

The speeches in Acts, and Scripture as God's word

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Review

1. Why study the book of Acts?
 - a. Luke 1:3-4 "...so that [we] may have certainty concerning the things [we] have been taught." [SLIDE]
2. Last week we looked at the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and what happened when he did arrive.
 - a. The sound of a mighty wind
 - b. Tongues of what appeared to be fire
 - c. The apostles (and possibly the other believers) speaking in many other human languages

Baptism of the Holy Spirit (from last week)

Acts chapter 2 overview

1. The description of what happened on that day in **Acts 2:1-13**
2. Peter's sermon and explanation of what happened in **2:14-41**
3. The immediate effects of the event on the life of the brand new Jerusalem church in **2:42-47**

Peter's speech in Acts 2:14-41

1. **Acts 2:14-41** [SLIDES]
2. Read the passage, and have one or more people time how long it takes to read verses 14-36.

Excursus: The speeches in Acts

1. Why an excursus on the speeches in Acts?
2. General observations of the speeches in Acts
 - a. First, let's deal with the term "speeches." In this case, "speeches" is a catch-all term covering one person speaking to a group of people, missionary or evangelistic sermons to Jews and Gentiles, defenses made at trial, debates, speeches that teach, and possibly the variety of dialogue between individuals.
 - b. Depending on who is doing the counting, the speeches in Acts make up approximately 25-33%, or up to one-third, of Acts - a significant amount of the total content by any measure.
 - c. Stott points out that "Luke is true to his intention of recording what Jesus continued (after his ascension) both 'to do and to teach' (1:1)." [SLIDE]
 - d. The distribution of the major speeches [SLIDE]
 - i. By Christians:
 1. Eight by Peter: Acts 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 10; 11; 13
 2. Two by James: Acts 15; 21
 3. One by Stephen: Acts 7
 4. Nine by Paul: Acts 13; 14; 17; 20; 22; 23; 24; 26; 28
 - ii. By non-Christians:
 1. One by Gamaliel: Acts 5
 2. One by town clerk in Ephesus: Acts 19
 3. One by Tertullus: Acts 24
 4. One by Festus: Acts 25
 - e. As far as we can tell, Luke was physically present only for the Miletus speech by Paul in Acts 20 and Paul's defense speeches beginning in Acts 23.
 - f. Acts covers a time-span of thirty years.
 - g. Paul's speeches where he gives an account of his conversion on the Damascus road are different each time.
 - h. Luke seems to follow the pattern of other ancient historians by including speeches in the narrative he is writing.

Historians such as Thucydides (History of the Peloponnesian War, 5th c. BC), Josephus, Herodotus, Tacitus, and Polybius, some of whom were more careful than others to be as historically accurate as they could be. Speeches and/or dialogue help tie events together, and we naturally want to hear what people are saying.

- i. Imagine a novel, for example, without any dialogue, and just containing descriptions of events.
 1. I read such a novel a few years ago, *Team Yankee*, a story about World War III set in Europe during the late 1980s. The author chose many times to describe the dialogue between characters

rather than write out the “actual” dialogue, and it made for awkward reading.

- ii. Luke has proportionately more speech material than these other ancient historians. Why? Because “Luke is chronicling a historical movement that was carried forward in the main by evangelistic preaching.” (Witherington, 118)
 - 1. Again, **Acts 1:1**, “...what Jesus **began** to do **and teach**...”

3. So what are the issues?

- a. “But are these speeches genuine utterances by the people to whom they are attributed? Are they accurate? There are three possible responses.” Stott, 69

[SLIDE]

- i. The speeches are verbatim (word for word) accounts of what each speaker said.
 - 1. Why is this an attractive idea?
 - 2. Why doesn't this work?
 - a. The speeches are (probably) too short to be complete
 - i. Peter's speech in **Acts 2:14-36** takes about three minutes to read out loud.
 - ii. Paul's speech in **Acts 17** takes about one and a half minutes to read out loud.
 - b. Even though a type of shorthand may have been in use, there was no recording equipment as we know it today. Besides, Luke was not present for the majority of the speeches. He would have depended on summaries given to him by either the speakers, the listeners, or both.
 - c. At least one of the speeches by Paul in **Acts 22**, and probably the speeches by Stephen and James, and some of the speeches by Peter, were spoken in Hebrew or Aramaic, and recorded by Luke in Greek.
 - i. Being verbatim from one language to another is practically impossible. Translation just doesn't work that way.
- ii. The modern critical (or skeptical) approach - Luke created the speeches to fit his narrative and serve his own historical and theological purposes. In other words, they are products of his imagination.
 - 1. Popularized in the early 1900s by H. J. Cadbury and Martin Dibelius, and carried on by many critical scholars since then. Their arguments and our responses:

- a. The speeches and Luke's narrative reflect the same style and vocabulary, and many of the speeches have the same shape, theological emphasis, and Scripture quotations. Therefore, it all came from Luke's mind and pen.
 - i. But why wouldn't they sound similar - the message is about Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection
- b. Based on a quote from Thucydides, there is an assumption that ancient historians freely composed their character's speeches themselves.

Thucydides: "As to the speeches ... , it was hard for me, and for others who reported them to me, to recollect the exact words. I have therefore put into the mouth of each speaker the sentiments proper to the occasion, expressed as I thought he would be likely to express them, while at the same time I endeavoured, as nearly as I could, to give the general purport of what was actually said."

Since Luke is also an ancient historian, though a Christian historian, they assume that he takes the same liberties as other ancient historians.

