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January 3, 2016  
Acts: Cut to the Heart  
Acts 2:36-41

As we return to the second chapter of the book of Acts, let me remind you of what has taken place. We are on the day of Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit has come upon the apostles with power, such that they have been proclaiming the mighty works of God in every language under the sun, languages they could not have possibly known. Then, Peter proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ to the crowds who have gathered there in Jerusalem. Peter preaches Jesus Christ—his life, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. This morning we will pick up our journey through Acts beginning with 2:36…the last line of Peter’s sermon, and we’ll read through vs. 41 to see how the crowd responds to his sermon. Let’s stand and read the Word of the Lord.

As Americans living at the edge of 2016, many of us will likely read this story wrongly because of our worldview, so let me back up and make sure you know some of the critical assumptions that this crowd in first century Jerusalem held in common before we dive into the text.

In his book, How Then Shall We Live?, the late, great Chuck Colson pleads that we understand Christianity as a worldview, not just as a personal experience. That’s good counsel. Remember that a worldview…any worldview…must address the big three questions: Where did we come from, and who are we? What has gone wrong with the world? And what can we do to fix it?

You may wonder why those particular questions are essential to any worldview. That’s an easy question to answer: those questions address the observable reality that is common to every person in the world. We exist, the universe exists, we are personal, we are moral, we are communal…we are intelligent and use language…how did that happen? And what does it mean? In other words…why are we here, what is our purpose, what’s the point of having life and intelligence and language and relationships? Everybody asks those questions…everybody. So a worldview has to address those questions.

And…everybody asks the question, “How did things get so screwed up?” Why are people so evil to one another? Why is there so much suffering and injustice? Why do people seem so programmed towards self-destruction? Why do relationships always bring us pain, even the best of them? Every worldview must address what is wrong and how it got so wrong.

And then finally, everyone wants to know, “What can be done to fix what’s broken?” How can we make the world a better place to live? How can we help bring healing where there is so much brokenness? Every worldview must address the solution.

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Keeping these big questions in mind, we must understand the Jewish worldview that was assumed by just about everybody that day in Jerusalem when Peter preached the gospel. First, all Jews understood that God created the heavens and the earth, and that they were given life to glorify God and to obey His commandments. The Jews did not wrestle with believing in the existence of God...that was a given. The Jews did not wrestle with atheism or agnosticism, they did not wrestle with the notion that the universe popped into existence on its own power or that life evolved over billions of years through random time and chance.

In regards to the second big question, the Jews believed the scriptures that revealed what went wrong: the story of the Fall found in Genesis 3. The Jews understood that the misuse of human freedom led humans to sin, and because of God’s perfect justice and holiness, the penalty of sin was death. The Jews understood that their sin required the sacrifice of unblemished lives (usually that of sheep, goats, or bulls) as a symbolic cleansing of their sin against God. The Jews knew they needed to be forgiven in order to be reconciled to God.

Finally, the Jews believed that God was going to make things right by sending a Messiah, a Savior. The Jewish prophet Isaiah had written hundreds of years before this day of Pentecost that God would provide a suffering servant who would bear the iniquity of us all, his death would serve as intercession for transgressors. And so they waited for the Messiah, the Savior.

You see, the Jews had a biblical worldview that served as the foundation upon which Peter built his sermon that day in Jerusalem. Peter did not have to convince his listeners that God existed, or that God created the world, or that human sin was the problem, or that God was going to send a Messiah to save the world from itself. No…the only thing Peter needed to convince his listeners of was what we read as his conclusion in vs. 36: “God has made this Jesus both Lord and Messiah, whom you crucified.”

Within the context of a biblical worldview, this one verse sums up the primary purpose of preaching the gospel in a public venue. First, we preach to convince the listeners of who Jesus is and what God accomplished through Jesus. Jesus is LORD…He is God’s Son…and Jesus is the Savior, the Messiah, the Promise of God fulfilled. Peter says, “Know this for certain!”

But notice that the message of the Gospel does not just convince the listener that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. The message of the Gospel preached this day in Jerusalem also convict the listeners that they have blood on their hands. Peter makes sure the crowd in Jerusalem understands that they were responsible for crucifying the Messiah. Why? Because it’s not enough to agree with who Jesus is. To be affected by the gospel, we must also be realistic and honest about who we are. We are sinful human beings who have rebelled against God, and our rebellion cost Jesus His life. Our sin drove nails into the Lamb of God.
Both the conviction of who Jesus is and who we are as sinners, within the context of a biblical worldview, were necessary to bring about the response we see in vs. 37, “Now, when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Luke reports that thousands in the crowd were “cut to the heart.” What does that mean? Have you ever been “cut to the heart?” We use that expression every once in a while, don’t we? We say, “Let’s cut to the heart of the matter.” To cut to the heart means to bring ultimate conviction to what ultimately matters most. When Peter concludes his message, thousands recognize what they could not formerly see: Jesus was the Messiah…He was right there, in their midst, and they missed it. Instead of worshiping Him as the fulfillment of God’s promise to save the world, they falsely accused Him and chanted, “Crucify Him!” Yet this Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, rose again and ascended to the right hand of the Father. His power now courses through His disciples, empowering them to speak in every language under the sun. The power of the Holy Spirit brings conviction at that moment, and those hearing Peter’s message get it…they see Jesus, the Righteous One of God, and they see their sin…and they are cut to the heart.

