

THE ASCENDED CHRIST GATHERS HIS CHURCH IN PREPARATION FOR PENTECOST

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath’s journey away; and went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers”.

(Acts 1: 12-14)

The ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven means for the church a totally new period of time. For the disciples on the day itself it meant a definite farewell: Christ would no longer be physically with them on earth. It would be quite different than before, and in certain ways much more difficult. Now, truly, the church would have to live by faith, and not by what is seen.

We have already concentrated on the ascension itself. We saw how Christ departed from His disciples while blessing them (Luke 24:50-52), and noticed how they gazed up at Him until a cloud took Him out of their sight (Acts 1: 9). This time I want to pay some attention to another question: how did the disciples react to the ascension? What was their immediate course of action? How did they deal with this definite departure, this decisive event?

We ask these questions not because we may expect from the disciples themselves anything good. They are not exemplary in themselves. When we look at the disciples, we often see the opposite of what is required of them. Remember how they all deserted Christ on the night He was betrayed and arrested? And where were they on Easter morning? They had to be gathered together and convinced at length that Christ had truly risen from the dead. At that time they did not at all remember Christ's word or heed it. No, the disciples have until now not shown much positive action.

A MOMENT OF SADNESS?

We might expect them now perhaps to linger a bit on Mount Olivet, to be again indecisive. A time of departure can be one of sad reminiscing and sorrowful reflection. They all have their combined experiences and their personal memories of the Lord, and of the wondrous things that have happened. But all that is now over, past, fini. Christ has gone home to His heavenly Father, so why do they not all go home too, back to Galilee from where they came?

We can understand it if the ascension led to a moment of sadness. It is so hard to bid farewell, and they would not again see the Lord in this life. But that moment of sadness, if it came, did not last very long. It is striking how the disciples immediately act upon the words of the two angels. They do not gaze anymore into the sky or linger longingly on the mountain. They tear themselves away from the whole scene.

BACK TO JERUSALEM

We read in verse 12, "Then they returned to Jerusalem. . . ." Then means: without delay, right after the angels spoke, as a response to their words. They act in accordance with Christ's will. They go to Jerusalem and they begin to act and live as a church, as the church of Christ. They begin to look forward to the fulfillment of the promises of the Lord, the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

This is not the same group of people as on Easter morning. Yes, it is the same group of people, but they have come much further. They have already changed

immensely. And this is nothing less than the fruit of Christ's redeeming and renewing power. That is what we are looking for. Not the initiative and obedience of the disciples, but the power of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. People do not change and cannot change unless Christ changes them. They will not assemble unless He gathers them. This is especially clear immediately after the ascension. We see here how the ascended Christ gathers His church in preparation for the day of Pentecost, and we note the unity and the ministry of this church.

UNIFIED ACTION

Although Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, has now ascended into heaven and is no longer physically with His Church on earth, and although at this moment the Holy Spirit has not yet been poured out, still the disciples show positive and unified action. This is nothing less than a manifestation of the grace and the power of the Lord.

We see this clearly in the words which precede our text. They returned to Jerusalem, it says. This is precisely what the Lord had commanded them to do. He had emphatically charged them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait there for the outpouring of the Spirit of God. Jerusalem is not chosen without reason, for it is the heart of Israel, the covenant people. Jerusalem is also the base of the operations of the Christian Church. Christ had said, "You shall be my witnesses [starting] in Jerusalem. . . ."

IN THE UPPER ROOM

We read that they went to "the upper room where they were staying" (verse 13). There has been a lot of debate on exactly where this "upper room" was, but it most likely was the same room where the Lord celebrated with them the Passover and instituted the holy supper. It probably belonged to the parents of Mark, the young man who fled naked the night Jesus was arrested.

Apparently the disciples had stayed there regularly, going out during the day to Olivet, coming in at night to the upper room. So it was a familiar room, filled with good memories. It was the same house to which Peter fled after he escaped from prison (Acts 12: 12). This house, then, with its upper room became a central point for the young Christian Church. It was there that they held their key meetings for counsel and prayer. By immediately going to this particular house, to this room, the disciples already indicate that they will continue as congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ in worship and prayer. The ascended Christ has on earth an assembled congregation!

And then follows the list of the names of the apostles, as we find it also elsewhere in the New Testament. This list is so important here, for it asserts immediately after the ascension who the earthly shepherds are, the lawful office bearers in the Church. The Christian Church will be from the beginning an *apostolic* Church, based on the testimony of chosen eye-witnesses.

ELEVEN DISCIPLES

I do not now want to discuss the list of names, but we do note one thing: the name of Judas Iscariot is, of course, missing. There are eleven disciples. That is an obvious fact maybe, but nevertheless a very telling and painful one.

The Church of Christ has at this early stage already experienced loss, even in its circle of office bearers. It is not a perfect Church yet. They may all be gathered in unity in that upper room, but there is one missing, one who was with them from the beginning, and who has gone from them, and even betrayed the Lord. The Christian Church will experience more often and in many ways the loss of members, of whom some even become traitors. Eleven disciples, the number is not full anymore.

