

The Kingdom of God

The Message and Ministry of the Church

By Steve Pruitt

The major theme of Jesus' message and ministry was the kingdom of God. He not only articulated with words, but also demonstrated with works what it meant to live life in the kingdom. His plan for spreading the message and ministry of the kingdom included training twelve disciples. Before leaving to return to the Father, Jesus gave them this commission.

All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

Matthew 28:18-20 NKJV

Jesus' commission to his disciples was for them to make disciples in the same way he had made them. He also exhorted them to teach their disciples to observe all the things that he had commanded them. What was it that Jesus commanded his disciple to do?

During Jesus' earthly ministry he empowered his disciples to preach the words of the kingdom and minister the works of the kingdom. The Gospel of Matthew records the first time Jesus sent out his disciples. *And when he had called his twelve disciples to him, he gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease.* (Matthew 10:1 NKJV) Among his instructions were, *And as you go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.* (Matthew 10:7-8 NKJV) Luke records the event this way; *Then he called his twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases. He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.* (Luke 9:1-3 NKJV) Mark chronicles their journey like this: *So the disciples went out, telling all they met to turn from their sins. And they cast out many demons and healed many sick people, anointing them with olive oil.* (Mark 6:12-13 NLT)

Jesus commanded his disciples to preach that the kingdom of God was at hand and to demonstrate that fact with signs and wonders. His words left no doubt that he wanted his disciples to operate in the both the words and works of the kingdom. The disciple's message and ministry was to be the same as that of Jesus. They in turn were to teach other disciples to do the same. After his resurrection Jesus told his disciples, *Peace to you! As the Father has sent me, I also send you.* (John 20:21 NKJV)

The twelve disciples were not the only group Jesus empowered with the message and ministry of the kingdom. Luke writes, *After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before his face into every city and place where he himself was about to go. Jesus told them, And heal the sick there, and say to them, The kingdom of God has come near to you.* (Luke 10:1, 9 NKJV) Listen to the report they brought back to Jesus. *Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name.* (Luke 10:17 NKJV)

Some time after Jesus commissioned his twelve disciples and before he commissioned the seventy, someone else was casting out demons. Mark records, *John said to Jesus, Teacher, we saw a man using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn't one of our group.* (Mark 9:38) Where did this guy come from? Jesus had not commissioned him nor had he been empowered on the Day of Pentecost; it had not yet occurred. Also, the man was using Jesus' name. He wasn't one of the exorcists of the day who used incantations to expel demons. Jesus

responded to John, *Don't stop him! No one who performs miracles in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us.* (Mark 9: 39-40 NLT)

We now know of eighty-three people other than Jesus who had the power to cast out demons and heal the sick. At best we could only assume that the seventy lost this power after Jesus' resurrection, but we know the twelve did not. Not only did they continue to perform signs and wonders but others were given that anointing as well.

Luke records these two passages:

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people.

Acts 6:8 NLT

But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the Good News about Jesus. Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to what he had to say because of the miracles he did. Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

Acts 8:4-8 NLT

Were Stephen and Philip the only two deacons empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform signs and wonders? The scripture says that the believers who fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the good news about Jesus. To the early believers the good news about Jesus included his power to heal and deliver as well as his power to forgive sin. Though the scriptures do not explicitly say that there were others who performed miracles it is not a stretch of the scriptures to believe they did.

We have noted that many believers other than the twelve disciples were give power to perform miracles in Jesus' name. Yet, we haven't even mentioned perhaps the most famous apostle of all; Paul. And lest we forget, his first traveling companion Barnabas. Both of these men were not only considered apostles they both performed miraculous signs and wonders. Their ministry is well documented in the Acts of the Apostles.

The apostles (Paul and Barnabas) stayed there a long time, preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord. The Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders.

Acts 14:3 NLT

There was no further discussion, and everyone listened as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Acts 15:12 NLT

Paul spent part of his ministry writing letters to the churches that he visited. His goal was to strengthen their faith in Christ, teach them how to live in the Body of Christ and to set in order the government of the church. He wrote this to the Corinthian church:

To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another he gives the gift of special knowledge. The Spirit gives special faith to another, and to someone else he gives the power to heal the sick. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and to another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to know whether it is really the Spirit of God or another spirit that is speaking. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, and another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one

and only Holy Spirit who distributes these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.

