

God is in Control of Jesus' Mission

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- [0 : 0 0] I'm going to start with a question, and this is the question. What qualities would a candidate need to have to win your vote at the next general election?
- What qualities would they need to have? What qualifications would you look for in their resume? Do they just need to belong to the right party? Or perhaps someone who presents well, who seems pretty genuine and speaks quite plainly?
- And I wonder what the job application for the Prime Minister would be. I tried to find it this week online, but I don't think it exists anywhere. But maybe it looks something like this. Must be able to handle big numbers.
- Must have experience running small republics. Must be able to kiss babies and no skeletons in the closet. And I guess, of course, that lots of us are fed up with politics.
- It's probably because we look back at some of the politicians we've elected and wonder if they're qualified for anything at all. Maybe we look at some of them and wish we could get our money back. You see, we need to be certain that we have the right leader or the right leaders because of the influence they have over our day-to-day lives.
- [1 : 1 2] Our passage today is basically like election day. But today we're a million miles away from the sausage chisel at your local primary school because today in our passage is, I think, the most important election that's ever been run or won.
- You see, today Jesus is electing the leaders of his church. Remember last week he ascended into heaven? He said, wait till I empower you with the Holy Spirit.
- And until he returns again, he's commissioned these apostles, chapter 1, verse 8, to be his witnesses from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.
- Chapter 1, verse 8, that's our key verse for the whole book. You see, Jesus needs to be certain that he elects the right leaders because they're going to represent him down here on earth to the ends of the earth.
- The stakes couldn't be higher. We only need to think back at all the scandals and all the damage done by bad church leaders. We need to be certain that these men can be trusted to lead.
- [2 : 1 9] You see, when the opposition party wants to discredit the Christian party, they always point to those scandals and those bad leaders. But if they really want to undo the church, they should concentrate on discrediting these 12 apostles.
- If they can do that, they can remove any certainty that Christianity is reliable. They can cut off any link between the Jesus we worship and the one of history.
- Acts is the story of Jesus' mission to the world. Today is the foundation of organized Christian religion, which in chapter 1 is an election day where Jesus is voting in his leadership.
- So please keep your handouts there and your Bibles open. We're at point 1. I'm going to actually read from verse 12, a couple of verses before we started. Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.

When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. And in verse 13, there's already a big awkwardness in the room. As I read it out, I want you to do the math and tell me what's wrong.

[3 : 29] So here we go. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the zealot, and Judas the son of James.

Do you spot what's wrong? Gwyneth got it right. Only 11. There's only 11 apostles. There's not 12. All the way through Luke's gospel, there were 12.

In fact, they were called the 12. 11 sounds awkward, doesn't it? Imagine having only three Beatles or a famous four instead of the famous five.

At all the key, sorry, 12 is a really significant number in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the family of God were made up of 12 tribes, the 12 sons of Israel.

They were like the daddies of God's family. At all the key moments of Israel, the 12 tribes gathered. When they coronated King David, they dedicated the temple and the tabernacle.

[4 : 29] All the 12 were there. When the high priest entered the holiest of holies to make atonement for the people, he had 12 precious stones on his sort of garment with the names of the 12 tribes on each of the stones.

The point is, if you were attached to one of the 12, he was making atonement for you. A sign that you were in God's family is whether or not you're attached to one of the 12 tribes.

Similarly for us in the New Testament, in the church, a sign that you are in the family of God depends on how attached you are to the 12 apostles, what you do with them.

That's why it's so radical when Jesus stood up in Luke chapter 6 and chose 12, 12 apostles in the church to replace 12 tribes or tribal daddies in Israel.

That's why 11 apostles is so awkward in verse 13. It's why even though verse 23, the party nominated two potential replacements, Jesus only chose one of them, Matthias.

[5 : 38] He wanted to get to the special number of 12. And we know why there are 11 apostles, don't we? We know what Judas did. He famously betrayed Jesus.

Peter's quite upfront about it. There's no political spin in verse 17. He says, he was one of our number. He shared in our ministry. Yep, he was one of us. We admit it. Verse 18, that's Judas' death.

It's a pretty graphic verse. I think verse 25 puts it more politely. It says, Judas left to go where he belongs. See, our theme today is being certain about leaders.

But Judas causes lots of doubts. He was meant to be a guide to the nations. But in verse 16, he served as a guide to those who arrested Jesus.

But it's not as though Judas slipped through the interview process. It's not as though the Russians had rigged the election. This passage tells us that Jesus was always in control.

[6 : 40] Have a look at verse 16. Brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled, in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas.

Verse 20 shows us which part of scripture it was. Verse 4, said Peter, it is written in the book of Psalms. May his place be deserted. Let there be no one to dwell in it.