But if you look at the names of those who remained, you can be amazed that they are still together. It says in our text, “All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer. . . .” All these, namely those eleven apostles. They are mentioned first because they are the apostles, the office bearers, and they belong together as a unit, and so determine the unity. They are still together in a remarkably close and unified manner.

WITH ONE ACCORD?

Do you remember when the Lord was still with them how they always fought and bickered? Especially about who was the most important? Who would get to sit at Jesus’ right hand or at Jesus’ left hand? Do you remember how they disagreed on the course of action? Stay with Christ or stay in Galilee? Do you remember how they opposed the very idea of a cross and thought in terms of worldly victory? Do you remember their fears and doubts?

They were a group that was sorely divided, with much dissent and harsh treatment of each other. They have quite a past, and humanly speaking, little future. How can they still be together? Is this not a time bomb ticking away, about to explode? The fiery Peter, who has yet so much to learn, the quiet John, the pessimist Thomas, the radical Simon – not to mention the others – all these, as the text says, how will they ever stay together and be unified? Especially now that the Lord is not with them in person to keep them together, to still their storms, dissolve their disputes, and heal their hurts?

ALSO THE WOMEN

Add to this the fact that there are also some others mentioned here: the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. The “women” are obviously those women who ministered unto Christ during His time on earth. I think of Mary Magdalene, for example, and the wives of some of the apostles.

Mary, the mother of the Lord, is also mentioned, but not first. I want to emphasize this for a moment. If Mary, the mother of our Lord, had taken such a prominent position in the early Christian Church as Rome would have us believe,

then the order should have been: Mary, the apostles, and some of the women. But this is not the case. Mary has a place in the church, certainly, but not a prominent place.

As a matter of fact, this is the last time in the Bible that we even read of her. Nowhere do we read, as Rome claims, that Mary later ascended to heaven as queen-mother to rule with Christ.

Still, Mary will have had her input in the early Church, for she knew many things about her beloved Son and Lord. And then we also read about “his brothers.” These are then blood-brothers of the Lord Jesus. Yes, they too are among those who gathered in the upper room. One of them, James, will later occupy an important place and even write a letter which has become part of the Bible. But remember how they at first disbelieved Jesus and even mocked Him? Had there perhaps been sibling rivalry or envy at first? But they, too, have come to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Will they, however, be able to accept the apostles as their leaders, now that Christ has ascended? Were they, after all, not closer to him than Peter, or John, or Matthew?

We see a church with a lot of family relations, some influential women, a group of varied leaders. Is this the church of Christ? Can this fragile congregation withstand the wiles of the devil and truly be moulded into a unity? Indeed, there will still be many stormy waters and many rivers to cross, but the unity of the Church is unmistakably there: all these were *with one accord*. The ascension does not split up the Church or lead to division on which course of action to take. They are united.

THE SAME SPIRIT

With one accord, it says. I want to use a stronger term yet. It says literally: *with the same spirit*. Actually the word denotes strong feeling and passion. They felt very strongly about the matter. They were completely united. They were not listlessly hanging together, but they worked together with conviction; they assembled with purpose and common zeal. They were all believers. They were all fully and intensely committed to Christ Jesus.

Why is this so? Well, this is the unity of faith. They have now come to see and to accept Jesus Christ for what He really is. They have, in those forty days that Christ was with them after His resurrection, come to understand the facts in the light of the Scriptures. Therefore they can cope with the fact of the ascension. They know exactly why He had to ascend. They see it as a step in His glorification. They know what He will do there in heaven, namely prepare a place for them and gather the Church out of all places. They know what they, in the meantime, have to do.

ALREADY THE BODY OF CHRIST

And they cannot wait to get started. They have one common desire and purpose. This is because Christ has already moulded them into a body, His body, and because even in His ascension He does not cease to govern them by His Word

and Spirit. It is at this moment still ten days from Pentecost, but do not think that the Holy Spirit is completely absent from the church. Do not think that the Word does not function among them. Do you believe that they ever were for one moment orphans without a Father, without a Head and Master?

What we learn here is that the ascended Jesus Christ immediately asserts His authority and power in the unity of His Church. It is the unity of obedience to the Word, the unity of faith and of the zeal of faith. And if that is how it is between Ascension and Pentecost, how must it then be after Pentecost? Or how must it be today?

The Church is characterized as a communion of faith, as a body with one soul, one mind, one spirit, a common purpose and a common zeal. This is the norm which Christ maintains from heaven, and this is the work of the Holy Spirit on earth. It is in this unity that the Church shows that it is governed by one Head and one Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Church did not become fragmented, splintered, and divided because of the ascension, because the binding factor was now gone, or because now so many people competed to govern it. No, the Church became divided because people did not obey the Word. Because they lost their zeal for Christ, sought their own glory, and so forgot the glory of God. Because they began to fight for their own name, and no longer saw the need for the edification of the congregation. But this was not the case after the Ascension and before Pentecost. The Church was united in common zeal and immediately began to fulfill its important ministry.

