



# APOSTOLIC MINISTRY IN THE BOOK OF "ACTS"

RICK JAMES

Many people think that A.D. means "after death" meaning after the death of Jesus Christ. It doesn't. A.D. commences with the approximated year of Jesus' birth, which means his death was roughly around the year A.D. 33. I just wanted you to have your bearings before we head back into the time machine, and it's a nice piece of trivia to amaze and astound your friends. But they probably already know this, so at the very least it will simply keep you from looking stupid.

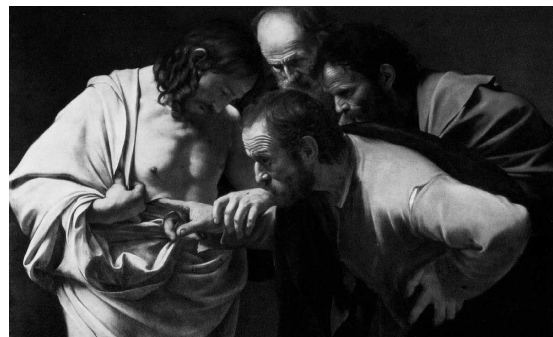
After Jesus uttered the Great Commission to his followers (Matt. 28), you would assume that he would have sent them packing and launched them out into the world with a sense of urgency "On your mark, get set, go" or "Don't let the door hit you on your way out." Instead he tells them to do nothing and go nowhere (those are my kind of commandments). They are instructed to wait in Jerusalem

*While he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. (Acts 1:4)*

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)*

Let's begin with this historical point of reference: by the early 4th century the entire Roman empire had embraced Christianity. Now if you think that it's even remotely possible for eleven uneducated fisherman to have accomplished this through their own efforts, then you, my friend, have a wild imagination. Jesus had commissioned them (and us) to accomplish an impossible mission (I'm sure the tape self-destructed moments afterward), one that would be possible only

by and through his empowerment. And so they were told to sit on their hands until they had been clothed in power and boldness by the Spirit of God.



The descending of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples is called Pentecost and we read about in the Book of Acts, chapter 2:

*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)*

It is like the Tower of Babel inverted, members of one kingdom praising God in an assortment of languages, symbolizing the impending proclamation to, and inclusion of, the nations of the world in the kingdom of God.

Dr. Bill Bright founder of Campus Crusade for Christ makes the following observation concerning the empowerment of Holy Spirit:



*Shortly after Jesus gave the Great Commission, God the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost, transformed and empowered the lives of the same disciples who, during His trial and crucifixion, had denied our Lord and for the most part had deserted Him. Following Pentecost, they went out boldly and courageously, willing to risk their lives to proclaim the message of God's love and forgiveness in Christ.*

*Somehow we have gotten the idea that the early Christians were different from us—that they possessed a quality of life to which we cannot attain. But it is a fact of history that the people to whom Jesus gave His Great Commission were common, ordinary, working people, plagued with the same weaknesses that we have. The only difference between most of them and the majority of us is that two outstanding things had happened to them.*

*First, they had complete confidence in a resurrected Lord triumphant over death. One who lived within them and was coming again to reign on the earth. Second, they were filled with the Holy Spirit.*

*Today, if enough Christians were completely committed to our resurrected and returning Lord, and were controlled and empowered by His Spirit, we would turn our world upside down, and experience a mighty spiritual revolution like that in the first century.*

After this initial infilling of the Holy Spirit, the Book of Acts tracks the disciples for the next thirty years as they move out to fulfill Jesus' command to proclaim the gospel to every nation on earth. By the close of the New Testament era (roughly the end of the first century the good news of the kingdom will have spread through most of the Roman Empire: making inroads as far west as Asia; throughout East, West, and southern Europe; and down into north Africa. Try picturing a big map engulfed in flames with huge red arrows sweeping down like they use to show troop movement on the History Channel. This is a pretty impressive campaign for foot soldiers marching in sandals.

## APOSTOLIC MINISTRY

Besides following the path of the gospel as it spreads from region to region and nation to nation, the Book of

Acts serves as a missionary handbook. Over the next two thousand years, churches, missionaries, pastors, mission agencies and seminaries will turn back here for a model and textbook on world evangelization, and depart from it at their own peril. And so we too should take a brief survey of the missionary model and methods found in this book.