That's Psalm 69. And may another take his place of leadership. That's Psalm 109. And it's not that Peter is plucking random bits of the Bible just to suit the bad event of Judas' life.

Jesus regularly quotes David's Psalms about himself. You see, King David was like a mini me, a mini Jesus. The Psalms are about David's highs and lows.

Jesus says, when you see David's Psalms, you can see the highs and lows in my life too. Psalm 69, that was our Old Testament reading. It talks about a king whose friend betrays him.

[7 : 42] And so that friend is condemned. That's what all the blood and the intestines of verse 18 was fulfilling, the condemnation. Psalm 109 is about a king whose friend treats him wickedly.

And so the king replaces him. Both these Psalms are a shadow of the interaction between Judas and Jesus. The point is, Judas' betrayal is not plan B.

It was weaved into the Jesus story ahead of time. God was always in control. Now, that is a really important lesson for us to learn from the book of Acts. Because again and again, we're going to see the church suffer all sorts of setbacks, all sorts of wicked persecution.

But like Judas, these things have to be. They have to unfold precisely the way God wanted it. That means we're going to be amazed when we see God's sovereign hand working amidst the setbacks and wickedness.

Of the early church. Pastorally, this will be really important in the darker times of your life. When there are setbacks and when you suffer wicked things, when you doubt where God is in all of your suffering and how your struggles are part of his plan, you'll need to know there is a sovereign God on those days.

[9 : 00] For now, the point is, we can be certain that God's plan A was to have this precise 12 chosen in this precise moment, in this precise way.

They are his 12. And that means you can trust them. And as we move to point two, we're going to see that they're also uniquely qualified. So point number two.

This past week, I dug out my job application for my role here at HCD. And here are the top three qualifications on my job description.

Someone whose primary goal is to seek the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ. Someone who's committed to biblical truth. Someone who's an example of Christian faith, life and leadership, as outlined in the New Testament.

Notice that these qualifications have nothing to do with Ridley Bible College or preaching and teaching just yet. I'm not making eye contact any wardens in case they want their money back.

[10 : 03] But the same goes for our passage. It's not that Jesus just sort of wanted the symbolism of 12. They had to be qualified to do the job as well.

And what I've done on your handout, I've put a ballot paper for you. Obviously, this ballot paper is officially sanctioned by the Australian Electoral Commission. But the ballot paper is for which qualities you would vote for in an apostle.

So would you vote for Mr. Brave? Mr. Bible Knowledge? Mr. Social Justice? What about Miss Personable and Miss Culturally Sensitive?

I wonder what the job application would look like for an apostle. So would it say, Apostle wanted. No previous experience required. Must be good with all that Jew-Gentile business. Completed course at Ridley Bible College.

Expert at using Jesus 2.0. Well, in verse 21 and 22, Luke gives us the three qualifications needed for an apostle.

[11 : 04] So the first one, verse 21. It has to be someone who was with the disciples the whole time Jesus was living amongst them, from his first baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up for them.

So not that they attended the Ridley course, but that they were on the Jesus course the whole time of his adult ministry. A qualification to? It's at the end of verse 22.

For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. They must have seen Jesus alive again. And qualification three, that's the important one.

Qualification three is the one that safeguards against someone who thinks pretty highly of themselves. The end of verse 24, it says, Show us which of these two you have chosen.

This means you can't decide to be an apostle. You have to be personally chosen by Jesus in the New Testament and for the prophets chosen by God in the Old Testament.

[12 : 04] That's what's going on in verse 26 when they cast lots and the lots fell to Matthias. So he was added to the eleven. It seems odd to cast lots, doesn't it? It seems like gambling at the next polling booth.

They're not going to hand you two dice instead of a ballot paper. But actually casting lots is a way of making sure that Jesus has the final decision. The apostles, obviously, they've pre-selected their candidates.

They've got a short list of two nominees, but they make sure Jesus has the final say. You see, they know that Jesus is Lord of all, even over the lots that they cast.

And so while not physically present, Jesus is still directing things from his throne in heaven. So someone who saw Jesus' ministry, who witnessed his resurrection, someone personally chosen by him.

And actually, that's exactly how Jesus chose the first eleven. So if you look over your page, it's verse two. Verse two talks about being chosen. It says, After giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he has chosen.

[13 : 14] Verse three talks about witnessing his resurrection. It says, After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. And qualification three about being with Jesus the whole time.

It says, He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. So it's not just that they were eyewitnesses, but they were earwitnesses too. They heard Jesus explain what all the signs and wonders and prophecies about the kingdom of God meant.

You see, that is the definition of an apostle. No pope or church leader can claim that of themselves. If the HTD job description asks for these qualifications, the position should still be vacant.

