

Church - Acts 1:1-11 Jesus' Ascension From Earth Part 5 - Head of the Church, Presbyterianism

This fall our Bible study is asking - what is the church? Where is Jesus now and who is supposed to be running the church?

Let's read Acts 1:1-11. Luke wrote Acts as the sequel to his gospel. So this is right after Jesus' death and resurrection.

[Ascension] Where is Jesus right now?

Jesus is in heaven. He died and three days later he rose again from the dead. Then he was with his disciples on earth for 40 days. Then he ascended into heaven before their eyes in a cloud of glory. That's not just a regular rain cloud. This is the glory cloud you read about in the rest of the Bible that looks like smoke and fire and it's a manifestation of the Holy Spirit! So the Holy Spirit comes and surrounds Jesus and what's implied is this is the moment of Jesus' visible physical glorification. During those 40 days he still had the scars of the crucifixion but he could phase through walls so it was like this in between state but here it's implied he's transformed like his transfiguration on the mountain with Peter and James and John when they saw the glory cloud enveloping Jesus. Which means...now Jesus is in heaven - and he's physically glorified, still fully God and fully man and will be forever.

Nobody talks about the ascension of Jesus anymore. But we do talk about Jesus' absence. "God are you there? Can you hear me? Do you see me? I feel so alone." It's weird after everything Jesus did to save us - Jesus is up there in heaven doing awesome but we're still down here not doing awesome. So it feels like he's abandoned us. Has he abandoned us? How is he still with us? He has not abandoned us. 1) He has sent us his Holy Spirit.

Did believers in the Old Testament have the Holy Spirit? If so, how is that possible?

Yes! It's possible because of what Jesus accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection for us. He won our salvation. Which means he won for himself authority over those he saved. So following his resurrection and ascension into heaven he has the power to send the Holy Spirit to his people in order to apply that salvation to us and work that salvation out in us. After his resurrection Jesus appears to his disciples and says in Mt 28:18-20, ¹⁸ *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.* ¹⁹ *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* ²⁰ *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

BUT, it was so certain after the Fall that God's promised Messiah would accomplish the salvation of his people that the benefits of that salvation were already being applied by the authority of God to those like Adam and Eve who believed in the promise of salvation through a Savior to come. It is not possible to know this Messiah/Christ Savior apart from the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

How do you see the Holy Spirit carrying out the work of the ascended Jesus? Who did Jesus leave in charge?

2) He left his apostles empowered by the Holy Spirit with extraordinary gifts to establish and lead the church. ¹⁸ *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

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Did the apostles accomplish their mission?
Did they go to the ends of the earth telling
people the gospel of Jesus?

Yes! They start in Jerusalem, then they move out to the rest of Judea to the rest of the Jewish people, and then they move farther out to the areas of Samaria to who the Jews thought were half-breeds and corrupters of their religion, and by the end of the Book of Acts the apostle Paul has taken the gospel as far as Rome which is the "end of the earth" because it was the capital of the world and the city of Gentiles, the oppressors and enemies of God's people in Jerusalem.

So is the church done going out to the world with the gospel?

No! First question the apostles ask is, "Ok Jesus you did it, so is the kingdom of heaven coming to earth now?" Jesus said, "Not for you to know when the end of the world is, so until it comes you go out to the ends of the earth with the gospel." In Mt 28 Jesus promises he is with us "always, to the end of the age." Jesus hasn't come back in that cloud of glory so we've not reached the end of the age. So the church isn't done going to the ends of the earth with the gospel.

But there aren't any more apostles. So who did the apostles leave in charge? Empowered by the Holy Spirit sent from the ascended Jesus - who did the apostles leave in charge? How did Jesus decide to organize his church? And does everyone in the church agree on the answer today?

No! The government of the church is not a point of unity in the church. In the day to day life of ministry, church government is an essential element that influences ministry at every level which is why the New Testament talks about church government a lot.

THREE PARADIGMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Episcopalianism

Episcopalianism includes most forms of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and some forms of Pentecostalism. The big claim of this paradigm is that the focus of church authority is in the office of bishop. So the bishop has the authority to exercise ultimate church discipline, to take in and cast out, and to protect the boundaries of the church. They have the authority to ordain clergy and place pastors in one congregation or another. In episcopalianism churches are connected to each other under the authority of the bishop.

There are too many to list here but one glaring problem with episcopalianism: there are places in the New Testament where the words "elder" and "bishop" are used interchangeably (Acts 20:17, 28). They mean the same thing.

Congregationalism

This is the most common form of government amongst Protestant churches.