LINKED WITH CHRIST

We read that with one accord all these people “devoted themselves to prayer.” This is an important piece of information. For now we see what a living *link* the New Testament Church still has with heaven and with Christ.

When Christ ascended into heaven, the contact between Him and His Church was not broken. You would almost expect that to be the case. You might think: Christ has ascended high above the clouds into the heavens, and He is now, until He returns, unreachable. There is no more contact, and the church is left to paddle around on its own steam without any contact with its heavenly Head. It sits around, sorrowful and grieving: “O my soul, why are you grieving, why disquieted in me?” (Psalm 42).

But this is obviously not the case. They say: Hope in God. The church immediately resorts to prayer, and so, “in prayer transcending distance,” lifts up its heart to heaven, where Christ Jesus is, seated at the right hand of God. It is not without reason that we may sing from Hymn 31, the hymn about the ascension, “We lift our hearts to Christ on high.” Or from Hymn 32: “seek the things that are above.” The contact is never really broken. The eye-contact is broken, yes, on Mount Olivet, but the spiritual contact is not. The communion remains intact from day one.

DIRECT ACCESS

This is important. Romanists try to make us believe that the church now needed time to get used to the new situation. They could no longer call directly upon the Lord Jesus Christ, for He was glorified. They had to go via Mary and the saints. But Mary and the saints – the apostles – are all sitting in the upper room in Jerusalem, and they call directly and immediately upon the Name of the Lord. The ministry of the Church is not to place all kinds of mediators between itself and the Lord, but instead, through lawful office bearers, to lead the congregation in calling upon its heavenly Head and Saviour. Oh, the importance and wealth of knowing the Scriptures!

It says here that they devoted themselves to prayer. A word is used that means doing something constantly. Devotion is something that goes on all the time and not just from time to time. It also means doing something with conscious perseverance. They put their mind and soul in it and they would not quit. There was an open channel with heaven and they would not allow that channel to get clogged up through inactivity. The Church from the day of ascension understood: the way is open through Christ, who as our High Priest has gone into the inner heavens, the heavenly sanctuary, and we must go that way. They came to the upper room and they said, “Let us then boldly seek God’s face, There to find mercy, help and grace. Our great High Priest will intercede, Come to our aid in time of need” (Hymn 33: 6).

EVERYTHING FROM HEAVEN

They devoted themselves to prayer, it says, and a word is used that specifically means petitioning, beseeching God. They put themselves in the hands of the Lord. They knew that especially now they had to expect everything from heaven. That was always the case for God’s people, but it was never brought home so clearly as on the day of the ascension. There is no help coming from among men. He who descended, and who was one of us, our only Saviour, has now ascended, and therefore we must until He returns look upward, look forward, expecting from the heavenly throne alone all blessing and help.

But prayer never stands on its own. We read, for example in Acts 6, how the apostles speak about their specific duties as being prayer and the ministry of the Word. The assembled congregation in the upper room began immediately to seek the Word of God, and to be edified by the apostolic preaching. The Church began to live by the Word and to preserve the Word through the apostolic testimony. And that Word, in turn, gave content and meaning to prayer and praise.

So we see the ministry of the Church appearing already on the day of the ascension. They went back to the upper room to remember the Word of Christ and to call upon God in His Name. They too ascended, that is, they lifted up their hearts in faith to heaven, where Christ Jesus is.

ACTIVITY STILL CONFINED

It is not yet Pentecost. This activity is still confined within the perimeters of the congregation. But soon the Spirit will be poured out. And the Word will go out to all Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The whole world will be called to prayer and praise, to recognize the mighty saving work of God in Christ Jesus. The whole world will be called to submit to the authority of the ascended Christ, the first-born of the dead and the Ruler of kings on earth.

It is a world-wide ministry indeed. But the first task remains as well: it is also an in-depth ministry. It is the ministry of the Church to preach the Word to its members, to lead in prayer and to urge to prayer, so that everyone will go the way of the open channel to heaven, so that we all may ascend in faith to where Christ Jesus is, and in prayer transcending distance seek the God of our existence.

Christ opened the line to heaven. The Church must through its ministry seek to keep that line open. That is what Christ teaches us through the little “upper room” congregation on the day of His ascension. He said: see, I am not far away. For the Word is near you, in your hearts and on your lips, and you may lift up your hearts to heaven, where I am, from where I am coming on my great day of descending in glory.

CHRIST GATHERS HIS CHURCH

So we know what we have to do today and how we are to live today. The Church that hears the gospel of the ascension knows the way to God, shares the flame of faith, and is unending in devotion.

And there is a great comfort here. If Christ already then kept His little Church together in this way and directed them to heaven, will He by His outpoured Spirit and completed Word not do so all the more today? He will assemble His Church today in preparation for the great day of His return. In His hands this gathering is safe and secure and will be completed. From the ascension to the great return it is clear: the Church is the gathering of Christ, and He alone will complete what He started. For this we will pray with great devotion today.