

CBA Continuing Seminar on Biblical Issues in Christian-Jewish Relations
Sixty-Fifth General Meeting University of San Francisco
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Summary: The Petrine Speeches in Acts

The sessions at our 2003 meeting discussed the the Petrine speeches in Acts in two interrelated steps; first, what are the objectives of the speeches?; second, what is the impact on congregations of the lectionary's use of these speeches during the Easter season? Our conversation began with a very helpful presentation by James Polich of his research on the Acts speeches.

The seminar read through each of the major Petrine speeches and examined their purposes. The following points were made:

1. The Lucan theme of forgiveness is prominent. God's gracious forgiveness in Christ is available to all, including Jesus' executioners, disciples, and everyone in Acts who hinders the spread of the gospel.
2. The speeches are prophetic denunciations meant to encourage repentance and conversion to the gospel. Acts notes that thousands of Jews are baptized in the aftermath of the speeches.
3. The speeches are intramural Jewish conversations. They take on an "anti-Jewish" character when proclaimed in the Gentile church.
4. Acts does not envision a continued religious validity for non-baptized Jews. Those who do not listen to Jesus "shall be ruthlessly cut off from the people" (Acts 3:23). Luke holds that the People of God are in the process of being reconstituted out of baptized Jews and Gentiles. Unbaptized Jews thus appear in the remainder of Acts as the constant foes of the gospel.
5. Of great importance is the de facto speech given by church members in their thanksgiving prayer in Acts 4:23-30. It mentions Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the peoples of Israel as responsible for Jesus' death, unlike some of the Petrine speeches which more narrowly address Israel and/or its leaders. Unfortunately, it is not in the Sunday lectionary.

The subject of the lectionary's use of the Petrine speeches arose throughout the seminar's deliberations. The bi-weekly repetition of the charge that Jews or Jerusalemites "killed the forerunner of life" (Acts 3:15 - which reads "author of life" in the lectionaries currently in use) was seen as reinforcing the long-lived Christian practice of blaming Jews collectively for the crucifixion.

There seemed to be a consensus that it would be best to devise alternate Acts lessons during the Easter season. Short of this revision, the following pastoral strategies in preaching and teaching were suggested:

1. Identify the congregation with those being challenged to repent.
2. Associate the charges of corporate responsibility for the crucifixion with instances of wrongs demanding communal repentance today. The prayers of penitence at the Vatican's Mass of Pardon in March 2000 could be used to illustrate this.
3. Point out that the church today does not share Luke's eschatological vision. He was comfortable imagining that unbaptized Jews had become disconnected from God, especially because he felt human history was winding to its End. However, our 2000 year effective history and our experience of holiness in contemporary Jewish communities preclude such an idea. We disagree with Luke.
4. Official church teaching, especially John Paul II's frequent assertions that Jews remain in covenant with God ought to be contrasted with Luke's perspective.
5. Our preaching and teaching should in general engage the Bible more critically. Catholic tradition does not accept the prevailing American biblical ethos, which at times seems *sola scriptura*. The Bible both critiques and challenges contemporary faith communities, and those communities have an obligation to critique and challenge the biblical authors.

It was decided that next year's topic will be "Historical Jesus research and Christian-Jewish relations." Although further details will follow, the following titles were suggested as possible advance reading:

- 1) Kloppenborg, ed. *Journal for the Historical Study of Jesus* (forthcoming special issue)
- 2) Jesus the Christian (author unknown, forthcoming)
- 3) Beatrice Bruteau, *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, Maryknoll: Orbis 2001
- 4) Bryan LeBeau, Leonard Greenspoon, and Dennis Hamm eds., *The Historical Jesus through Catholic and Jewish Eyes*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000.
- 5) John Townsend, article on Jesus' agreements with Shannai against Hillel in the forth coming memorial volume for Anthony Saldarini.