

## The Mission to the Nation(s)

*series – God & Governance*

PD Mayfield

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If you have your Bible with you or a tablet or an iPhone or you just have your eyes and would like to look at the projector, we're going to be looking at Acts 1:6-11. As you're turning, it is an opportunity to remind you, as Wayne mentioned, we are continuing our summer series looking at *God & Governance*. And today we will be discussing the church's mission in relationship to the state. So to do that we'll be asking kind of a broad question: What is the mission of the Church? Does the Church's mission somehow involve political governance or national identity?

Before we get started, though, I do want to draw your attention to those first few verses in the context before verse 6—just a reminder [of] who's writing this book. This is written by Luke, who we learn from scripture was most likely a physician and was a companion of Paul. And we know Luke also wrote the gospel of Luke. And his intention was to be writing these as two volumes, side by side: his gospel account, in which he also gives a kind of a prologue in that telling why he's writing the gospel; and then we see here him giving the reason why he's writing this book, the Acts of the Apostles. He's reminding the reader that the gospel account is seeking to explain all that Jesus began to do and teach. It showed his life and his ministry. It spoke about his death and his resurrection. Verse 3 mentions how Jesus has, you know, since he's raised from the dead, what's he been doing? Is it eating fish? He's been hanging out with his friends. He's been describing and continuing teaching about the Kingdom of God, as well as showing himself to people, showing that indeed it is he who has been risen.

And where we pick up in verses 6-11 we see kind of a . . . It's more like a prism for the rest of the book. He's giving a foreshadowing of what the whole book of the Acts is going to be talking about, and it's what happens after Jesus leaves again. You see, after he died his disciples were distraught. They were afraid. They thought he was the Messiah. They thought he was going to do something. And yet he ended up on a cross and in a tomb. But then he raised. The tomb was empty. He really is Messiah. And this passage this morning speaks of also Jesus's . . . what theologians and church historians call Jesus's Ascension. The disciples were left scratching their heads once again, though. They thought Jesus was dead, but now they were very much glad that he's alive, but now he's gone again. So now what? And the book of Acts is an opportunity for the apostles to bear witness to the message of the gospel, but also to bear witness in the demonstration of their lives as we see the gospel going forth from where we're beginning here in our passage, and it expands outwardly. So read with me as I . . . or follow along, rather, as I read the passage.

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom [of] Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white

robes,<sup>11</sup> 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.” [ESV]

The word of the Lord. Let's pray together. Father, we do add our feeble attempts to live our lives, to make sense of the world, to often to make sense of you, and to make sense of your word. And yet you in your good wisdom and your good providence—you provide us your word. So we do pray that you would add blessings to the reading and the preaching. Lord, that we would experience your grace and your mercy through your Son, Jesus, by hearing and believing the witness of your word to your death and resurrection. May we have faith and believe and have hope in your kingdom. May you change us and transform us to live in light of your kingdom. We give you thanks and we give you praise. In Jesus' name, Amen.

It's been a long time now, but I'm sure most of us have watched the movie, *The Lion King*. I'm not going to get up here, I'm not going to sing anything from that movie. I'll let you do that with your own kids or in your own solitude of your living room. It's been a while, but if you haven't seen it, it's a good movie. Yeah, it's a good movie. There's one particular scene between Mufasa, who is the king lion, and his son Simba, who is a young cub at the time. And Mufasa says this: *Look, Simba, everything the light touches is our kingdom.* [Simba's] kind of just amazed: *Whoa.* Mufasa says: *A king's time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day, Simba, the sun will set on my time here and will rise with you as the new king.* Simba, kind of looking out over the kingdom: *And this will all be mine?* Mufasa: *Everything. Everything the light touches.* Of course Mufasa, the voice of James Earl Jones, is very powerful, very lion-esque. But there's something beautiful and tender and touching in this exchange with his son. The sense of kind of ruling as king of the jungle, looking at his kingdom.

In his book, *Reversed Thunder: the Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, Eugene Peterson writes this: “The gospel of Jesus Christ is more political than any one imagines, but in a way that no one guesses. The kingdom of God is an altogether political metaphor, is basic vocabulary in understanding the Christian gospel.” Abraham Kuyper, who was a Dutch journalist and then later became prime minister famously said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine.’” It's easy to glance throughout the Bible, it's easy to just give a survey of human history and see how people misunderstand God's rule over all things and how humans are to govern one another. There's some glimpses of that working out well, and there's tons of examples of that not working out so well. But because we often think like Simba, we're usually amazed by what's ours, while forgetting to see how Abraham Kuyper sees that everything is Christ's. We confuse the kingdom of God with other things, such as our national identity, our political governances. And we misunderstand the Church's mission. Those things really kind of go hand in hand. When we confuse the kingdom, we often misunderstand the mission.

