

## **Always True of the Church ACTS 1**

I was thinking the other day that when I started working you could save money just by being busy – because when you were busy you never had time to get to the bank to get money out, and for most things you had to have cash. But now I can always spend, even in the middle of the night, with my card, and the card is always available. When I last had my card compromised I received a new digital card within a few minutes of asking.

Our lives are marked by constant change.

There is demographic change, change in the ethnic make up of the Australian population. There is political change – new parties, new causes. Changing social attitudes to marriage and gender.

Some change is good, some more unsettling, but we are surrounded by change.

Change even in church. Some of us will be aware of that, some less so. But I have seen changes in preaching style, changes in music – it's a while since I've sung to an organ, changes in dress - where are the ties and hats – and as a church we are living through a period of change in leadership, brought on by another set of changes, the changes that happen, to varying degrees and at varying rates, as we age.

That is change that is built in to all our lives.

But just as there is change, so some things don't change. Banking may have changed, but the need to earn and spend has not.

My body, your body, might be changing with age, but the DNA that directs the growth and aging of my body, that has been there from the day we are conceived, that makes me and you recognisably the same person we are over the years, does not.

What, in the midst of change, doesn't change about the church, understood this time not as a local congregation but as God's people on earth as a whole? What in a sense is the church's DNA, there from the birth of the church, to be present in every particular church, that gives believers collectively through the centuries the recognisable characteristics of God's people, even as individual believers are themselves carried off by the passing of time out of the history of the world, out of the church visible?

What is to be always true of the church as a whole, and so true of particular churches, of our church?

WE will be answering that question over the next six weeks by going back to the birth of the church as it is recorded in the first nine chapters of Acts.

Today, from Acts 1, we will be looking at the foundation of the church in the past and continuing work of the Lord Jesus, and what that means for our understanding of our identity, our times and our task.

Then from Acts 2 we will be looking at the content of the church's unchanging message about Jesus.

In weeks 3 and 4 we will consider the reality that the church will always live its life in the context of both external and internal pressure to give up being the church of Jesus, that characteristic of the church is an ongoing fight for faithfulness

In week 5 from Acts 6 the resources God provides for our distinctive common life in this world

And then finally from Acts 9 the confident hope the church can always have in God.

## The Church's Foundation in the past and present work of Jesus.

*Acts 1: I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach **2** until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **3** After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*

***4** While he was with them, he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "Which," he said, "you have heard me speak about; **5** for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days."*

Acts is the second volume of Luke's two volume work on the origins of the Christian movement, the first, called here his first narrative, being the gospel of Luke.

Both are dedicated to Theophilus, a wealthier Roman, for whom, as Luke said at the beginning of his gospel, Luke is writing an orderly account **4** so that he [you] may know the certainty of the things about which he has [you have] been instructed.

*Luke 1: **3** So it also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, **4** so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed.*

Here, at the start of his second volume he describes his first volume as what Jesus "began to do and teach." That's an interesting way to speak of a work which finishes with a brief summary of what Acts starts with – the departure of Jesus, carried up into heaven.

*Luke 24: **50** Then he led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. **51** And while he was blessing them, he left them and was carried up into heaven.*

But Luke doesn't say "In the first narrative I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught", but 'all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up'

The implication is that what will follow in his second scroll, our book of Acts, in which Luke traces the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and the associated growth of the number and geographical distribution of believers in Jesus,

The implication is that this spread is what the Lord Jesus continues to do and teach. Acts will be a record of Jesus' work, a work which He will do through His Spirit at work in the apostles.

From verse 12 on of chapter 1 we see Jesus is no longer physically present with His disciples. The resurrection appearances have finished and the Lord Jesus has ascended bodily to heaven vv. 9-11.

But in the light of His coming absence the Lord Jesus emphasised before His departure the coming presence of the Holy Spirit to be with and empower the witness of the apostles

Luke's gospel ended with Jesus speaking of the promise of the Father, that they were to wait in Jerusalem for.

