

Apostolic Succession

Acts 1:15-26

The idea of apostolic succession is generally used to define the Roman Catholic doctrine of the papacy—that the apostle Peter gain superiority and preeminence over all the other original apostles, and then that his authoritative position as the supreme head of the church was passed on to his successors in the church, those who came to be known as popes. Upon the death or resignation of each pope, that authority was understood to be passed on to his successor. Thus, at any particular time, the current pope would trace his right to rule in the church by direct succession from Peter himself. They even dare to claim that this papal succession ensures that each pope would retain the right to call himself the vicar of Christ—the ruler of the church in the place of Christ, his representative, his substitute.

I hope that whole idea strikes as dangerously wrong, even blasphemous, for Jesus himself is our only vicar. He alone is the substitute for us, his sacrifice for our sin is the only ground upon which we can claim forgiveness of sins and peace with God. His death upon the cross for our sins is often and rightly identified as a vicarious atonement. A substitutionary atonement.

So I don't believe in apostolic succession in that sense at all. Rather, the truth is that the age of the apostles ended, the foundation of the church was established, and all who follow after the apostles would build upon that unique foundation they laid, but not as apostolic successors. However, I do believe in apostolic succession in this sense, with regard to the preservation of the twelve, as they were called, during the time and age when that foundation was being laid. As I said last week, we don't know any of the details of which apostle died when, and who succeeded which one, nor how it was that their number eventually

dwindled down to the final apostle, John, whose death then marked the end of the apostolic age. But we do know the details of how the first replacement came was selected. That is our focus this morning.

I've managed to cover just 14 verses with my first five sermons from this book, so today we will speed right along with 12 verses all at once, and I do that, of course, because of the unity of the subject matter at hand. As I anticipated this text and this sermon, I initially began thinking in terms of the central focus upon Judas and his demise, but actually the bigger picture is that of the apostles themselves and their place in the building of the church. So the story today does not ultimately focus upon the tragedy of Judas' life, and death. Rather, in the context of that tragedy, we see and we learn how it is that God is building his church.

Remember what we have studied so far. The disciples are all gathered together in Jerusalem, following Jesus' ascension and awaiting the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

v.14 "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers."

One more item to cover before Pentecost. The replacement of Judas among the band of apostles. The eleven were identified in our text last week, but there was to be twelve, and I noted last week the great symbolic importance of that number, representing the fullness of the whole church, just as the twelve tribes of Israel noted the whole of God's covenant people in the Old Testament. So Judas had to be replaced. Luke, however, gives us a little introduction to that replacement, namely the account of Judas death. And it is a gruesome destruction.

v.18 “(Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.”

We don't know much about Judas' plight, but Matthew's gospel tells us this,

Mat. 27:3 “Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, 4 saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” And they said, “What is that to us? You see to it!” 5 Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. 6 But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood.” 7 And they consulted together and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, 10 and gave them for the potter's field, as the LORD directed me.”

There is not contradiction there, as Matthew records the cause of his death, suicide by hanging. Luke, records the gruesome aftermath, and remember that he was a physician. You all know what it is like to have such a conversation with a doctor about things related to the human body! Luke gives the doctor's description of what happened, the medical description. I won't even read how one well known commentator describes what likely took place with Judas corpse, but rather let Luke's description suffice,

v.18 “...falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.”

So we see,

I. JUDAS DESTROYED.

That's a gentle word compared to what I just read, but the emphasis is helpful. Judas was totally and absolutely destroyed, and his spiritual condemnation is clearly represented by his physical humiliation. And, it was deserved. For this horrific disgrace was earned, because he is,

A. Judas the betrayer.

He betrayed Jesus. Verse 16, he “became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.”

More fully,

Mat. 26:47 “And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. 48 Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him.” 49 Immediately he went up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed Him.”