- i. While this may be true of some ancient historians, such as Josephus, they ignore the continuing quotation by Thucydides: "Of the events of the war I have not ventured to speak from any chance information, nor according to any notion of my own; I have described nothing but what I either saw myself, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular enquiry. The task was a laborious one...."
 - ii. Remember, Luke told us in **Luke 1:1-4** that he was writing carefully researched history, so that we may have certainty about what we have been taught. In **Acts 1:1** Luke tells us that his concept of history includes both deeds and words. Luke was as unlikely to make up the words of the speeches as he was to make up the events.
- c. Most of the speeches by Peter and Paul do not sound like their canonical (New Testament) letters.
 - i. The letters are written to Christians, while most of the speeches are intended for or delivered to

non-Christians.

- iii. Regard them as reliable summaries of what was said on each occasion, rejecting both extreme literalism (i.e. they are verbatim reports) and extreme skepticism (i.e. Luke made them up).
 1. Stott quoting F. F. Bruce: "Taken all in all, each speech suits the speaker, the audience, and the circumstances of delivery; and this ... gives good ground ... for believing these speeches to be, not inventions of the historian, but condensed accounts of speeches actually made, and therefore valuable and independent sources for the history and theology of the primitive Church." (72) [SLIDE]

4. Scripture = God's word

- a. Most of the commentators, even the conservative ones, tend to leave out the doctrine of Scripture being God-breathed (inspired) in their discussions about the speeches in Acts.
 - i. Why do you think this is the case?
 1. I think it's because they want to be taken seriously by all the other commentators, including the critical, skeptical scholars.
 2. Commentaries, although helpful in understanding Scripture, have also been described as an ongoing conversation between scholars.
 3. This doesn't necessarily mean that they don't believe Scripture is God-breathed.
- b. Saying that Scripture is God's word does **not** mean that God audibly spoke every word in Scripture himself, though he did speak some or many of the words, especially in the Old Testament.

The Bible records the words (speech) of hundreds of people, including Moses, David, Peter, Paul, and even Satan.

What it does mean is that even the words (quotations) of other people in Scripture are God's reports of what was spoken. (Grudem, 73, footnote)

- i. **Acts 1:16** [SLIDE]
- ii. **Acts 2:24-31** [SLIDES]
- iii. **2 Timothy 3:16** [SLIDE]
- iv. **2 Peter 3:15-16** [SLIDE]
- v. **1 Timothy 5:18**, referring to **Deuteronomy 25:4** and **Luke 10:7** [SLIDE]

- c. Saying that Scripture is God's word does not mean that God dictated every word to human authors (though that is what happened at some times).

- i. **Luke 1:1-3 [SLIDE]**
- ii. Commenting on Luke 1:1-3, Grudem writes:

"This is clearly not a process of dictation. Luke used ordinary processes of speaking to eyewitnesses and gathering historical data in order that he might write an accurate account of the life and teachings of Jesus [and the apostles and early church]. He did his historical research thoroughly, listening to the reports of many eyewitnesses and evaluating his evidence carefully. The gospel [and Acts] he wrote emphasize what he thought important to emphasize and reflects his own characteristic style of writing.

In between these two extremes of dictation pure and simple on the one hand, and ordinary historical research on the other hand, we have many indications of various ways by which God communicated with the human authors of Scripture. In some cases Scripture gives us hints of these various processes: it speaks of dreams, of visions, of hearing the Lord's voice or standing in the council of the Lord; it also speaks of men who were with Jesus and observed his life and listened to his teaching, men whose memory of these words and deeds was made completely accurate by the working of the Holy Spirit as he brought things to their remembrance (John 14:26). Yet in many other cases the manner used by God to bring about the result that the words of Scripture were his words is simply not disclosed to us. Apparently many different methods were used, but it is not important that we discover precisely what these were in each case.

In cases where the ordinary human personality and writing style of the author were prominently involved, as seems the case with the major part of Scripture, all that we are able to say is that God's providential oversight and direction of the life of each author was such that their personalities, their backgrounds and training, their abilities to evaluate events in the world around them, their access to historical data, their judgment with regard to the accuracy of the information, and their individual circumstances when they wrote, were all exactly what God wanted them to be, so that when they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words but also fully the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as his own."
(81)

- d. What about the inerrancy of Scripture when it comes to quotations and the speeches in Acts? How does that work?

- i. Here's how Grudem explains it:

“The method by which one person quotes the words of another person is a procedure that in large part varies from culture to culture. In contemporary American and British culture we are used to quoting a person's exact words when we enclose the statement in quotation marks (this is called direct quotation). But when we use indirect quotation (with no quotation marks) we only expect an accurate report of the substance of a statement. Consider this sentence: ‘Elliot said that he would return home for supper right away.’ The sentence does not quote Elliot directly, but it is an acceptable and truthful report of Elliot's actual statement to his father, ‘I will come to the house to eat in two minutes,’ even though the indirect quotation included none of the speaker's original words.

Written Greek at the time of the New Testament had no quotation marks or equivalent kinds of punctuation, and an accurate citation of another person needed to include only a correct representation of the *content* of what the person said (rather like our indirect quotations): it was not expected to cite each word exactly. Thus, inerrancy is consistent with loose or free quotations of the Old Testament or of the words of Jesus [or the speeches in Acts], for example, so long as the *content* is not false to what was originally stated. The original writer did not ordinarily imply that he was using the exact words of the speaker and only those, nor did the original hearers expect verbatim quotation in such reporting.” (92)

The take-away for us

1. All Scripture is God's word, it has God's full authority, and it should be believed and obeyed.

It's okay if we don't have the exact speeches spoken by the people in Acts. What we do have is exactly what God wanted written down, and it communicates exactly what he wanted to communicate through the author (Luke) to his original readers and finally to us.

Resources

1. *The Message of Acts*, John Stott
2. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ben Witherington III
3. *Acts*, Darrell L. Bock
4. *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Peloponnesian_War