*Luke 24: **49** And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high."*

The introduction of Acts, vv. 1-5 which is a bit like the recap at the beginning of each new episode of television series, summarising and connecting with the previous episode, picks up on this promise

**4** *While he was with them, he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "Which," he said, "you have heard me speak about; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days."*

The promise of the Father is the promise given through John the Baptist that the coming one would baptise with the Spirit in fulfilment of God's promises in the Old Testament of the coming of the Spirit in the last days. [e.g. Joel 2:28, Isaiah 44:3, Ezekiel 36:27]

*Luke 3: 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

It is this promise Jesus fulfils by pouring out the Spirit on His followers at Pentecost

*Acts 2: 33 Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear. [Acts 11:15-17]*

A promise of the Spirit that is for all who become His followers through believing the gospel the apostles preach

*Acts 2: 38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call."*

Jesus emphasises, just as He had done on the night before He died in John 14-16 [14:26, 15:26-27, 16:4-15], that the coming of the Spirit will empower the apostles witness to Him, to Jesus

**8** *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Jesus said in John that the Spirit will glorify Him, and one of the ways the Spirit does that is by empowering the apostles' truthful testimony to Jesus' death and resurrection [John 16:14].

In what follows in Acts it is made clear that the spread of the gospel, the growth of the church, is the work of the Lord Jesus through the Spirit He gives at work in the apostles and all His followers

This is shown in many ways

For example, the repeated references to the apostles and others being filled with the Spirit is to help us see that their witness, its boldness and clarity, is the work of Christ through them

*Acts 4: 8 Then Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders:*

*Acts 4: 31 When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.*

[Acts 7:55, Acts 9:17]

At many crucial points the advance of the gospel happens under the guidance of the Lord Jesus, often through the Spirit.

So it is the Lord Jesus who brings Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Spirit who tells Philip to get into the chariot to explain the Scriptures to him

*Acts 8: **26** An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: "Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is the desert road.) **27** So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem **28** and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud.*

***29** The Spirit told Philip, "Go and join that chariot."*

It is the Lord Jesus through His Spirit who directs Peter to Cornelius to bring the gospel to Gentiles

*Acts 10: **19** While Peter was thinking about the vision, the Spirit told him, "Three men are here looking for you. **20** Get up, go downstairs, and go with them with no doubts at all, because I have sent them."*

The work of the Lord Jesus is highlighted in the story of the apostle Paul's conversion and call, Paul whose ministry dominates the book from Acts 13 on and whose conversion and call is repeated three times in the book.

Describing what happened on the road to Damascus in chapter 9 Luke writes

*Acts 9: **4** Falling to the ground, he [Saul who becomes Paul] heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*

***5** "Who are you, Lord?" Saul said.*

*"I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting," he replied.*

Acts 9:10 Then we are told that it is the Lord who sends Ananias to Saul in the face of Ananias' objections, and that the Lord Jesus is giving Paul a special role in the gospel going to the non-Jewish, the gentile, world

*Acts 9: **15** But the Lord said to him, "Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites.*

Then the repetition of Paul's call on the road to Damascus in Acts 22 and 26, emphasises each time that it is the Lord Jesus who calls Paul to do His work.

[Paul giving his defence to an angry crowd in the temple says

*Acts 22: **7** I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'*

***8** "I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?'*

*"He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.*

*v. **21** "He said to me, 'Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"*

And again, defending himself in Acts 26 before the Roman governor and Jewish royalty Paul says

*Acts 26: 14 We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice speaking to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'*

**15** *"I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'*

*"And the Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. 16 But get up and stand on your feet. For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. 17 I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me.']*

It is the Lord Jesus who saves and sends Paul, and then it is the Lord Jesus who directs Paul's mission

*Acts 16: 6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia; they had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 When they came to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8 Passing by Mysia they went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision in which a Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him, "Cross over to Macedonia and help us!" 10 After he had seen the vision, we immediately made efforts to set out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

The Lord Jesus is very present in Acts, directing and empowering the witness of His apostles.

Luke and Acts together relate the one continuous saving work of the Lord Jesus

The first volume what Jesus does bodily while on earth

The second what Jesus now reigning in heaven continues to do through His Spirit

From the outset we see that the story of the New Testament church which comes into being at Pentecost has its beginning in the finished work of Jesus on the cross and his subsequent exaltation which brings forgiveness and sanctifies, cleanses and so makes the coming of the Spirit to sinful people possible.