This morning's text is one example where Jesus shows his mission and how it supersedes national politics. He shows us this mission and how it involves his **Kingdom Come**, his **Power Received**, and a **Tension Lived**. So if you are a linear thinker in some ways, those are your points that are in your bulletin.

First looking at **Kingdom Come**. Verses 6 and 7. The disciples ask a question: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom [of] Israel?” You see, his disciples often shared, with the other Jews of their day, just common preconceived imaginations about what God's coming kingdom was supposed to look like. These imaginations involved the Messiah coming to restore the throne of David, to restore the nation of Israel, to kick out with power and might and strength and to be victorious over their Roman occupiers, so that upon the throne of David the Messiah would rule with justice and righteousness. There was an expectation, a longing, a hope for this. The word ‘restore’ here in the translation that we read suggests a change to an earlier condition that was perceived to be good. Something that once was, such as when Jesus restores the man's disfigured hand or how the prophets spoke of Israel being restored to the land out of exile. So when the disciples asked if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom, this is something maybe what they wondered about. Would Jesus be restoring a sense of national pride that would finally bring about God's glorious presence in the nation of Israel and in the lives of its people as it had once been. Were they wondering if now is the time that the old southern kingdom, which is now Judea, and the old northern kingdom, which is now Samaria by the reading of the text—would these two broken kingdoms be reunified. Maybe they were wondering whether or not the Messianic reign would culminate in the final age, the end of time, the end of the ages, where Israel would have a fully restored relationship with God in the land that he gave to them. He would fulfill his promises where they also would perfectly love God, perfectly love neighbor, as they love justice and mercy, as they walk humbly before God. And that in this restoration there would be a further fulfillment of all the nations looking at Israel and being amazed at their God.

Throughout the history of Israel there's been glimpses of this, of how God worked through that nation in particular. But we see something different, something new, something's changing at the time of Jesus's life and his death and his resurrection. Their expectation for a political patriot and a military king contributed to their confusion when Jesus was crucified by the Romans. But now they see the risen Jesus. They see more clearly and understand a bit better what he meant by the kingdom. They are still, though, kind of still asking the question—we see it here in verse 6: *What about now, Jesus? Is it time now?* Notice that Jesus didn't fault them for desiring the kingdom. He merely diverts their attention away from their question, their question of ‘When?’ He actually points them to the work in the kingdom.

Perhaps if you're in school or if you remember all those years ago in school how you would stress about deadlines for homework, for papers. And if you're doing that now, I hate to be the one to break the news to you, it doesn't change once you're out of school. You still stress about project deadlines. But the hard part of doing an assignment for a class or delivering goods or services in your vocation for the benefit of the client, the hard work is focusing on the actual work that's being done, focusing on its benefit to you and to the ones you're serving, without losing sight of the urgency. You see, if you have three hours to finish something, your adrenaline is pumping, and you are honed in. You are focused on what you've got to do to get it done to meet the deadline. Your adrenaline is flowing through your veins. But if you have three weeks to finish, it's a little bit harder. When you know the test is almost over, you are racing to finish until the teacher says, ‘Pencils down.’ But if the test is in three weeks you are saying, ‘I don't even need to pick up my pencil yet.’ Jesus is focusing their attention on the task he is giving them. He's not calling them to be clock keepers shouting when the kingdom will or should be coming. Jesus is calling them to be witnesses of the kingdom come through him now.

