

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 ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After 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. ⁴While 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; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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." ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They 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."

When Jesus began to prepare his disciples for his departure back into heaven, they were filled with all sorts of emotions: anxiety, confusion, fear of their uncertain and dangerous-seeming future. But Jesus had even, prior to his crucifixion and resurrection, told them that his eventual departure would be to their advantage. It would mean that, all that he had meant to them in his earthly presence would be magnified and expanded after his departure into glory. All he had been to them during those approximately 3 years would be given to them individually and everlastingly (Jn.14 &16). You and I have received the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit, the greatest gift and asset God could ever give us (Lk. 11:13).

I'm reminded of the account of the pastor's young son, riding with him in some very challenging traffic, in which his preacher dad gave angry outbursts against rude and careless drivers. The pastor realized his angry outbursts, peppered with some "choice words," was not a good example to his son. After a while the boy broke the silence by saying, "We'd be pretty good Christians, wouldn't we Daddy, if we didn't have to drive?"

When I make a conscious effort to control my thoughts, temperament and speech, I think that keeping an image of the presence of Jesus with me in the car or in the store or even in our home, I would do better in living in the spirit and likeness of Jesus. Yet, I think Jesus' words are to me, that it's better that he not be with me physically so he can be with me through the inner dwelling of the Holy Spirit. If I lived in the awareness of Christ in me through the Holy Spirit it would be to my advantage, as he told the disciples (Jn. 16:7).

Just compare the lives and behavior of the disciples when Jesus was with them bodily and then after his resurrection when he came to reside in them through the Spirit. When he was with them, even as the time of his passion and death drew near, they were still arguing over who would have the highest place in his kingdom. Even after his warnings, the disciples forsook and

denied him. Yet they became transformed followers after Jesus left them and sent the Spirit into them.

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 more 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.

As you know, your Session and Property and Finance members are engaged in a study and process called Project Regeneration. It's a time of prayerful study, reflection and sharing about what options lie before Dale Heights. At this point, no one seems to have a clear perspective of the future. But we can all safely assume that God will lead the way, perhaps in a way we have yet to imagine or envision. I think we can safely assume that whatever the shape of the organization or institution, God wills that we each one be a part of her or his mission in the Great Commission and that we explore ever more deeply into what it means to be a missional Christian.

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.’”

On this Ascension Sunday, we do well to examine Jesus’ last words of instruction to his followers before his bodily return to the heavenly realm. Jesus had been with his disciples for a forty-day period of appearances that affirmed the reality of his bodily resurrection and the assurance that his kingdom work would continue through their faithful obedience to the task he was assigning them. 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" (Matt. 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" (Matt. 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" (Is. 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" (Rev. 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 (Gal. 6:17). That means we are called to witness to the cross of Jesus as we follow his pattern of the cruciform, crucified life (Gal. 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 (Jn. 14:12). The Holy Spirit is Christ within us (Col. 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 spoke of his being a guest in a home along with other professors from the theological college where he taught. 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 (Jn. 18:36). The most precious awareness is that the risen Lord Jesus is alive *everywhere*, 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 (Mat. 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" (Rev. 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 (Rev. 21). As NT Wright says, we shouldn't think so much of the Parousia as a second coming but 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.

Our missional lives are enhanced by our connection with the church, the body of Christ, including Dale Heights Church. God is able to work through even traumatic and tragic circumstances to link us up with those who are in need of a witness of the love of Christ. Individually and as a praying church, God uses us as his missional people.

Locally and globally 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” (Rev. 5:9; 7:9). The ascended Jesus calls us and expects us to be his missional people, joining God by following the Spirit into the worlds where we live, just the ordinary places where we live, and the people we meet every day.