

## ***The Ascension of Jesus: The Commission of the Church***

Our New Testament Scripture is from the opening verses of Luke's Book of Acts, verses 1-11.

*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup>for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." <sup>6</sup>So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup>He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*

In my former life as pastor of Baptist churches, I was used to the term "Great Commission Christian" and "Great Commission Church," preaching sermons to urge our people to be missionary in outlook and support of missionary enterprises. But I see the need to use a term often used in Presbyterian circles, *missional*, which focuses on the responsibility of individual Christians to engage in a lifestyle of witness and service. A missionary church is one that gives to missions and possibly sends and supports vocational missionaries. But a missional church is one that sees that every Christian has a responsibility and opportunity to take the good news to her or his places of influence. We shouldn't cease to be a missionary church, but we should especially be missional.

Alan Hirsch defines missional as a more personal, incarnational word that describes the very heart, character and passion of the follower of Christ. God himself is a missional God, who through his Son came into the world for our salvation. We are not to be missionary or a missionary church but are rather to be missional, joining God on mission. As Hirsch says:

"A proper understanding of *missional* begins with recovering a missionary understanding of God. By his very nature God is a 'sent one' who takes the initiative to redeem his creation. This doctrine, known as *missio Dei*—the sending of God—is causing many to redefine their understanding of the church. Because we are the 'sent' people of God, the church is the instrument of God's mission in the world. As

things stand, many people see it the other way around. They believe mission is an instrument of the church; a means by which the church is grown. Although we frequently say 'the church has a mission,' according to missional theology a more correct statement would be 'the mission has a church.'"

Today we celebrate our giving to our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, which is the perfect occasion for asking if we're a Great Commission, missionary and missional church. Are we obeying what the risen Christ commanded these first disciples and us?

The inner core of disciples were still ingrained with Jewish expectations for an immediate messianic rule that would spell the end to Roman political occupation and would mean the fulfillment of prophecies about world-wide domination by God's perfect rule on earth. Regardless of what Jesus said and taught, such as in his instructions about the end of the age, his followers persisted in fabricating false expectations about his return.

Just like these first century followers of Jesus, many today hope Jesus will immediately fulfill the promises of a consummated kingdom, with no suffering, hardship or even hard work to endure. This is the same dynamic behind the popularity of the teaching of a secret pre-tribulation rapture of the church (and hence the popularity of Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* book and movie series). Who wouldn't want to believe that we will be lifted out of this world before the real trouble starts? Yet, thousands of followers of Christ have been and are currently suffering greatly because of their stand for Christ. The hope for a secret pre-tribulation rapture for them seems almost a cruel hoax. Instead of setting our hopes on a secret rapture, we ought rather to heed Jesus' warnings, who spoke about persecution, about being hated and put to death, and said, "he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:9-13, NIV).

And so, Jesus gave a kind rebuke to the disciples' question that revealed their false expectations, saying that "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." (7). Clearly, the expectations of Christ are for his program of bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. He taught us to pray to this end, that his kingdom might come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

The goal of Christ is to see his kingdom spread, as Isaiah prophesied, until the earth is "full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9, NIV). Luke writes his second volume, which we call *Acts*, as a continuation of what Jesus began to do in volume one, his gospel account. The way of salvation was provided through Jesus Christ, but now the risen Christ Jesus has a remaining goal—that of making this provision of salvation available to the world. And thus through the church he will continue to spread his kingdom, the rule of God, until the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and "he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

Christ Jesus has a passion to bring the rule of God to the world. Since his ascension, his return to the Father's right hand, Jesus has been working through his church to bring about the fullness of the glory of God, on earth as it is in heaven. His

charge to us is that we are to be his missional people and his “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (8).

And first, a witness is someone who knows something important that is to be shared. The etymology of the word “witness” is from the word “wit,” for knowledge. Witness is thus both a noun and a verb. We are people who know something that ought to be told. And the charge to the church is for us to faithfully tell by life and words what Christ has done for all, and specifically the difference he has made in our lives. And that means we are to be faithful unto death. And, as Paul says, we often bear in our bodies the marks of Jesus (Galatians 6:17). That means we are called to witness to the cross of Jesus as we follow his pattern of the cruciform, crucified life (Galatians 2:20). Jesus says in our text that we will be his witnesses, and he is the crucified, risen Lord, who calls us to follow in his steps of death to self and all that opposes the Father’s will. We are to make known the saving gospel of Christ and verify by our transformed lives and illustrated by our testimonies of what Christ is doing in our lives today.