As a pastor, I’ve had the great privilege and opportunity to hear many, many people give their personal testimonies. Time and again I’ve heard people say, “God showed me my sin, and then I experienced the love of Jesus who died for me so that I could be forgiven.” That’s my testimony as well, as many of you know. I can’t tell you how many times people have reported that a sermon or the scripture or even a Christian song was like a knife that cut them to the heart…bringing conviction from God about their sin, God’s love in Jesus, and God’s call upon their lives. People will say, “It was as though every word was spoken just for me.” I have no doubt that God continues to convict human hearts about the truth of the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit. If ever you come under such powerful conviction of your own sin and God’s great love for you, you will understand what some 3000 people experienced that day in Jerusalem.

The conviction of our sin in light of God’s holiness is devastating, but knowing that God so loves us as sinners that He takes on our sin and dies in our place as one of us is what ultimately brings us to the place of contrite submission. It’s in that place of our unworthiness and God’s great love for sinners that our hearts break and we inevitably ask the question of the crowd that day in Jerusalem, “What then shall we do?”

Peter replies in vs. 38, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

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Over the next few weeks I’m going to unpack Peter’s response in greater depth, but this morning I want to encourage you to submit yourself to Peter’s teaching. If you are ever cut to the heart by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the first and immediate response should always be repentance…which, at the minimum, means to turn back to God. Most people who have been cut to the heart realize they have been running from God, so when they come under conviction, they turn around. Whenever we repent, whenever we are convicted to turn around, we always find our loving Father running to meet us and to make up the space between us. In Jesus Christ, our Father ran to us so that we would never have to earn our way back to Him. Baptism signifies both our repentance and God’s forgiveness through the name and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And the gift we receive upon our repentance and our baptism is God’s presence, His Holy Spirit, living and abiding with us with power and healing. Again, we’ll unpack each of these areas in greater detail over the next few weeks, but I want to finish this message by circling back to this notion of being cut to the heart and worldviews.

One of the reasons that so many people in our culture cannot grasp the concept of Jesus as our Savior is that they are operating on a worldview that has no place for God, the supernatural, or even the concept of sin. Millions have been brainwashed into believing that the universe simply popped into existence on its own, there is no purpose in life other than to survive and reproduce…nothing is really wrong because nothing is absolute standard for what is right…and consequently, the only thing that can be done to make things right is to be true to ourselves and to tolerate those who are different than us.

Still others around the world operate on a competing religious worldview that involves other gods or philosophies that attempt to answer the big three questions such that they have little interest in the proclamation of Jesus as Lord who reconciles us to God through the forgiveness of sins.

Here’s what I feel led to say about that: I am convinced that a Christian worldview is the ONLY…not one of many, but the ONLY satisfying, thoughtful, and comprehensive answer to the universal questions asked by all people. As Chuck Colson writes, “Only Christianity provides credible, defensible answers to life’s most crucial questions, and only Christianity offers a reasonable strategy for how we are to live in the real world.” I encourage you to pick up a copy of Colson’s book, How Now Shall We Live that he penned with Nancy Pearcey that unpacks exactly why Christianity alone serves as a satisfying and defensible worldview.

Now let me ask you a question: do you believe in a Christian worldview, or do you simply believe in a personal spiritual experience that helps you manage your life? The reason I ask that question is this: Christianity, in the end, is either comprehensively true in every aspect of our existence…every realm from politics, to the marketplace, to education, to justice, to health, to
science…or it’s not true at all. Christianity is finally a holistic worldview, not a particular practice or moral code that is helpful to some but not to others.

If Jesus is Lord, then God is there, and He has spoken. He has not only spoken into our religious questions, He has spoken into every realm of existence and said in no uncertain terms, “It’s MINE!” All people belong to Him, every planet and star has His fingerprints on them, and there is nothing in the physical or spiritual realm that He does not reign over.

The challenge for us as the local church is to live in every realm of existence in such a way that we actually believe that Jesus is Lord of all and we act accordingly. That means honoring Christ in the way we lead our families, in the way we do our business, in the way we govern, in the way we address the great needs around the world, in the way we treat our environment, and so on. We cannot defend a biblical, Christian worldview if we do not live out a Christian worldview. And we must defend a Christian worldview even as we challenge competing worldviews. The days of preaching sermons to those already convicted of a biblical worldview in the public realm are about over. In order for people to be cut to the heart, the Holy Spirit will need to empower us to preach the gospel in the language that people will understand, and right now that language requires us to speak about worldview questions with conviction and compassion.

Remember, every person you know is constantly wrestling with how we got here, what our purpose in life is, what is wrong with the world, and what we can do to make it right. Ask the people you care about to share their answers to those questions. If ever we can find common ground as to how we got here and what the problem is, people’s hearts will be that much closer to hearing and believing the good news of the gospel…which is simply this: God created the heavens and the earth, but everything got broken when we misused our free will to rebel against God…which is why there is so much pain and brokenness in the world. But God so loved us that He gave us His Son, that whomsoever would believe in Him…that all who call upon the name of the Lord…might be saved. We are saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. Our salvation will lead to an empowered life through His Holy Spirit, and consequently we serve as His agents to bring healing, justice, freedom, and hope to our broken world. And when we’re done, we get to go home…to our true home with our true Father. That is the good news, and if it cuts you to the heart this morning, turn around. Let’s pray.