

The Church's Witness

Acts 1:8

John Breon

Jesus the risen Lord is preparing his disciples for his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit to them at Pentecost. Even as they receive instruction from the resurrected Jesus, they're still able to miss the point. They ask if Jesus is now going to restore the kingdom to Israel. His answer is, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is the Father's business" (verse 7, *The Message*). "But," he says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In getting them ready for Pentecost, Jesus tells them that when the Holy Spirit comes *you will receive power and you will be my witnesses*. The word for power here is *dynamis*. We get the word "dynamite" from it. The Church on fire explodes in evangelism. This is the same power Jesus demonstrated in his life and ministry. It's the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead.

God had intended Israel to be anointed with God's Spirit and be a witness to the nations (for example, see the "Servant Songs" in Isaiah 40-61). The nation failed to fulfill that call. Jesus came as *the* Servant of the Lord, *the* Anointed One (Messiah), *the* King of Israel, *the* Son of God. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. At his baptism God anointed Jesus with the Spirit in a dramatic way to mark the beginning of his public ministry and to empower him for ministry. Jesus was filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit. All that he did in his ministry was in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, as Jesus returns to heaven he promises his followers that the same Holy Spirit will come upon them and fill them so they can continue the work of Jesus. Jesus is the Anointed One. The Church is his anointed community, bearing witness to him, representing him, reflecting his life in the world. In a real sense, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus himself comes to continue his work in and through his followers. Jesus makes available to the Church the same power that was in him.

This is power with a purpose: "you will be my witnesses." The Holy Spirit empowers us for outreach. Witness is a sign that the Spirit has come. We rely on the Spirit's power as we carry out the mission Jesus gives us.

The word for witness here is *martus*. We get "martyr" from it. As witnesses of Jesus, we are willing to lay down our lives for the gospel. Our lives are in God's hands, at God's disposal. We make ourselves available to God to share what Christ means to us and can mean to others.

Be witnesses, Jesus says. Witness is not just what we say but who we are. We have to walk the talk. But we also need to talk.

There are people who say they do not need to make a vocal witness, because, as they express it, they "just let their lives speak." This appears as humility, but is really self-righteousness. No person's life is good enough to speak with any adequacy. (Elton Trueblood, *Confronting Christ* 12)

None of us is good enough just to let our light shine. A lighthouse alone isn't enough; sometimes a foghorn is needed.

The Church's life and outreach involve at least three basic elements: 1) *Proclamation*: We tell Jesus' story. We also tell our own story. What has God done, what is God doing in you? 2) *Presence*: Sometimes we call this "relational evangelism." As we are with people and get to know them, needs surface and we have the opportunity to show how the gospel relates to those needs. In church we help people feel welcome as we are warm, loving, and accepting. We want people to be involved in the church's fellowship to expose them to the gospel and to keep us all growing. 3) *Practice*: This is service. God made the world and God wants it back. The gospel is both personal and social. We show that we care about all kinds of needs, including physical/material needs, and we help meet those needs in Jesus' name. That's an effective witness. In all of this we follow the example of our Lord who is a servant and we introduce people to him.

The goal of all this is to make disciples. Evangelism is more than just telling the Good News. It's more than just getting people to accept an invitation or make a decision. It involves helping people to respond, getting

them attached to the Body of Christ, involving them in the fellowship of the church where they become deeply devoted, lifelong followers of Jesus.

We are to be witnesses wherever we are and wherever God leads us. Jesus says to be his witnesses in “Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This is the outline for the the book of Acts. It describes the early Church’s expansion as the Church exploded out into the known world.

Imagine how Jesus’ call to be witnesses sounded to those first disciples. Jerusalem—where Jesus died! Judea—where they had been rejected! Samaria—among impure heretics! The ends of the earth—into the unknown! The disciples may have thought at first that the ends of the earth just meant going to fellow Jews scattered around the world. But eventually they came to realize that Jesus’ call included Gentiles as well.

This outline of the early Church’s expansion gives us an example for our outreach. We move out in increasing circles of influence. We are to be witnesses wherever we are and wherever God sends us. Start where you are, with the people around you, then go to others as God leads you.