So what are your expectations of God's kingdom? That's a very natural question from this text. Do you lean toward it being fully realized, that at some place or time that maybe some places have more of it. Maybe some places are losing it. Maybe you lean toward it being under-realised. What I mean by that is a sense of sitting back, lounging in a chair, your feet are up, and you're waiting for the train to come into the station. And it could even be more delayed than that; you're waiting for the tracks to be laid, and you're ready for the station to be built in order for the train to come. But what Jesus is doing is he's inviting us to explore what he means by the kingdom. We are to see him at the center of it. And that with his life, his death, his resurrection, and this text pointing us to his ascension—all of these things matter to showing us that the Kingdom of God has already come in the here and the now with Jesus's first coming. And since that is true, we must not squeeze Jesus into our version of the kingdom. Maybe this is something you can reflect on later. Maybe this is something you can reflect on when [there are] things in the headlines about schools or infrastructures or taxes or the election cycle. What is your version of the kingdom? If your version is how you think it should be, then it will contribute to your pride and self-righteousness. You will potentially begin to see others very smugly as trespassers or robbers of your utopia. If your version is not how you think it should be, then it may contribute to your despair, to your apathy, to your cynicism, and you may then begin to see others smugly as tyrants and oppressors to your utopia. Jesus doesn't conform to our utopias. The gospel of Jesus invites people from every tribe, every language, every culture, every nation, to be transformed by him, and he is the one that welcomes us into his kingdom to live with him, to live in his rule and reign—everything that the light touches.

Second, Jesus shows that his mission involves a **Power Received**. This comes from verse 8. So where verse 7 ends on focusing on Jesus pointing them to God's authority, verse 8 then shifts to how Jesus is showing how there's a delegated mission. He declares two things here in this verse. First he declares that the apostles will receive power. And second he declares that the apostles will be his witnesses. So let's look at that first one first. This is important, this idea of receiving power, because Jesus is encouraging them that though Jesus has gone from them, he is not absent. He's transferring something about his authority, his power. He's delegating something to them—this task, this work in the kingdom—and he does that by giving them power. It's something received. The power is passively received and actively given by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. You see, in that dynamic—by remembering that you're receiving something from him—it is a grace. It is not a skill, it is not an ability of influence. He's not saying that you are powerful or you will become powerful. He's saying that. . . Well, sorry, that's like a parenthetical conversation in my head. Sometimes we also think of the Spirit as this magical power that imbues spiritual powers. *We can fly. We can do all kinds of things just as the apostles did.* He doesn't mean that, either, for us. The power received is indeed the gift of the Holy Spirit, and He pours that out. And that significance is of course later unpacked by Peter in chapter 2 when Peter's preaching at Pentecost. And Peter is just not making up a new message; he's calling their attention to what had been spoken of hundreds of years before. The prophet Joel talked about the pouring out of the Spirit on God's people. Now this doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit was never around until Pentecost. No, but it does mean that there is something new going on in how God is working in the life of his people. You see, what has been given to the apostles here in this passage, we see in the rest of the book of Acts how then that is transferred also to the church—that we receive the Holy Spirit, we receive the power given. The church

becomes that vehicle to bear witness to God, the very group of people who then now is carrying on the task.

And that brings us to the second thing that Jesus is declaring something about, that we will be witnesses. As I just mentioned, you know, there is a distinction between the apostles here and the larger church, but it's not separate, it's not as if, *Oh, they get the Spirit and we don't*. There is a continuation, and it's all wrapped up in this idea of what it means to be a witness. The apostles were witnesses specifically to Jesus's resurrection. The first twelve walked with Jesus. They ate with Jesus. They saw him arrested and killed, and die. And then Judas chose to end his life, and they were left with eleven. And then we see immediately after this passage they say, *We need another one that will bear witness to Jesus' resurrection*. So there is something unique about the apostles. But then there is something, then, that we then inherit that story. Their witness of Jesus's resurrection is something that is trustworthy for us to also their witness, as we see it played out in our lives. Their witness, the apostles, is foundational to the establishment, the very pillars, of the church. And on those pillars the gospel goes forward in their witness throughout the whole world. Think about that. Sometimes this passage, this verse, is used: *Let's have a mission strategy for us to be Jerusalem, a localized center, and let us expand out of that*. And that's fine, but this text is saying: You—United States American citizens and residents—you're a long way away from Jerusalem. The gospel has gone to the ends of the earth. You're recipients of the witness of the apostolic faith. You were on the fringes. The gospel went to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. You were not in Jerusalem. You were on the ends of the earth, and God found you. He went and found you. Praise God!