And The story of the church goes on from there because of the work of Jesus by His Spirit in the apostles and other disciples, the Lord Jesus continuing His mission of being a light to the Gentiles Isaiah 49:6 Acts 13:47,

of gathering His lost sheep into the one flock, the church of God which He bought with the blood of His own [Acts 20:28], the one people of God John 10:16, 11:51-52 ,

His work of seeking and saving the lost Luke 5:31-32, Luke 19:10 – not just from amongst the Jewish people, but from amongst all people

## **Our identity – belonging to Jesus**

Why am I labouring this point?

It is because the church as the outcome of Christ's past work on earth and His continuing work through His Spirit establishes the church's identity, its enduring identity. It shows us the church's DNA, what must always be true of it across all times and cultures if it is to be recognised as Christ's church. Brought into being by

Jesus, it belongs to Jesus, and like DNA being expressed in every cell, that belonging is to be expressed in every gathering, every activity, of the church

It reminds us the church is not a human invention, not the result of a human initiative, and so it doesn't belong to any particular human group, dependent on them for its existence and continuing life, to change its beliefs and behaviour when they want to change.

It is brought into being by Jesus, through His death and resurrection and sending out of His Spirit empowered messengers

Its life is sustained by and accountable to Jesus, and it takes its direction from Jesus its Builder and Lord And it matters to Him [Rev. 2 and 3, Eph. 5:19ff]

"Why are you persecuting me" said the Lord Jesus to a Saul who was attacking the church. He identifies Himself with His people, His body

And Paul will later write that the church is Jesus' beloved bride.

There is great encouragement in knowing that the coming into being and the continuing growth of the church is what the Lord Jesus continues to do and teach through His Spirit

Though the church is despised, dismissed, marginalised in our community, reckoned a relic of an unenlightened past, it is at the heart of God's eternal purpose to have a people for His own, the promise and purpose He is realising with almighty power through the work of the Lord Jesus, a promise and purpose that has its origin before time and that will find its consummation at the end, when Christ comes for His bride.

In being in the church you are not involved in a human project, but God's. He has caught you up in the fulfilment of His eternal purpose, His great love story.

And the Church does not stand or fall with the success or failure of our plans. It exists because of God's faithfulness to His plans.

And the church can never be a human club where we make the rules

It is about Jesus – listening to Him in the word He has sent out through His apostles, trusting Him, having our life shaped by obedience to Him, especially by the reality of His cross – and as we are about to see, waiting for Him.

Clarity about identity gives clarity about our responsibility in our life together and in our relation to the world around us. It is to be followers of Jesus, holding fast to our head -the source and guide of our life, living as He did the life of trusting obedience to God's will.

And clarity about identity gives hope, for it reminds us that the church's goal, its endpoint, what its whole life strains towards, is not something the church can bring about but a gift of her bridegroom, not something that it can realize in this world by its own efforts but realized only at the return of our Lord Jesus, and so a hope independent of the church's prominence or obscurity, its weakness or its strength, in this life.

### **Our Times – waiting for Jesus**

But that goal, the outcome of Christ's work, does give the church a distinctive way of understanding its context and its task.

*6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?"*

*7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

*9 After he had said this, he was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven."*

Seeing Jesus' victory over death the apostles naturally ask whether now is the time when all the Old Testament promises will be fulfilled, when Israel, God's people, will be vindicated over their enemies and be established in a reign of peace.

No, says the Lord Jesus. The coming of the end is not now.

In fact, as is made clear when the angel says *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven.*

The end must await Jesus' return in glory, His coming with the clouds of heaven.

The church lives, always, between the first and second coming of Christ. Like the apostles, we await the Lord Jesus' coming.

Waiting for Christ's return is the church's characteristic stance, and the timing of that coming is not our concern, nor determined by us – the Father has set it by His own authority.

That means we live with hope whatever the current fortunes of God's people in our part of the earth. Jesus is exalted, He will come again in glory, whether we are popular or unpopular, small and weak, or big and strong,

And that hope gives us perspective on our present

The present is never as good as it seems, or as good as the world wants to make it out to be, the time and place where we can have all our desires and longings fulfilled – for we still live in a world under judgement, a world of suffering and death, where we will always be battling the world, the flesh and the devil [cf Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders], until Jesus returns

And the present is never as bad as it seems, for it is not final. There is always better to come – for our hope is sure

In this time of waiting Faithfulness is never a failure, fruitfulness can never deliver our ultimate goal What we long for – depends on God, and He will do it.