Or at least you have someone who thinks quite highly of themselves. But choosing the twelve this way gives Jesus certainty that his message will reach the ends of the earth without being twisted or corrupted.

This is why books like the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas are not part of the original Bible. The authors never met the three qualifications. They were never personally chosen by Jesus.

[14 : 26] Now, maybe you think all of this is only slightly less boring than election night on the ABC. Well, I want to show you why this is so much more.

And so let me ask you this question. What do you love about Jesus? What do you love about Jesus? His death for your sins? His certain resurrection?

The fact that you will certainly be raised too? That your name is certainly written in the book of life? That you will certainly be heading to the new creation? That you are certainly part of God's family?

How do you know if any of those things are true? How do you know if they're true? Unless, sorry, what if it wasn't written down by reliable eyewitnesses, personally chosen in the New Testament for us?

Where would the certainty for your faith come? At this church, we love the Bible, not because we love books per se, but because we love the glory of the Jesus that the Bible reveals.

[15 : 30] It's like Jesus is the stars, the glory of the stars. We don't love the telescope per se, but we love the glory of the Jesus that the telescope reveals.

It is the teaching of these 12 apostles that means we can see and hear and know the real Jesus as if he was still physically present with us.

And the upshot of all of this is point number three. Don't drift from the daddies. Don't drift from the daddies. You see, when we talk about certainty and God in the same sentence, the voices of our age try to sow all the doubt.

How can you know anything for certain? Especially about God. The only certainty is that there is no certainty. You should throw all religion out, they say.

But Luke thinks we can do better. He says if we humble ourselves before the apostles, before their teaching, we can move from a doubt to a certainty that gives us security in our faith.

[16 : 37] You see, again and again in the book of Acts, the defining symbol of the true church is that they were gathered around the apostles' teaching. There are other signs of the authentic church, but I think the apostles' witness is the main one.

Because even the sovereign hand of the Father, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the signs and wonders of the Son, all three of those things follow these 12 men wherever they go testifying about Jesus.

Actually, even for your own personal security, your own salvation, a sure sign that you are in the family is what you do with the daddies.

How you humble yourselves before the apostles. The point is, don't drift from the daddies. And maybe you find all this too restrictive.

You know, why does it have to be 12? Surely there are other equally important ways to experience Jesus. But remember, moving away from the apostles gives you a blurry picture of Jesus.

[17 : 46] Getting rid of the telescope means you've got a blurry view of the stars until one day you end up with a different Jesus altogether. Sadly, many churches, especially in Melbourne, have done that.

They're never going to admit publicly that they've drifted away from the apostles. But in their priorities, in their teaching, in what they, in how they organise what they do, they are showing who they're really listening to.

It sounds like freedom, doesn't it? Go! Find your own personal Jesus. But all it does is make Christians shakier in their faith. Because they've got a blurry picture of Jesus.

That attitude, it plays into our rebellious spirits. We hate boundaries. We hate limitations. But if you can reject the 12, you can reject anything.

A sign of family membership is what we do with the daddies. Don't drift away from them. Moving away from the apostles, it breeds disunity amongst us.

[18 : 53] Of course it does. If you move away from the tribal daddies, you move away from the tribe. We don't say all this to judge other churches. This is not about getting a pitchfork and going on a witch hunt.

We're saying this because we need to watch ourselves. This passage helps us to prioritise our church life. It helps us organise the things we do.

It helps our preaching and teaching, whether our small groups study the Bible or books related to the Bible. This passage means that our church is allowed to look less impressive than other churches.

It might mean that our church is out of step with the Anglican diocese. It might mean that a different style of worship is okay because the true church is the one built on the foundation of the apostolic testimony of Jesus.

And while all of that is at a sort of church level, I think it's equally true for us personally. You see, we've all got voices we listen to, other things that guide our organisation and how we guide our lives.

[19 : 59] But could we do better than whatever just grabs our emotions or what affirms what we really want to do or whatever our personal opinions are? Luke says, don't drift away from the daddies.

I'm not suggesting we don't have doubts, but Luke wants to cure our doubts. The point is, where do we go when we want to be certain about who Jesus is and what he wants from me?

Our own Nicene Creed, it says this, we believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. The true church is the one built on the foundation of the apostles' witness.

An authentic Christian is one who doesn't drift from the daddies. Let's pray that we would not do that. Our Father God, we thank you that you have organised a reliable eyewitness of Jesus' life.

Thank you that even 2,000 years later, we know that we are going straight to the source material. Thank you that means we can have security in our faith. Please help us humble ourselves before the apostles in the New Testament and the prophets in the Old Testament.

[21 : 16] Please would we not drift from them. Please would we not listen to other voices. We need your help. There's so much temptation to drift in our culture.

In Jesus' name, amen.