I don't know what you picture when you think of the disciples going into a strange town and preaching the gospel. You probably picture it wasn't so weird for people to do that "back then." I don't know why we automatically assume that about the past—the Emperor used to massacre his farm animals by running over them in his chariot...but I guess that was normal for back then. There were lots of things that were weird even in the first century. Walking into a foreign town or city as itinerant missionary was not an easy task, and there would have been any number of approaches and methods that would have been as ineffective and embarrassing as they might be today.

Though empowered by the Spirit, the disciples gave careful and prayerful consideration of how to address the audiences they spoke to. They did not assume God gave His Spirit to replace wisdom but to animate it.

For example the Book of Acts relates that when the apostle Paul came to a new town or city he typically spoke first at the local synagogue: a very wise strategy. Here there would be Jews familiar with the Scripture and anticipating a coming messiah. Here too would have been gentile seekers who were warm to Judaism, and would have surely been converts if not for the festive initiation rite of circumcision (a highly effective means for keeping membership down). Here, Paul, would make a public proclamation of the gospel often over a series of days and weeks answering questions and addressing objections. Eventually, after a few polite sessions of turning the meeting over to rabbi Paul, he would be kindly asked to leave, and warned that he would be pummeled to death if he returned. Or they would pummel him first and then ask him to leave, depending on their custom. But in those initial meetings the Holy Spirit would be powerfully at work speaking to the hearts of individuals. They in turn would be the first converts in that city and allow Paul, no longer welcome in the synagogue, to hold meetings in their home.

Without a public forum Paul would then network relationally through the family and friends of those who had been converted. New converts would share



with their friends and family and invite them to a meeting at their homes, where they could hear the message in its entirety from the apostle. And apparently Paul knew how to tell the story in its entirety; on one occasion he literally talked a young man to death:

*Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. (Acts 20:9)*

In most every town the gospel travels we witness three predominant modes of evangelism and they have not changed in 2,000 years. The first is public proclamation: the disciples spoke in public forums such as at the local synagogue. Second, we see relational evangelism as new converts shared their faith with the friends and family in their relational networks. And third we see “body evangelism:” a term given to inviting others to participate in a Christian gathering, like inviting someone to church, a Bible study or prayer meeting.

In the planting of a church resourcefulness and Spirit-led guidance were never exhausted. Having pursued the public forum of the synagogue, and the relational networks of new converts, other venues could be employed to broadly sow the gospel message. For example some towns had lecture halls, the early forerunner of the university, where speakers could discourse and dialogue with a gathering audience:

*But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. (Acts 19:9)*

But now, what do you do when you enter a town or city to where the idea of a Bible is as foreign as a frankfurter, and where deities and beliefs are as numerous as the people. Listen as Paul speaks to the local governing body in Athens. This was kind of like scheduling an evangelistic presentation to the towns Rotary club:

*“Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something*

*unknown I am going to proclaim to you.*

*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’*

*Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:23-31)*

Notice the bridges the apostle builds with his audience. He doesn’t begin with “dear heathen pond scum”—as attention grabbing as that would have been— but compliments them on their religiosity. He then segues to an observation about their spiritual worship: he had observed a statue in the city dedicated to an unknown God, and makes this salient point, “In all your religiosity you obviously sense that something is missing, or why dedicate a statue to an unknown deity? Let me tell you what that something missing is...” And then he quotes a lyric from one of their songwriter/poets, connecting with the popular culture and current beliefs and linking them to the gospel message. I mean, this is not “turn or burn” rhetoric; this is a thoughtful contextualized presentation of the gospel to a rough crowd—polytheists unfamiliar and unconvinced by the Hebrew Scripture.

We often frown on advertising and PR because it can be so deceptive and worldly but there is a place for publicity and in many towns and cities, God, himself, provided it. Through a healing, miracle, or the conversion of a prominent figure, a “buzz” was created that brought the crowds out in droves. And while the miraculous is not commonplace in our daily lives



today it is far from an anomaly wherever pioneering missionary work is taking place, as this story coming from the new frontier missions of the JESUS Film will attest.

There is an expression that doesn't sound biblical but contains truth none-the-less, "where there is a will, there's a way. And no matter what the circumstances or the audience, as the disciples were obedient to follow Jesus' command to take the gospel to the nations, the Spirit led them to the most appropriate way to accomplish it. A willingness to go, courage to pay a price, and utter reliance upon God's spirit, were the only provisions or prerequisites for the mission. And we should say a word about their courage.