He betrayed Jesus. He turned him over to the be arrested, and put to death. He was the false witness needed for the Roman authorities to charge with treason and have him put to death. He was the witness upon which that charge was made. And he was without excuse. Guilty himself, guilty of accepting money, 30 pieces of silver, in order to provide the evidence needed for Jesus' trial.

Mat. 26:14 “Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?” And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver. 16 So from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him.”

Notice something important, however. Notice what Luke tells us here, in addition to emphasizing Judas' wickedness and guilt. Judas sinned greatly, in one sense more greatly than anyone else in human history. But his sin, his grievous sin came about, we read, according to Scripture. In other words, God decreed it. God predetermined the certainty of this sinful act, for which Judas was held responsible. But it came as no surprise to God at all. Look at how Peter explains it.

v.16 "Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; 17 for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry."

Scripture had to be fulfilled! That is to say the same thing as God's eternal purpose and decree would come to pass. So we read in the messianic psalm,

Ps. 41:7 "All who hate me whisper together against me; Against me they devise my hurt. 8 "An evil disease," they say, "clings to him. And now that he lies down, he will rise up no more." 9 Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me."

Jesus fulfilled so many specific prophecies, including this one regarding Judas' betrayal. And that is what Peter saw fit to emphasize. God's will would not be thwarted by the sinfulness of a man, for even that sin was identified in Scripture as a prophetic announcement. So this was God's eternal purpose, his eternal plan, that Judas would be an apostle.

v.17 "...for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry."

And yet, for his sin, he was condemned. Rightly so. So here is,

B. Judas the condemned.

His condemnation is represented by his physical demise, and no doubt, that is the reason for Luke's medically descriptive words, as well as the reference to the field of blood. Luke tells us explicitly,

v.18 "Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity..."

Sometimes translated, "the reward of his wickedness." That's the only reward Judas had. His wickedness enabled him to purchase a field, a piece of property. But his money came from his sin, so there was no benefit to his soul, no benefit for any good. It was worthless, as is all the rewards of wickedness. And the horror of the worthlessness of his existence is demonstrated not merely by the guilt-ridden despair that led to his suicide, but to the disgrace that went along with his death so graphically exposed by Luke, "falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out."

Again, the emphasis is upon the disgrace of all that. And as horrific as those words are to our ears, all the more so in the Hebrew culture and religion, where there is such great emphasis upon the honorable treatment that must be given to a corpse. In death, Judas had no such honor, but the polar opposite. His condemnation before God for his grievous sin of betraying Jesus is so fully demonstrated by what happened to his body after death.

Then notice again Luke's emphasis, that all of this is also "according to Scripture." According to God's prophecy and purpose, and Luke quotes from Psalm 69,

v.19 "And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 "For it is written in the Book

of Psalms, “May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it”; and “Let another take his office.”

Psalm 69 include multiple prophecies of Jesus, as well as this prophetic condemnation of Judas.

Ps. 69:19 “You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you. 20 Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. 21 They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. 22 Let their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap. 23 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually. 24 Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them. 25 May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents. 26 For they persecute him whom you have struck down, and they recount the pain of those you have wounded. 27 Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. 28 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.”

Judas the condemned thus became,

II. JUDAS THE REPLACED.

With this replacement, Luke here gives us much wisdom and insight with regard to,

A. Qualifications of the apostles.

This replacement, or apostolic succession, rightly understood was of great significance and importance. And not the one great qualification for the man to be selected.

v.21-22

The twelfth apostle must be chosen from those who had been with Christ. The word apostle refers to a messenger, one who is sent, who acts on behalf of the one sending! The apostle represents the one who sent him, and he exercises authority on his behalf! So the new apostle must be chosen from among those who have been with Jesus. He must be a witness of the resurrection, a witness of the resurrected Jesus. In fact, that becomes a descriptive title for the replacement apostle—he “must become a witness with us.”

The ability to bear witness to Jesus, directly and personally, was foundational to apostolic teaching and preaching. So Peter would preach at Pentecost,

Acts 2:32 “This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. 33 Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.”

