

## *We Are Witnesses*

### **Acts 1:8**

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As we explored *The Treasures of the Transformed Life* over the last few weeks, we saw that our commitment to God includes our prayers, presence, gifts, and service. Those are part of the membership vows in the United Methodist Church. Not long after that study was published, the UMC added “witness” to the membership vows. Witness is part of our commitment. It’s one of the ways we participate in the church’s ministry, one of the disciplines that disciples practice. So let’s look at witness and consider a way we can commit to being witnesses of Jesus.

Here at the beginning of Acts, 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 Holy Spirit makes the church dynamic witnesses of Jesus, exploding out into the world. We need power beyond ourselves to do what God calls us to do. We need power.

Did you hear about the man who bought a chainsaw? He took it home and the first day he could only cut down three trees. The second day he was able to cut down just two trees. The third day, he couldn’t even cut one tree. So he took the chainsaw back to the store and said, “This chainsaw’s not working right.” The store owner started up the chainsaw and the man said, “What’s that noise?”

There's power available, but we may not know about it or we ignore it or refuse to avail ourselves of it.

The power Jesus promises has 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're 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. Our life and our speech combine to tell about Jesus.*

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 witness involves 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*: As we're 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're warm, loving, and accepting. John Williams told me about what he shared in his testimony about presence a few weeks ago. He was so grateful for the people in this congregation who welcomed him and connected with him. Let's do more and more of that. 3) *Practice*: This is service—these commitments work together and support each other. 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 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.

Jesus says to be his witnesses in "Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That's the outline for 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!

This outline of the early Church's expansion gives us an example for our outreach. We move out in increasing circles of influence. We're 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 could be home, those closest to us. If we communicate the gospel best through relationships, our closest relationships are a prime place for witness.

Parents can be some of the most effective witnesses. Parents represent God's image and help children begin to relate to God. They 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 I knew 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're most likely to respond to. They know us—our weaknesses and our strengths. They can see what Jesus is doing in our lives.

## Judea

Here we're 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.

A study of the area around our church lists reasons that people outside a congregation don't participate in a church. Seventeen percent of these people say they've never been invited. The people around here who don't participate also perceive religious people as being too judgmental (61.4%) and too focused on money (58%). They also lack trust in organized religion and religious leaders. (*The MinistryInsite Report 2017*, Prepared for: Oklahoma Conference UMC; Study area: 5 mi Around Durant, Oklahoma 74701, United States; Date of Report: 10/23/18; Quad Project Version: 2017)

Does that include some of our friends and neighbors? What can we do about their perception of the church? We can surely make some inroads

to that seventeen percent by inviting people to join us in following Jesus and being part of the church.

### Samaria

We're also 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 ministered in a Samaritan village (John 4) and told a parable where the hero was a Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). 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 have to 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.

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. 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. White men started 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've tried 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 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's Samaria for us? What barriers is God calling us to cross with the gospel?

My brother, talking about the church he serves, says, "We do a pretty good job reaching people who are looking for a church, people who are like us. We don't do as well with people who are different." We're pretty good here at reaching people who are already looking to join us. But what about the people who are different? Who don't have a church background? Who are in a different social or economic group? Thinking about this makes us realize how much we need the power of the Holy Spirit. We don't change people. We can't change anybody. But we can help put them in touch with the Lord whose Spirit can change them—and who is changing us.

### The Ends of the Earth

We're 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.

Jesus is unique and 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 recognize that Jesus calls us to be witnesses; he doesn't call us to be 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.

A writer named Trevor Hudson sums up the idea about witness we've been exploring:

We are called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. This witnessing occurs through our listening, our lips, and our lives. To witness effectively about the reality of the living Christ, we need his Spirit to empower us. The Holy Spirit does this by empowering us to know Christ personally, to communicate Christ to those around us, and to lay down our lives like Jesus did. The Holy Spirit adds this kind of strength to our natural capacities and abilities. The crucial question is this: Will we allow the Holy Spirit to empower us to become credible witnesses for Jesus Christ? (*Holy Spirit Here and Now* 120).

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 the witnesses God calls us to be.

We made specific commitments to pray, to attend, to give, and to serve. Now here's one way we can make a specific commitment to witness.

## **Commitment to *Witness***

A *faithfulness goal* instead of a numbers goal.

Write the names of two or three of your Friends, Relatives, Associates, or Neighbors who are not currently active in a church.

Commit to pray for them daily.

Be alert to opportunities to share an insight or extend an invitation.

Pray something like this:

*Dear God, thank you that your Spirit is already at work in every person that I am going to meet today. Your desire is that every person will hear and respond to your good news. Help me to discern the right time to share my experience of you. Please grow within me the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially those of discernment and wisdom, that I may possess your sense of timing in all that I do and say.*

*(Trevor Hudson, Holy Spirit Here and Now 122)*