And waiting for Christ's return means we live as pilgrims now. Here, as Hebrews puts it, we have no lasting city [Heb. 13:14], for the things of this age will pass away. Our true home is in the heavenly Jerusalem that will be revealed when Christ returns [Rev. 21]

And that recognition frees us both to now invest heavily with our time, money, resources in the work of the gospel and doing good – for it is our heavenly treasure that will endure, not what we accumulate here, and to hold lightly what we have, even our lives like the martyrs in Acts, for whatever is taken from us now, or whatever we give up for the sake of serving Christ now, was only on loan, a temporary possession, and its loss can never leave us eternally poorer, never deprive us of the Kingdom He will bring when He returns.

And waiting for Christ to return in glory means we live with readiness. The Father has set the time for the return of Jesus by His own authority, and the Lord Jesus tells us in the gospel that knowing that, knowing that of the day or hour of Christ's return no one knows but the Father [Mark 13:32], calls, not for calculation, but readiness.

That readiness is trusting the Lord Jesus and doing all that He has commanded, living each day conscious of our accounting to our Lord for what He has entrusted to us. Churches, we, should be places where we are stirring one another up to love and good deeds because we know, in Hebrews words, the Day, the Day of Christ's return is drawing near [Heb. 10:24-25]

Is that us? Are we helping each other to live waiting for the Lord Jesus, ready for His return? Think of your conversations – do you quickly get immersed in the day to day, limit your conversation to just the things of this life, or do you frame your life and its decisions in the context of our Lord's return?

The church lives always between the first and second comings of Christ, which means we also live with a consciousness that there will be a judgement for all for when He returns all the nations will be gathered before Him. On that day there will be an eternal separation, a day when, in Jesus' words, the righteous, those who have loved Him in loving His people, will enter into eternal life, and those who have ignored Him and despised His people will go away into eternal punishment. It will be a day when some will rise to life, and others to judgement

*Matthew 25: 46 "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

*John 5: 28 Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice 29 and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

That consciousness is inseparable from the church's hope that *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven."*

And that means in our times the church is to be busy with the task entrusted to the apostles of witnessing to Jesus.

Why? Because that witness to Jesus they are sent into the world to give is the only means by which people can be saved, can move from being rebels against the exalted Lord to being at peace with Him, from being in dread of His return to look forward to it with joy.

### **Our Task for this time – witnessing to Jesus**

*8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

The apostles are called to be witnesses to the Lord Jesus, a witness that is to go to the end of the earth.



And they were very conscious of this responsibility – we see that at the end of this chapter where they seek to make a replacement for Judas who betrayed Jesus and lost his place amongst them.

**21** *“Therefore, from among the men who have accompanied us during the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— **22** beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us—from among these, it is necessary that one become a witness with us of his resurrection.”*

What is to be the task of the replacement, for which he must be suitably qualified?

*that he become a witness with us of his resurrection.”*

Witness has the sense it does in the law court. It is saying truthfully what you have seen and heard.

They apostles are to speak of what they have seen and heard of Jesus, witness to what the Lord has said and done, particularly to His death and resurrection.

And they repeatedly give their witness throughout Acts, and it is through this witness that the Lord Jesus gathers His people into His church.

The apostles insist that what they are saying is what they have witnessed.

In the first sermon

*Acts 2: **32** “God has raised this Jesus; we are all witnesses of this.*

Before the authorities

*Acts 4: **19** Peter and John answered them, “Whether it’s right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; **20** for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*

*Acts 5: **29** Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than people. **30** The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging him on a tree. **31** God exalted this man to his right hand as ruler and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. **32** We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”*

Speaking to the non-Jewish centurion Cornelius

*Acts 10: **39** We ourselves are witnesses of everything he did in both the Judean country and in Jerusalem, and yet they killed him by hanging him on a tree. **40** God raised up this man on the third day and caused him to be seen, **41** not by all the people, but by us whom God appointed as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.*

*[Acts 13: **30** But God raised him from the dead, **31** and he appeared for many days to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.*

*Acts 26: **16** But get up and stand on your feet. For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.]*

The apostles are to be witnesses, speak of what they have seen and heard, and they have been equipped to be reliable, informed witnesses very deliberately by Jesus’ choice, their accompanying Him throughout His ministry, His resurrection appearances to them, and the gift of the Spirit.

