

Acts 1:6-11 | So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But 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.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Acts 1:6-11 | Ascension

Luke is the only writer who recounts Christ’s ascension, but he makes up for that deficit by recounting it twice, at the end of Luke and here at the beginning of Acts. It is appropriate as an ending and a beginning. Let’s first consider the Ascension as an ending in Luke.

Luke 24:50-53 | And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the end of Christ’s first coming. We must answer the question, “If he rose from the dead to never die again, where is he?” And the ascension answers this question. He is in heaven. His disciples saw him go. Jesus met with his disciples in Bethany. Bethany in the gospels is like the green room of the big stage Jerusalem. It is about two miles outside of Jerusalem at the Mt. of Olives, the home of Martha and Mary sisters of Lazarus whom Jesus rose from the dead. It is where Jesus staged his disciples for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. So the story of Bethany is the place where the dead are raised and then Jesus triumphs over Jerusalem. So in Bethany, Jesus makes the triumphal exit.

Bethany is the place of rising from the dead and triumphal entry. The disciples should be thinking, Who is going to enter Jerusalem? That is, if the king is going to ascend to the throne, shouldn’t he go to the capital city? Where the throne is? Everything is poised for an ascension. We’ll get Frodo, and Gandalf and the whole gang together at the capital city and we’ll celebrate the rightful king ascending to the throne. But Jesus does not ascend to the throne in Jerusalem to re-establish the capital city of the nation of Israel. He ascends to a throne far higher than that. At Bethany he does not make another triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but a triumphal entry into the throne room of God. Thus the response of the disciples is to worship Jesus Christ as God is worshipped because he is God.

Christ’s ascension does not mean he removes the presence of his power from the world. It is precisely the opposite. He receives all authority in heaven and on earth from the father. If the

lord of a small town becomes king, he does not lose authority in the small town by ascending to the throne in the capital. But this means something for the capital. And here we see the ascension as a beginning. It is the beginning of the reign of Christ over all nations of the world, and it is his people who will take up his ministry as they go to Jerusalem to proclaim the triumph of the king.

1. Question

Acts 1:6 | So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

The recounting of the ascension in Acts is about the beginning of our Lord’s heavenly reign following his incarnation. Luke gives us a more fleshed out account of the ascension including the conversation before it which directly connects Christ’s ascension to the mission of the church. The question which the disciples ask him in Bethany is a question about Christ’s taking the throne.

John Calvin famously says of the disciples question, “There are as many errors in this question as words.” Calvin is not one for subtle takes. What then are the errors? They had seen him conquer the grave, and they had heard his teaching of the kingdom. If Christ is the Messiah, which they know he is, certainly he will now take his throne thus restore the kingdom of God’s people. But there are several assumptions in the question which betray the disciples misunderstanding.

The first is their assumption of the instantaneous establishment of Christ’s kingdom. Will you *at this time*. The kingdom of God is not going to be established in a flash. They had seen Jesus’ power, and perhaps even rightly understood that if he would like to make his reign immediately universally realized he could. But they had forgotten his teaching. The growth of the kingdom will not be instantaneous but gradual. Like a mustard seed.

Matthew 13:32 | It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

The kingdom is truly present in a new way, but it will be established organically. Gradually, like the growth of a mustard seed. What Jesus intends to do is plant the seed in the world and make it grow.

Secondly they see the kingdom as being *restored*. That is they think the establishment of the kingdom will be a return to the Davidic or Solomonic reign over a united Israel. But this is no return to past glory. God in Christ is making all things new, and the reign of Christ in the New Covenant far outshines the Old Covenant.

This is related to their final error, which is the scope of the kingdom. It is not being restored to Israel. It is a kingdom which will go to all nations. The kingdom of God will

reign over all the nations of the world. You could say they have the phrase backwards. It is not that Christ's mission is to restore the kingdom to Israel, it is that Israel will be restored, along with all the nations of the world, to the kingdom of God.

So to recap, the kingdom is not immediate but progressive. The kingdom is not a return but an advance. The kingdom is not relating to any one kingdom of the world, but is over all nations. Jesus corrects their thinking in his answer.

2. Gradual, You, Israel to the Kingdom

Acts 1:7 | He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

He clarifies to them, that the culmination of his kingdom is not to be known by them. Instead this is a knowledge with the Father reserves for himself. The hidden things belong to the Lord, and the Lord does not reveal to us the precise dates and times of his providential timing. These are fixed by him with an authority that belongs exclusively to him. The Lord gives us promises, not a timeline.

Acts 1:8 | But 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."

The Lord does not merely hand over the kingdom. Instead he hands over the power to bear witness to his kingdom. The promise is of the Holy Spirit who will be the one who gives the power to establish the kingdom. Who is given more, the one who is given the kingdom or the one who is given the power to establish a kingdom?

And with this power from the Holy Spirit, the disciples are commissioned by Jesus to be his witnesses, and here they see the international reach of this kingdom. This verse gives us the outline of the book of Acts, and the shape of the mission of our New Covenant age. This is no local mission but the salvation of the world.

There is a question though, why didn't Christ merely establish his global kingdom immediately? Why didn't he make a global announcement in the heavens? Well we know why the initial conquest of Canaan was structured this way.

Exodus 23:29-30 | I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you.
³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land.

The extent of the kingdom must be matched by the increase of the people to hold it. Of course this same principle holds for the mission of the church. There must be growth in

such a way where churches are able to be established that the kingdom might be manifest in the gathered community of Christ's body.

And we know this was the intention from the very beginning. Likewise this is the shape of humanities conquest from the very beginning. Adam and Eve were to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. This intended mode of growth for humanity, although disrupted by sin, is not undone at redemption. Grace restores nature. And lastly why does the mission of the church not happen immediately, why the slow growth and future culmination? Is it the neglect of the Lord?

2 Peter 3:9 | The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Why does the kingdom come by a progressive Holy Spirit empowered proclamation over the whole earth rather than a flash. Well perhaps it was so that you might be saved.

3. Ascension

Acts 1:9 | And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

After he commissions the Lord ascends to the throne. Christ in his resurrected body rules all things. There is a man on the throne of heaven. This means that heaven is not a place of mere spirits. Heaven is not a floaty misty place. I think C.S. Lewis in the great divorce is onto something when he imagines heaven as more substantial than our present life such that we will look at our current selves like ghosts. They could see his ascension. This really happened. You live in a world in which God became a man, died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.

His being covered by a cloud is no meteorological accident. The cloud in scripture is the glory of God, just as at the Exodus, the cloud goes before the people, or the glory cloud filling the temple. God rides on the clouds, Jesus rides on the clouds. And he is taken out of their sight. He does not physically reign here now, but his Spirit empowers us to make his reign known over the whole world.

Acts 1:10-11 | And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Just like the two angels which were sitting in the empty tomb, who were just like the two angels which were above mercy seat where the Spirit of God dwelt. So here the two angels bear witness to the glory of Jesus Christ. But they turn their eyes not to the heavens but

back to the earth. They are not to stay gazing up. Instead they are to know Jesus reigns, they are to prepare their hearts for receiving the Holy Spirit, and they are to trust that Christ will return. Christ will return, in the pattern of his ascension, he will come down to reign present with us again. Until then, he's putting his enemies under his feet.