

**Bethel Christian Church**  
*Growing in Grace*  
Studies in the Book of Acts

*And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of  
the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all*  
Acts 4:33

**Acts, the continuing Ministry of Jesus**

Acts is the record of the risen Lord Jesus Christ going out to the nations declaring and revealing the power of God's grace through the Apostles. It was not the story of the Apostles taking Christ to the nations, but Christ taking them to his nations. In the opening verse Luke tells Theophilus (an unknown character to whom he previously dedicated his Gospel) that his Gospel had been about, "All that Jesus began to do and teach." The word 'began' is significant. Luke's Gospel covered the period between the birth and the ascension of Jesus. So Luke was saying that the Gospel of Luke was only the record of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, thus implying that Acts was the continuation of that ministry.

**With Christ to the Nations**

The risen Christ was going ahead of the Apostles as the great Missioner, the reigning Lord to whom the nations had been promised (Psalm 2, see too Ezekiel 34:22-24). The Apostles simply declared what was so (Acts 4:29-30). The Apostles were not the main missionaries and neither are we. We simply declare what we see and know of Christ. He is the one who stretches out his hand to heal and restore and subdue all things, filling the earth with the true glory of the Father. Since the resurrection of Jesus a true Man is obeying God's creational commands.

When God, at the resurrection, declared that Jesus was the Son of God with power (Romans 1:4) it was with a view to gracing the nations of the world. The Apostles were constrained in their hearts to be part of this ministry.

*Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the  
gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy  
Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David  
according to the flesh, who was **declared the Son of God with power** by the  
resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our  
Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the  
obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake,*

All that needed to be accomplished for the in-gathering and filling of the nations had been finished in the cross and resurrection. It was not to be a military operation. It was not to be a storming of national defences with superior military might, a superior culture or superior intelligence. It was and is a battle for hearts. This is why Christianity is so different to militant religious extremism which seeks to tear down cultures and belief by force and impose its beliefs by brute strength. The enemies Jesus destroyed were those which gripped the hearts of people and nations. Satan, death, guilt, fear, the flesh, the world had all been defeated. So Christ's continuing ministry across the earth would now be a ministry of releasing people from these enemies. Because the enemies he defeated are the greatest enemies of humanity Christ's Lordship as the risen Christ is the greatest Lordship, I.e. over 'heaven and earth.'

## **At Last the Nations can be subdued and filled**

*"When he ascended on high, he led captive a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (Now this expression, "he ascended," what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? The One who descended is himself also he who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)*

We don't often equate the current ministry of Christ with God's commands to Adam and Eve in Genesis. We try to separate the spiritual from the creation. That is a Greek idea not God's idea. Paul makes the connection clear in Ephesians. Several times he speaks of Christ's ministry as 'filling all things.'

For the first time since Eden the command to fill the earth and subdue it could be accomplished by the Last Adam, Jesus Christ. He now assumed the mantle as the true Son, obeying the Father's mandate. As the Apostles submitted to Christ, had their sins washed away and saw the Kingdom of God for the first time, they were propelled by love into this 'worship' (service) of filling the earth with the glory of God. This glory is the glory of being one with him in open hearted love. So the nations were not simply going to be evangelised, the Lord was going to establish them as a whole new community, the people of God, the church, the community of love.

God had always had his people, his treasured possession (Deuteronomy 7:6ff). But a whole new people, hearts made new through the washing of forgiveness, now became a reality. Acts is the account of the Lord building his church as promised (Matthew 16:18). No longer would this be a thing for the Jewish nation alone. The Gentiles too, hearing the Gospel, come to the obedience that is trusting in Christ.

The progression of this church building was not smooth sailing. Those Apostles who went out with Christ suffered greatly. It seemed all of them eventually were martyred. The great power of Rome, the deep penetration of paganism into the nations and the growing opposition from within sections of Judaism meant that the church grew out of persecution. But grow it did.

## **Our Response**

Does Christ's role as the chief Missioner mean we become slack saying, "If Christ is working then we don't need to?" Of course not. It was the reality of Christ at work amongst them that filled the hearts of the Apostles and the early church with joy and hope. Faced with the huge obstacles and opposition the Apostles could never have prevailed and filled the earth with the love. Their only hope was the resurrected Christ, Lord of all the nations. His victory was what had changed their hearts so they only desired to walk continually in that victory. The victory over their indwelling and external enemies meant that they were now fitted for the same kind of life with the Father that the resurrected Son now experienced: In a word, communion. They were now created anew for communion with God. It was the power of love communion they saw breaking into peoples lives as they declared the Gospel. They saw his power flourishing in the most unlikely situations.

He had shown them that they were all together in the heart, arms and will of the Father. This meant that they could face all the opposing powers with humble boldness whilst retaining their joyful assurance that their true life was secure in Christ's care.