Jerusalem

For us, this is home, with those closest to us. If we communicate the gospel best through relationships, our closest relationships are where we begin.

Parents can be some of the most effective evangelists. They represent God’s image and help children begin to relate to God. Parents provide an example as they model a life of faith. They can teach their children.

Children can also reach their parents. I remember a man in seminary telling us that his mother asked him how to become a Christian. He had the privilege of helping his mother receive Christ and baptizing her as she became a follower of Jesus.

In family relationships we know people’s needs and what they are most likely to respond to. They know us—our weaknesses and our strengths. They can see what Jesus is doing in our lives.

Not just in our immediate families, but also in other close relationships God works to shape our lives, to teach us how to love and

forgive, to make us into disciples. Diana Garland uses the image of quilt-making to describes the process at work in marriage and other close family relationships:

Making a quilt seemed like a fun late-winter project. Our blank white kitchen wall begged for something, and to pick up the design of the area rug under the table in a quilt-hanging seemed like a great idea. It would be beautiful, unlike anything my foremothers had made. I borrowed the children's colored pencils and sketched out the design on the back of a large cardboard panel. I had never made a quilt before, but how hard can it be to cut out simple shapes and sew them together? I bought the fabric and plunged in.

As I worked, I soon realized that the quilt was going to be different from what I had planned. I mismeasured some of the middle pieces—little mistakes that multiplied as I added layer on layer to the edges. I had to patch in extra pieces and change the design to fit the mistakes.

Eight months later (not the two I had planned), the quilt was finished and hanging on the wall. It was a lot more work than I had ever dreamed. It only remotely resembled my original sketch. It refused to hang flat, and one side is slightly longer than the other. Nevertheless, I like it. No one will ever mistake it for factory-made. It is quite different from the work of art I dreamed I could create; all the mistakes and corrections have become part of the design.

As I put the finishing rows of stitches on the quilt, hoping against hope that a few more stitches would perhaps persuade it to hang straight, it dawned on me how much my quilt is like a good marriage. We start out with a dream that we can make a marriage better than the imperfect and (from our perspective) dull marriages of our parents. We sketch out our plans, and we begin to build our dream marriage, far underestimating the work of quilting together two lives into one pattern. As we busily shape and stitch our lives day by day, we make mistakes and cause hurts. The marriage quilt becomes flawed, quilted as it is by two sinful people. We become discouraged;

the pieces don't fit together as well as we thought they would. Compromises and patching are essential if it is going to hang together at all. The design must be altered; otherwise, we give up and throw it away.

If we persevere, however, and allow God to work in and through us, our marriage quilt takes on a unique beauty as love and grace and forgiveness turn the flaws into redemption. The hurts and wrongs are not beautiful, but the love that shapes them into the larger design of God's work through our lives can turn them into pictures to the world of the healing power of God's love. (*Family Ministry* 363-64)

Not only are we witnesses in our closest relationships, but those relationships themselves can bear witness to God's grace.

Judea

Here we are still dealing with those close to us, but the circle is widening. Here we share faith and life and good news with our friends and neighbors, at work and in the community. Each of us has a web or network of relationships that provides many opportunities for being witnesses. We each have a sphere of influence where we can minister most effectively. Some people are more apt to listen to you. Someone is waiting to hear the Good News from you or for you to invite them to be part of the church. It's great how one person or family comes to Christ and gets involved in a church, then they invite some of their friends—and on it goes as our witness reaches more people.

I once heard about a woman who came to Christ through the ministry of a church in her town. As the church prepared to baptize her, they sent invitations to her family and friends and coworkers, inviting them to attend the baptism service. Several of them did. During the service, the pastor explained to them what Mary was experiencing, the commitment she was making, and how it was changing her life. The pastor invited these family members and friends and coworkers to the same experience. For each of the next several weeks Mary walked down the church's aisle again, each time accompanying one of her friends who was coming to Christ.

