

Great Texts on Scripture: Luke 4: 16-30

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Editor's Note: For the next several issues, Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old will present a series of articles on the biblical roots of Christian worship.

The story of Jesus going to the synagogue in Nazareth tells us about a most important principle of worship: God is glorified when the gospel is preached. For some time after Jesus' resurrection, the worship of the earliest Christians followed the pattern of synagogue worship as it was celebrated on the Sabbath. We read in the Gospel of Luke concerning Jesus, "On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom" (Luke 4:16). There Jesus and his disciples joined other devout Jews in the prayers, the singing of the Psalms, and listening to the reading and preaching of the Scriptures.

By that time the Jewish synagogue had well-established patterns of worship. The service would have begun with the singing of psalms. Then there would have been several rather lengthy prayers. Finally the scroll of the Law would be brought out of the ark, a large cupboard similar to the armoires that were popular a century or two ago. Different members of the congregation read through the scroll of the Law of Moses. Perhaps as much as half an hour or more was given to the reading of the Scriptures, done on the basis of the *lectio continua*. (Each Sabbath the reading began where it had left off the Sabbath before. The point was that the Scriptures were regularly read through in a systematic way.)

After the reading, a psalm would be sung while the scroll was rolled up and put back in the ark. The singing would continue as a second scroll was brought out and unrolled to the place requested. This rolling and unrolling of the scrolls might take several minutes.

There were always two Scripture lessons on any given Sabbath. The first was from the Law and the second was from the prophets. The lesson from the prophets was not, however, based on a *lectio continua*, but rather was chosen by the preacher. It was the basis on which the preacher interpreted the passage read from the Law. On any given Sabbath several elders of the congregation might have interpretive remarks to be made on the portion of the Law of Moses that had been read.

It was also the custom that any recognized teacher or distinguished visitor might be called on to say a few words. Visiting theologians and traveling teachers had what might be called "a right to the pulpit." This, of course, is what we find in Luke 4:16-30. Jesus was an itinerant preacher like many others in his day. The Greeks knew plenty of itinerant philosophers, just as the Jews knew itinerant rabbis. They had a distinct place in the religious culture of antiquity.

This custom of multiple sermons passed over into the Church as well. St. Jerome, about the year 400, tells us that at the Church of the Holy

Sepulchre in Jerusalem it was the normal procedure for several presbyters to comment on the Scripture readings. After the elders had commented, the bishop would tie the comments together in a sermon.

Luke's account of Jesus' preaching in the synagogue fits very well into what we know about synagogue worship. We read, Jesus "... stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ...'" (Luke 4:16-18). Jesus read the passage and, as the text says, "He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down" (Luke 4:20). That is, he sat down in the seat of Moses which, in the synagogue, was the equivalent of the pulpit. Preachers sat to preach.

What is interesting here is the way Jesus introduced his sermon. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). When Jesus preached the gospel the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets were fulfilled. The preaching of Jesus was worship because it glorified God for his faithfulness to his Word.

The very fact that God's Word is proclaimed in all the world glorifies him, but when we proclaim he has fulfilled his promises, sending his Son to support the poor, release the captives, open the eyes of the blind and liberate the oppressed, then God is especially glorified.

A lecture about theology or simple moral or ethical teaching is not necessarily worship, but the proclamation of the gospel as we find it in this sermon Jesus preached is worship at its most profound.

It is very clear from Luke's story that the preaching of the gospel is central to our worship. Luke does not tell us about the psalmody which built the context of this sermon, nor does Luke even tell us about what the lesson from the Law might have been that particular Sabbath. Apparently the service broke up before they got down to the Prayer of the Eighteen Benedictions, or what we might call the pastoral prayer, but normally considerable time was given to prayers of supplication and intercession. The service would be concluded by a benediction and the singing of another psalm.

A strong emphasis on preaching is not some innovation brought in by the Protestant Reformers. The ministry of the synagogue was strongly weighted toward the reading and preaching of Scripture long before Jesus. In his day, Jesus was, above all, recognized as a preacher. (Cf. Mark 1:14). The reading and preaching of Scripture is one of several components of Christian worship, a component for which Jesus was particularly well known, and for a good five hundred years, the Christian Church maintained a strong preaching ministry.

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