So in verse 8 we see that it's both this thesis statement for the book of Acts, but it's also the table of contents, because that's how the book, the rest of it unfolds. We see the gospel advancing in Jerusalem when they go and wait for the coming Spirit as Jesus foretold. The Spirit's poured out, and there is wonderful witness that is happening in Jerusalem. And then it extends out into the surrounding region of Judea and Samaria—and again that's this allusion to what once was of Israel, the two kingdoms that became broken are now are unified under Christ's lordship, his kingship as the Messiah—and then to the ends of the earth. That's this unfolding that we see through Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, which I'm a recipient of. You are, too. The story of the gospel goes forward even today. The church's purpose is glorifying God in our worship of him and being completely fulfilled by our enjoyment of him, forever. The church's mission is primarily one of witness. As John Piper famously has written, "Missions exist because worship doesn't." The task is not yet finished.

So when we recognize his power and his Holy Spirit given, our witness weaves together in multiple ways, but I'm going to quickly list three. We witness God's work in our lives in our relationships, inviting a response of worship. God is worshiped when we are finding our fulfillment in him. And out of our corporate worship, out of our times with smaller groups, our time individually, a devotional life to him, we witness more and more of his love and holiness and realize more and more the depth of our wounds and our rebellion. We seek to grow as his disciples experiencing the scope of his pardon and the depth of his healing. And that's done in the context of his family. It's not tied to the land anymore. It's a building. It's a not a literal building, it's a household, it's a family of God. And out of this God-glorifying worship and as we experience his pardon, as we experience his healing, we can't help but bear witness of his work in our lives to others. The gospel kingdom motivates us to carry out the task he has given us.

We become worshippers of the king. And as Paul talked about, 2 Corinthians 5, we're also ambassadors for the king. And as ambassadors for Christ, the church's power does not rest in military or political might—or as the Bible warns using the language of trusting in chariots or princes, rather trusting in the living God. Now the church's power rests in Jesus Christ and the Spirit he has given. The church is not to conquer other kingdoms for Christ; the church is merely on a diplomatic mission with a message of reconciliation from Christ. I invite you to hear and to receive this message. Maybe you have, then it's continuing in that. But if you have not, I do pray that you will hear and consider this message that is proclaimed to you by God's power through his Son, Jesus, by the giving of the Spirit. In a sense—it's kind of its kind of kitschy, I admit—but he provides the passport and the visa in to enter into his kingdom.

Third, we see that Jesus's mission involves a **Tension** that's **Lived**. This comes from verses 9-11. You see, this is a story that we have been living in since Jesus rose from the dead and he ascended into heaven. And this tension that the story really does kind of hold together is in between Jesus's first coming and, as the text talked about, his coming again. The kingdom has come with his arrival. It continues to be held in by his very hands. All things are held together by him, because we see that in his physical ascension Jesus is still reigning on the throne, and that gives us great encouragement, great hope, when everything feels like it's not held together. And this brings us to a discussion also for our current context. And to be honest, much of the reason why the pastoral staff team, we talked about how do we enter in to these conversations, how do we talk about God and governance, what does the word have to say, how do these conversations bear fruit into our other conversations—hopefully face to face, but often on Facebook and in comments.

Tim Keller recently in an article talked about 'The Mushy Middle.' (And I seem to...That's great...Don't know where it went.) Let's see if I can remember it without quoting it in depth. But he was talking about this umbrella. And what we're experiencing right now in the United States is this perception—and to some degree there's truth to it, to some degree I think we've probably built it up bigger than it has been with all its complexities and nuances. But this umbrella of . . . for a very long time in America there has been this sense of respect for tradition, for morals, a sense, a respect even for, at some level, a spiritualized version or a private faith of Christianity. And so what we have is a very normal bell curve. We have on one side we have the devout who are Christians who believe the gospel for their salvation, and then on the other side, of course, we see a more devout unbelief, let's say, a progressive secularization of society. And what's interesting is what we're seeing is that neither is it getting better or worse. It's getting both better and worse. And we see that in actually the parable that Jesus talks about the wheat and tares. Things are getting both better and better and better, and things are getting worse and worse and worse. But what we are experiencing is this rooftop being removed, this umbrella being taken away, where 'The Mushy Middle,'—this phrase that Keller used in the conversation—this Mushy Middle has now begun to, for whatever reason, are no longer holding this sense of kind of morality or what we might understand as a traditional morality. And so that's what we're experiencing, this shifting. But you see the church's mission is irrespective of those things. The church's mission is irrespective of culture, whether it looks like the kingdom or whether it's not like the kingdom. The church's mission is irrespective of the government structures, but recognizing that because we are humans and we're physical and we live in community, the church's mission is cognizant, it's aware of those structures.