As missional Christians, we’re also called to build bridges in our relationships with Christ and others. Palmer Ofuoku, although not a Christian, was placed in a mission school in Nigeria because his parents knew he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for years, yet remained an adherent of a traditional African religion. One year a new missionary came to the school who began to develop close relationships with the students, including Palmer, and eventually led this young Nigerian to Christ. Palmer Ofuoku explained the missionary’s influence, saying “He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across.” (Harbour).

As missional Christians, we need to build some friendship bridges close to home. And we live our everyday lives with the freedom and joy of the Spirit, and under the authority of Christ, who’s always at work and inviting us to join him. When we join him, we soon realize he’s gone ahead of us, preparing the way.

If we’re to be faithful to our calling, which also is to continue in Kingdom of God advance against the overwhelming powers of darkness, we absolutely depend on the risen Lord Jesus, who says “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (8). In John’s Gospel, chapters 14-16, Jesus speaks at length about the promised Holy Spirit, who will empower the disciples to continue the work of the risen Lord Jesus after his return to the Father, following the finished work of the cross and resurrection. Jesus promises in those passages that the Spirit will enable us to do even greater things than he did prior to the cross and resurrection (in scope, through his working through a church scattered throughout the earth. John 14:12). The Holy Spirit is Christ within us (Colossians 1:27), to be our Teacher and also our Helper and Enabler. The Spirit in us is what allows Jesus to continue his work *in us, through us and as us*.

There are no hierarchies in God’s kingdom. All of God’s people are given the Spirit and an absolutely indispensable role in The Great Commission. God tends to use the ordinary people of this world to advance his kingdom. Eugene Peterson tells of his being a guest in a home along with other professors from the theological college where he now teaches. The hostess asked everyone around the dinner table to tell about the person who most influenced his or her life. What impressed Peterson was

the fact that none of these very influential people mentioned a pastor or church vocational person. Sometimes *in spite of* us professional ministers, God uses ordinary folks.

The Holy Spirit gives us power for living a faithful, godly and fruitful life. He's also the key to an abundant and joyful life. And in our spiritually dark world, it takes power to have joy and peace, the kind of joy and peace that the lost world around us will notice, admire and desire.

We're to live in the awareness that we belong to another realm, another kingdom not of this world, as Jesus explained to Pilate (John 18:36). The most precious awareness is that the risen Lord Jesus is alive *somewhere*, and even present with us through the Holy Spirit. Our calling and commission is to pray, live and serve to the end that the kingdom of God will come to earth (Matthew 6:9) and that the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). And when work on earth is done, the heavenly city will descend and be established on the redeemed earth, even as Jesus ascended into heaven (Revelation 21). As NT Wright says, we shouldn't think so much of the parousia as a second coming as a second appearing, since he really hasn't left us so much as has physically disappeared during this church age when he resides in his people through the Spirit .

The angels assured the disciples that the mystery of Jesus' ascension would be followed by the mystery of his return. By our living in the daily awareness of the risen Lord Jesus, dwelling in our hearts by faith, we have the assurance that "This same Jesus...will come back" (11). We're to live with faithful witness and perseverance during times of peace as well as persecution and also with persistence in godly readiness for the Master's return, as Jesus himself teaches us.

The life and work of the local church is the New Testament strategy for reaching the world, and missionary sending organizations simply help facilitate this work. Out of the church, missional disciples are sent to penetrate society.

I have a new friend I made at the fitness center, where we often work out together. He's a professional poker player and also owns a sports bar, where he grills amazing hamburgers, among other things. Although I usually and gladly pay for myself and my guests, Mark will often treat me to lunch, and always announces my presence and brags about my physical fitness to his other patrons (saying, "Roger's in amazing shape, *for his age!*")

One morning as I was working out, a local TV station reported that Mark's bar had been robbed early that morning. I got a step closer in our friendship that morning when I called him and offered to minister to anyone who might have been injured or traumatized. Mark was grateful for my call but more eager for me to give counsel to his daughter, who's grieving the loss of her mother and has become the sole caregiver for her grandmother with Alzheimer's. Recently Mark related with tears that his best friend had been killed in a forklift accident. Mark has thanked me for my concern and willingness to minister to his family and said he and his wife want to come hear me preach. God has a sense of humor, to give an old Baptist preacher a

friendship with and mission to a poker-playing bar owner! I'm as much a missionary here as when I was on the mission field of Western Europe.

We participate in the return of Jesus Christ through our involvement in gathering in his people for whom he died, and in taking the gospel to "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9; 7:9). The ascended Jesus calls us and expects us to be his Great Commission, missional people, who are joining God by following Jesus into the worlds where we live.