Likewise,

Acts 3:13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. 14 But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.”

This is a vital qualification, a necessary prerequisite. The band of apostles were witnesses, eyewitnesses, of Jesus. And that idea makes obvious the reality that the age of the apostles would end. The witnesses of the resurrected Jesus would eventually die out. Just one generation. Thus the meaning of the word foundation. When a foundation is laid, when a foundation is finished, it is finished. The of building a foundation is, by

definition, limited. If it is a rectangular building, when the last piece is laid, the foundation is complete. When the last edge piece of a puzzle is put into place, there are no more edge pieces to be found or to be added. So the unalterable qualification of an apostle was that eyewitness testimony.

Now, that might raise a question about the addition of the Apostle Paul, and that very question of his right to be called an apostle is the reason he so often and extensively defends his apostolic office. And notice how he does so.

1 Cor. 9:1 “Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 2 If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.”

The book of Acts recounts the calling of Paul as an Apostle, and we will certainly that in depth in the months to come, but note how he summarizes his right to call himself an apostle, how he defends himself. “Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?”

Paul wasn’t with Jesus from the beginning, of course, but he did see the resurrected Jesus, in person.

Acts 9:3 “As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” 5 And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into

Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

We have further explanation of that in,

Acts 22:12 “Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, 13 came to me; and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him. 14 Then he said, The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.”

Paul describe himself in these understandable words, speaking of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances.

1 Cor. 15:7 “After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

So the next apostle would join the other witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection, and, ultimately, he would be chosen by God. Look at how Luke describes,

B. The selection of the apostles.

We don’t know how the two finalists might have been identified, but they are named,

v.23 “And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.”

What is very clear and very intentional is that the choice belonged to God himself. So we read,

v.24 “And they prayed and said, “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen.”

That’s plain enough, but they did more than pray. This was the apostolic age, which is to say, there remained direct, special revelation from God. So they cast lots, which little to nothing in common with what we might describe today as rolling the dice or flipping a coin. We use those methods to give us an answer when we are unable or unwilling to make a choice. We use those methods when we require an objective, unbiased and independent answer. But the casting of lots was much, much more than that. This was a revelation of God himself.

Casting of lots was an Old Testament means by which the revealed will of God would be made known to the people of God. We read,

Prov. 16:3 “The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD.”

In the Old Testament there was also the urim and the thumbing, small stones that gave the high priest either a positive or negative answer to a question. And similarly, casting lots, such as to distribute the land and determine their inheritance. There was also the casting of lots to disclose Achan’s sin, to select Saul as the king of Israel, and to determine the number and time of the priest and Levites to serve at the temple. Just one example,

1 Sam. 10:20 “And when Samuel had caused all the tribes of Israel to come near, the tribe of Benjamin was chosen. 21 When he had caused the tribe of Benjamin to come near by their families, the family of Matri was chosen. And Saul the son of Kish was chosen.”

“Chosen” there means chosen by lot! Chosen by God. Thus Matthias was selected.

v.26

One more comment about the apostles, and that is to identify and describe the,

C. Responsibilities of the apostles.

Notice how Luke so eloquently describes the work of the apostles.

v.25 “...to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.”

They were to take part. To join with the twelve, laying the foundation upon which the church would be built. Luke calls it “this ministry and apostleship.” And this is that ministry, that work of apostleship,

Eph. 2:19 “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

More fully,

1 Cor. 12:28 “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.”

Then also,

Eph. 4:11 “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some

prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

We will see these apostles as we study through the book of Acts. We will see their ministry, and we will see the foundation they will build, a foundation upon which we continue to build our church to this day, for no greater words could ever be used to describe us even today, that this church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.”

Let me end with the words of R.C. Sproul, “From the outset of the book of Acts we are provided a glimpse of the life of the early church in its pristine purity—obedient, unified, praying, searching the Scriptures, and submissive to apostolic authority. That should be in front of us all the time as we seek to build the church today.”