Samaria

We are witnesses with people who are different from us. Remember how Jews and Samaritans despised each other. Jews looked down on Samaritans as being racially and religiously impure. Samaritans rejected the Jews' claims to have *the* place where God was to be worshiped. The two groups avoided each other as much as they could. But Jesus had already ministered in at least one village in Samaria (John 4). And now he tells his disciples that the power of the Holy Spirit would enable them to be witnesses even in Samaria. Chapter 8 of Acts tells how that eventually happened.

The gospel reaches across racial and cultural lines. We must overcome our prejudice and fear. Everyone deserves to hear the gospel. This aspect of our witness involves reconciliation—bringing people together with God and each other.

In Ferguson, MO, United Methodist Churches are working together to try to bring some peace and hope into that situation. When unrest led the Ferguson-Florissant School District to cancel classes, Wellspring UMC welcomed children with educational games and healthy food so parents could work without scrambling for childcare on Friday of that week. Members of other area United Methodist churches volunteered to help, and the Missouri Annual Conference provided financial support for the church's outreach. Wellspring is a predominantly African-American church. Their pastor said, "The rallying cry of support and the uptick in engagement from churches in our connection and their leaders has been very, very encouraging." The lead pastor of The Gathering said his church responded by praying, organizing, and listening to community needs. The Gathering, a predominantly white, multi-site United Methodist congregation in the St. Louis area, is among the congregations that sent volunteers to Wellspring. "There is a lot of grief, which I don't think the media has really covered," he said. "I also think there is a sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement, a sense of having a voice but having no one willing to listen." He saw resiliency, too. "I continually hear a deep faithfulness and hope that God is present and at work for good and not for harm"

<http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/church-leaders-strive-to-be-peacemakers-in-ferguson>, accessed 8/26/14).

Here's another example. Rod Morris played football for the San Francisco 49ers until he blew out his knee. After rehabilitation he became a firefighter in Youngstown, OH. Everyone thought he was quite a man, but he knew the truth about himself and his failures, including a broken marriage and his status as a part-time dad. Rod began attending a church with a woman he was dating. He didn't really participate, but he was there. So everyone was surprised when he signed up to go with a group of men from the church to a Promise Keepers rally. At the rally, Rod was aloof and distant at first, not letting anything touch him or affect him. But he watched and wondered at the excitement and joy the men around him experienced.

On the second day of the rally the worship leader challenged the men to a time of reconciliation and acceptance of one another. Immediately, white men were embracing black men with tears and words of apology for their personal prejudices and for the offenses of a nation's history toward people of color. Suddenly, Rod was weeping! This giant of a man was shrinking in submission to the work of the Holy Spirit. He entered into the rest of the rally with enthusiasm.

On the trip home, Rod talked with the other men on the bus, sharing his excitement and learning more about Christian faith from them. The next evening he was baptized at the church and started participating faithfully. He later said, "All my life I have sought to prove my manhood, not just to others, but to myself. Football didn't do it, my marriage didn't work, and the fire department failed to give me that illusive assurance of being a real man. Nothing worked until now!" What made the difference was his encountering and experiencing Jesus (Bob Tuttle, *Can We Talk?* 99-100). And it was God's grace crossing racial barriers that began to break down the barriers in Rod's heart.

Where is Samaria for us? What barriers is God calling us to cross with the gospel?

The Ends of the Earth

We are a world Church with a world mission. Acts 1:8 reinforces what Jesus said at the end of Matthew's Gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (28:18-20)

Jesus calls the Church to go everywhere in the world and to realize that everyone needs the gospel.

This doesn't mean we say we have all the truth and there's no truth anywhere else. But it does mean we believe we have come to know God in Jesus Christ and we believe everyone has the right to that same knowledge. In relation to other world religions and religious leaders, I believe that Jesus is unique and that he does what no other person or system can do: He puts us right with God and gives us the new life of God's kingdom. At the same time, we can recognize that Jesus calls us to be witnesses, not the judge. God alone knows what's in people's hearts and what their response is, or would be, to the Good News of Jesus. We simply need to start where we are then go wherever God sends us, telling the Good News and showing what God has done for us.

The Holy Spirit's dynamic power is continually given as we keep giving out, communicating, and sharing. That power will always be available to fulfill God's purpose. Let's receive God's power and let's be about what God calls us to be.