You see throughout all of church history it's always been a pendulum swing from church and state being the same, where the state controls the church—that's been one model. Another model has been the church and the state being the same, but the church controls the state. Another model, which is maybe more in keeping with some of our history of the last couple hundred years, church and state has sought to be separate, but cooperative. And then there's also places and people who would desire a separation of church and state, but the state is antagonistic or even oppressive to the church. And throughout all of the world there are different glimpses of all of these models of the relationship between them. Sometimes in history they've lasted longer than others, sometimes it's a flip and a flop and it goes back and forth. But the reminder that Jesus is showing us is that the church's mission remains constant despite this relationship, despite this pendulum swinging. The church's mission must not drift by confusing or conflating its witness with pursuit of a more desirable or reputable political relationship. Because we have different opinions of those structures, right? We could take a poll, and I would hope that we're very different. Maybe there are some similarities because we're born out of a context and an American understanding of freedom and liberty and even those concepts of separation of church and state, but we have opinions of what that might look like. But regardless of our opinions the church's mission must not drift.

You see, even in this, when we weigh into those waters, the church has many successes. I think of William Wilberforce struggling within the governing structures for decades to seek to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain. I see in our church history in America failures where the church failed to speak out against that same slave trade. There's good and bad, successes and failures. But along the way we proclaim the kingdom of God. We preach Jesus as King and as crucified and as raised. And at the same time we seek to proclaim that message, we also seek to embody it in ourselves in order to display it—to display it to each other who are in the family of God, but also to display it to others who are not yet in the family of God. It's a kingdom ethic, and that shapes our character. It shapes our thoughts, it shapes our passions, it shapes our behaviors. And that shaping is not to one rigid sense of what morality is, but it's shaping to the transformative power of Jesus rooting out our sin that doesn't conform to him, and it grows in godliness that is true to the power of the gospel. It also shapes our relationships, how we speak and treat one another. It shapes our vocations by adding benefit to the common good of society and again that reflecting and revealing of God's character. And in doing that we're participating, we're doing, we're contributing not in something we're adding to what God is doing, but we're seeking to kind of reflect more and more and to reveal God *shalom*, his peace, his prosperity, his kingdom. The church's mission remains constant.

James Allan Francis, he was born in the late 29<sup>th</sup> century. This is a longer quote. I do want to read it from its whole, and I didn't forget this one. It's a great quote. This is what he says of Jesus.

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never traveled more than two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. When he was

dead he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he stands as the central figure of the human race. I'm far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man on earth as his, this one solitary life.

By focusing on a physical kingdom the church swings back and forth between two extremes. On the one extreme our political pursuits are in a sense to go after whatever our vision of the kingdom is, our own personal utopia. We seek to engage politics to take ground, however that may be defined, of course. But on the other extreme we can swing to political retreats, to protect our ground, to protect what we have so that we don't lose more. But instead of focusing on those extremes . . . Just as when you learn to drive you don't pay attention to the middle line and you don't pay attention to the side, because if you just pay attention to one or the other, you just drive going back and forth. But you pick your head up and you look forward down the road, and you find that you drive the car without swinging so much. Of course the metaphor breaks down. But it is what the kingdom. . . we focus on the king. And by focusing on him who physically lived, physically died, physically was raised, physically ascended, and we see the promise that he will physically return, that's how we remain anchored when the powers that be or the culture, however nebulous that gets defined, fluctuates between either seeking his kingdom or opposing his kingdom.

May the global church, as well as the church in America, as well as CPC, may we faithfully bear witness with power to the risen king until he returns. You see, as the light touches everything—because the kingdom is come, it's no longer night waiting for the sunrise. No, the sun has come. We live in the light, though it may be cloudy, but we still know the sun is shining. But once the clouds clear away the sun's rays shine down. You feel the warmth on your skin. You see its brightness. And you can't help but look to the person next to you and say, *Isn't this awesome. Isn't this splendid.* It's rejoicing and taking pleasure in who he is. The kingdom of God has come in Jesus. It has come in his power. It is lived both in the here and now and in that tension of not yet, but will be one day.

Let's pray. Father, we do give you thanks and praise that we get to live in this tension, though we sometimes are exhausted, sometimes we trip and fall, sometimes we get ahead of ourselves and we cause others to trip and fall. We ask that you would be patient with us, but we ask that you would be our focal point. May we lift our heads up. Remove all fear, and we remove all sense of our own agendas, but may we be mindful of your agenda for your world. In Jesus' name, Amen.