## PAYING A PRICE

We do not know the individual sacrifices of each of the earliest missionaries, though we know that many gave their lives including 10 of the 11 disciples. Through the book of Acts we do encounter the particular hardships experienced by the apostle Paul, which he helpfully puts into a list for our consideration (and guilt):

*I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.*  
(2Corinthians 11:23-28)

There is an old saying "I am in the kingdom because someone prayed me there." Fair enough. But biblically it would be more accurate to say, that you find yourself in the kingdom today because someone was willing to pay a price and put their life on the line, for Jesus said, "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" declaring a 'willingness to sacrifice' and the 'willingness to die' to be the mechanism of

missions growth. Someone must bear the labor pains of new birth and that is often the missionary.

Josef Tson, leader of the spiritual revival in Romania in the 1970's and 80s, said that the secret to missionary growth was the courage to die and declared that what was hindering it, "was our desire to survive." "Sometimes," said Tson, "the Lord wants you to stand up and die and through your death bring revival." As a courageous victim of numerous interrogations and beatings under the Romanian dictator Chuchescu, Tson, certainly knew what he spoke of. He preached this message of courage and sacrifice and "the young people embraced it, declaring, 'we do not want the compromise of our parents. It is either or. Totally with Jesus or without Him.'" "It was at that moment," said Tson, "that revival came to Romania."

In the first few decades of the church there were different types of missionaries just as there are today. There were fulltime pioneers like the apostle Paul and Peter; there were short-term missionaries like Mark and Luke, and there were lay missionaries who simply transported the gospel in the course of their life and work. Yet they share this one thing in common: a commitment to Christ and obedience to the Great Commission such, that they were willing to sacrifice all that they had in order to see God's kingdom expand. As the early church father, Tertullian, observed, "The blood of the martyrs has become the seed of the church."

## FINANCES

Projects cost money. Big projects cost a lot of money. MGM Mirage spent 7 billion for a new City Center (read, Casino and Resort). And as noble as their goal is of bilking the elderly out of their social security checks, the Great Commission is eminently more noble and requiring of our funding. Though we are constructing a spiritual kingdom it will still require funding equivalent to the magnitude of the structure.

The Books of Acts introduces us to the financial struggles and budgetary problems implicit in the construction and expansion of the Kingdom. A careful reading of the New testament letters also reveal that several of them had as a primary goal the raising of money for the mission—they were 'support letters':

*So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act*



*of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us — see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (2Cor. 8:6-7)*

Some of the early missionaries worked jobs on the side (Paul was a tentmaker) so they would not be a burden to the people they were ministering to, but this was an exception to this clearly stated principle, “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel (1Cor. 9:14).

Missionaries have given of their lives for the Great Commission and they should not have to work two jobs because others Christians refuse to sacrifice anything. Everyone must sacrifice; everyone, serving in one role or another, is to be a part of the mission. If a missionary is not paying her bills or having to hold down a side-job to ‘make ends meet’ it is really to the shame of the church and its lack of commitment to fulfill Christ’s command to preach the gospel to all nations.

Missionaries should not have to work a side job because other Christians won’t give, and they shouldn’t work a side job to avoid the humility required to raise support. We cringe as we see Paul having to humbly and humiliatingly sign off his epistles with a request for financial aid, but such humility and initiative are prerequisite training for what is involved in missionary service. Self-sufficient missionary—financial or otherwise—is an oxymoron.

In the first 30 years of the missionary endeavor, recorded for us in the Book of Acts, we see a missionary labor force funded by other Christians, great generosity as well as financial negligence from ministry supporters, and the humbling task of fund development as part of the missionary job description.

## CHURCH STRUCTURE

One last observation before we leave the first century. We should take note of the form and shape these church plants took, because when we think of the disciples planting a church in a city or town we inevitably think of laying the footing for a cathedral. We always think in terms of buildings. They never did. The churches met in houses and the services were rather informal: singing, praying, reading of scripture. As the disciples moved on to plant other churches

they typically left behind a missionary to provide leadership, until the point where leadership arose indigenously from the community of believers.

*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. (Titus 1:5)*

And while we’re at it lets also note the use of technology and communications. The New Testament is primarily composed of letters, letters written to churches. While the disciples didn’t have e-mail or a website (disciples.com) they made use of communications and technology to advance the gospel. In the middle ages the printing press will be commandeered in a similar fashion. All that to say: teaching was given in person, through proxy (a sent representative of the missionary), and by pen—highly adaptable and innovative.

Well, you can read the Book of Acts for yourself and add your own observations. We have gleaned much through just a brief look at the pioneers of missions



Rick James is on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ and serves as the publisher of CruPress.