be the most convincing “evidence”?

What – if anything – did this sermon encourage or inspire you to do?

What things, if any, did the preacher do in the sermon that allowed you to trust her and consider her message?

Overall, did you sense God at work through the sermon? If so, how?

## Appendix D: Survey Responses: Regular Attendees

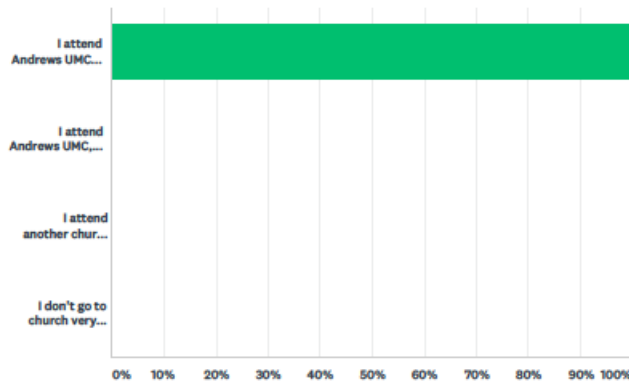
Double-click on image below to access .pdf and full results.

Christmas Eve Sermon Questionnaire

SurveyMonkey

### Q1 Which best describes you?

Answered: 7 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
I attend Andrews UMC regularly (once a month or more).	100.00% 7
I attend Andrews UMC, but infrequently (closer to 1-6 times a year).	0.00% 0
I attend another church regularly.	0.00% 0
I don't go to church very often.	0.00% 0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7</b>

# Appendix E: Survey Responses: Infrequent Attendees

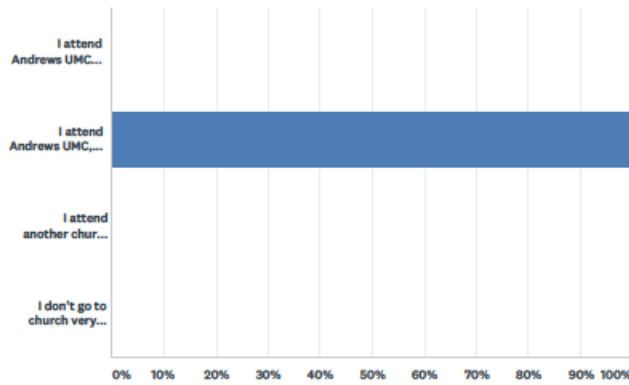
Double-click on image below to access .pdf and full results.

Christmas Eve Sermon Questionnaire

SurveyMonkey

## Q1 Which best describes you?

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	PERCENTAGE	RESPONSES
I attend Andrews UMC regularly (once a month or more).	0.00%	0
I attend Andrews UMC, but infrequently (closer to 1-6 times a year).	100.00%	5
I attend another church regularly.	0.00%	0
I don't go to church very often.	0.00%	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>5</b>

# Appendix F: Survey Responses: Attend Elsewhere

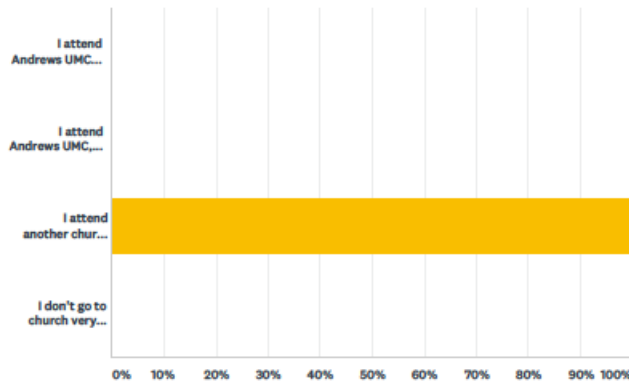
Double-click on image below to access .pdf and full results.

Christmas Eve Sermon Questionnaire

SurveyMonkey

## Q1 Which best describes you?

Answered: 3 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
I attend Andrews UMC regularly (once a month or more).	0.00% 0
I attend Andrews UMC, but infrequently (closer to 1-6 times a year).	0.00% 0
I attend another church regularly.	100.00% 3
I don't go to church very often.	0.00% 0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3</b>

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## **Biography**

Mary Wood Brown was born in St. Petersburg, FL on April 25, 1978. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Emory University in 2000 and a Master of Divinity from the Iliff School of Theology in 2003. She was ordained an elder in the United Methodist Church in 2013 and is currently a member of the Western North Carolina Conference. She was a recipient of the Parish Ministry Fund scholarship.