What does their call to be witnesses say about the Christian message? We will look further at the content of their witness next week, but for now I just want to look at that question: What does it say about the Christian message that at its heart is witness, the apostles' speaking of what they have seen and heard.

It means first of all that the Christian message is news, a report of something that has happened in the world.

Not a philosophy, and while it contains teaching it is not just teaching or moral instruction.

It is News, and that has momentous consequences.

It means that if it was true then, it is true now, and remains true for ever

What's done cannot be undone, for time can't be reversed

And it means the truth of the Christian message does not depend on the quality of life, depth of insight, material success of Jesus' followers

It is a report of what God has done in Jesus

And it means its truth doesn't depend on its popularity, or whether it fits in with what people want to believe about the world, or its conformity to any particular culture.

It has happened

Its truth doesn't depend on how well you can argue it, or whether you can answer all the questions it raises

Whether, for example, you can explain how someone can rise from the dead, doesn't alter in any way the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead to be seen, eaten with, touched, talked with by the apostles.

The Christian message as witness is news, News about God

That He is active in the world – doing things people, humans, can't

Bringing about an event so momentous which can't be repeated – for Jesus has one life in this world, and dies one death; and doesn't need to be repeated, for done once it is done forever

An event in the world which by its nature, the uniqueness, the singularity of a man defeating death so that He lives forever – and its consequences – His reign with all authority in heaven and earth – means it is news all must reckon with in all times until the world ends

As witness the Christian message carries its universal relevance in itself

And sharing this witness to the world is A task all believers share in

The Lord Jesus commands this witness to go to the ends of the earth. It always looked beyond the apostles' lifetime.

And we see in Acts many more besides the apostles engaged in sharing their witness with the world

The story of Acts focuses on different things as it progresses – first on the Jerusalem church, then a focus on Peter and the gospel going to the Gentiles with Peter, then a focus on Paul and the gospel going, or beginning to go, to the ends of the earth as we follow Paul’s journeys that end in Rome.

But its focus should not obscure the reality of the activity of many more

We hear of Stephen, the first martyr, bearing witness to Jesus, and of Philip taking the gospel to the Samaritans

In Acts 11:19-20 we see the great city of Antioch is evangelised by unknown believers

*Acts 11: **19** Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. **20** But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus.*

And when Paul’s travels climax in Rome, symbolising the gospel going to the beginning of the ends of the earth – we see there are already believers there, the brothers and sisters who come to meet Paul, not the fruit of his ministry, but of others.

*Acts 28: **14** There we found brothers and sisters and were invited to stay a week with them. And so we came to Rome. **15** Now the brothers and sisters from there had heard the news about us and had come to meet us as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.*

The expectation that all believers would share in the task entrusted to the apostles of taking their witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth is what we also see at the end of Matthew’s gospel

*Matt. 28: **18** Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. **19** Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Those who are taught by the first disciples to do all that our Lord has commanded, are also taught in their own turn to make disciples, for that is part of what our Lord has commanded.

That is God’s agenda between the first and second comings of Jesus – that the gospel should be preached to all nations before our Lord returns [Matt. 24:14], preached while God’s patience waits because He does not wish any to perish but all to come to repentance [2 Peter 3:8-9].

There is an end, and there is a need for all to hear, and that will always be the case until the end, and so to the end the church of Jesus is characterised by witnessing to Jesus, sharing what the apostles saw and heard of the Lord Jesus who came to seek and save the lost, who died and rose again to be the Saviour of the world.

### **What should always characterise the church, always be true of us**

What never changes about the church, God’s people

Knowing that the core of its identity is belonging to Jesus because it is brought in to being by Jesus, the fruit of what our Lord Jesus continues to do through His Spirit in the lives of His followers

Is that true of us – living listening to Jesus, our life together directed by Him

Knowing that its time is characterised by waiting for Jesus, longing for the revelation in glory of her bridegroom

Is that true of us, stirring each other up in light of the coming day, not letting ourselves be choked by the cares and desires of this world

And knowing that while it waits its task is to share the witness of the apostles to Jesus.  
All our activities tested by whether they make and mature disciples.

These things must always be true of us.

Jesus' people – living to do all He has taught us, hoping for His return, sharing His good news.