1 Corinthians 12:8-11 NLT

It is no stretch to believe that the reason Paul wrote about the gifts of healings and performing miracles to the Corinthian church was that there were believers in that church operating in those gifts. This further validates the fact that many believers outside the realm of the twelve apostles were performing miraculous signs and wonders.

Jesus told his disciples, *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to my Father.* (John 14:12 NKJV) He also said, *These signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak new languages. They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick and heal them.* (Mark 16:17-18 NLT)

The early church didn't seem to have a problem believing the words Jesus spoke to them; especially after the Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost. But, what about the church today?

The vast majority of church has the message of the kingdom down pat. Salvation is found in Jesus alone. He is the way, the truth and life. It is by the power of his shed blood on the cross that sin is erased and man is made right before God. He has ascended to the Father and will one day return to judge the living and the dead. On this the true church agrees.

But, this is not the entire kingdom message that Jesus preached. He said, *The kingdom of God is at hand.* Then he cast out demons, healed the sick and raised the dead to prove it. Did Jesus ever envision the church not healing the sick and performing other signs and wonders? If not, why have many in the church today abandoned the kingdom ministry? Did the ministry of the kingdom of God cease with the death of the first twelve apostles as some suppose and teach?

If signs and wonders are not a part of the ministry of the church today when exactly did they cease? We have established without a doubt that the first twelve apostles were not the only apostles nor were they the only ones who performed miraculous signs and wonders.

Imagine this scenario: John the Revelator is lying on his death bed. Waiting outside his cottage is a line of people with all sorts of diseases with some being tortured by demonic spirits. This line has been formed for quite some time because John is the last living apostle. With his last breath John pronounces a leper cleansed then dies. Those attending to John are given the task of telling the rest of the people that the miracles have ceased because the last apostle has died.

This sounds preposterous doesn't it? Yet, there is a faction in the church today who preach the cessation of spiritual gifts, miracles, signs and wonders. Most who teach this readily believe Jesus' words, *...everyone **who believes** in me will have eternal life.* (John 3:15 NLT)

are valid for the church today. But they discard Jesus words, *...he **who believes** in me, the works that I do he will do also...* and *These signs will accompany those **who believe**...* (John 14:12 NKJV and Mark 16:17 NLT).

Not only are there many who preach that gifts and signs and wonders have ceased, but they often reproach those who practice these things by accusing them of "being of the devil." This very thought flies in the face of what Paul taught the Corinthian church. He said, *Now there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it is the same Holy Spirit who is the source of them all.* (1 Corinthians 12:4 NLT) In other words the same Spirit who gives the gift of the words of wisdom and knowledge is the same Spirit who gives the gifts of healings. The same Spirit who gives the gifts of helps and administration is the same Spirit who gives the gift of miracles. (1 Corinthians 12:28)

Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, *And He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...* (Ephesians 4:11-14 NKJV)

Paul wasn't merely talking about changing diapers in the nursery, decorating the bulletin board or mowing the cemetery. All these things are good and necessary in the life of the institutional church. There are many good works in which the church should be involved such as feeding the poor, clothing the naked and visiting those in prison. But, Paul was also referring to the proclamation of the kingdom gospel; which is repent the kingdom of God is at hand, and the demonstration of kingdom power with signs and wonders following those who believe.

God has ordained leaders in the church to equip the saints to do those works. Since the Body of Christ has not yet come into the unity of faith, to a perfect man or into the fullness of Christ we can only conclude that the function of these anointed offices is still valid. We can also conclude that until the church begins to walk in the fullness of the kingdom, doing both the words and the works, that it will not come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

There is spiritual warfare taking place in the world today; a violent conflict between the forces of darkness and the forces of light. The church has been called to enter this conflict as allies with Jesus to destroy the works of darkness.

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