Congregationalism includes Congregational churches, Baptists, many independent churches, Vineyard Churches, many charismatic churches, and Willow Creek churches. The focus of authority is in the whole congregation rather than in a particular office. There may still be church officers, but there is an equality of authority among the members of the congregation. The members have the authority to set the boundaries of the church, the call and placement of ministers, and ordination. In congregationalism each local church is independent of the others. Usually local Congregationalist churches have established bylaws that govern questions of change. In

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practice though many congregational churches are dominated by the pastor.

Again, there are too many to list here but one glaring problem with congregationalism: we specifically see that local congregations are collectively ruled by a collection of elders from those different congregations, meaning they're connected and accountable to each other. (Acts 15).

Presbyterianism

This is the form of government of Cornerstone's denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Presbyterianism includes Presbyterians, Lutherans, most reformed churches, and some Pentecostal churches. The focus of church authority resides with the elders.

You find the authority of the elders in the three "**courts**" of the church:

- 1) The "**Session**" is the group of elders governing the local congregation.
- 2) The "**Presbytery**" is the group of elders governing the churches of the region
- 3) The "**General Assembly**" is the group of elders governing all the churches.

The apostles and prophets in the NT spoke and wrote the authoritative Word of God. They had the gift of prophecy and special revelation and healing and miracles and interpretation. They laid the foundation of the church by teaching the church the gospel and they in turn appoint elders to lead the church and deacons to serve the church.

[Elders, Deacons] Elders "rule" the church.

Do you know the two kinds of elders?

- 1) Teaching elders = ministers/pastors.
- 2) Ruling elders = shepherds

A ruling elder is someone who is called by God and approved by the church to shepherd the people in the church. What does a shepherd do? They care for the flock, they watch over and protect the flock, they feed the flock and they do all that with the truth of the gospel through the means of grace.

What is the other office in the church?

The deacon. The apostles established the office of deacon at the beginning of the church. You can read about it in Acts 6. A deacon is someone who is called by God and approved by the church to serve the church by taking the resources of the church to care for physical needs in the church. This is because you are both body and soul.

Once the apostles had committed the New Testament to writing and they died, those revelatory gifts became obsolete and ceased to function in the church. You see this transition before the apostles die as Paul writes his final epistles 1, 2 Timothy, Titus - he never talks about any of these gifts of prophecy or healings - instead he talks about the offices of elder and deacon that Jesus gifts to the church.

Jesus, the head of the church, cares so much that your needs are really met on earth now that he delegates the responsibilities to specially called people to run the church.

Does that mean you don't have to worry about serving in the church?

No, these officers also oversee and equip and prepare all the people in the church to care for each other spiritually and serve each other physically. Which means Jesus GIFTS all of us to EACH OTHER because we are all called to serve each other. Which means it's not ok for anyone in the church to just focus

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on their own individual spiritual health and well being. Can you imagine going to the gym and only working out one leg, or one arm? You'd be deformed. If you want health you've got to be about the whole body.

Elders and deacons are God's idea. It is his gift to the church. These elders and these deacons are God's Plan A for the church. If you refuse these means Plan B is not guaranteed. They are not to be overbearing or prideful but they are your servant leaders. The word deacon means servant. The irony of calling elders shepherds is shepherds were the absolutely lowest class of people in ANE society. In the eyes of the world they were a class of filthy rabble = and that really is the most fitting picture of church leaders.

[Witness] Jesus says, "You will be my witnesses." And the apostles then say that's our job now. Witness. Witness what? Witness Jesus.

What is Christianity? Some people today say it's just a religion that judges you and makes you feel guilt and shame. Other people say no it's a religion that makes you feel loved and accepted whoever you are. If Christianity was either of those things do you think this bunch of social outcasts would have changed the world?

No. Which means the average person today does not understand Christianity.

So what is it? If it's a witness about Jesus - what do we witness about Jesus?

Luke tells us right at the beginning. ¹ *In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,* ² *until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.* ³ *He presented himself alive to them after his*

suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God."

We witness about Jesus what Luke witnessed about Jesus = about what Jesus has done, not about what you have done!

[Still Working] The founder of every other religion is gone. They're dead and done. They're not doing anything else for anyone else. Our ascended Lord is still at work. He has saved us and he will bring that salvation to completion. Which means if you are witnessing about him - what do you expect him to do?

You're not talking about a ghost. You're not talking about someone who is dead. You're talking about the risen and ascended Lord of the universe, your Savior who loves you and is sovereignly caring for you. Who is still working. What do you expect when you witness? Whatever it is, your expectations are too low, like mine.