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Acts 1:4-8 “What It Means to Be a Witness”

Intro. V.8 of my text is in many ways an outline of the book of Acts. Here we read of the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples in chapter 1. Then we read of them being witnesses in Jerusalem in chapters 2-7. Next we read of the disciples being witnesses in Samaria and Judea in chapters 8-10. And finally, we read of the apostles taking the gospel to other nations beginning in chapter 11 to the end of the book.

Witnessing about Jesus is in many ways the theme of the book of Acts. It became the priority of the early church, and it should be a priority with us today. After all, Christ commanded His disciples saying in v.8, “you shall be witnesses to Me...” This command is even rooted in the Old Testament. Three times in Isaiah 43-44 God said to His people, “You are My witnesses.”

However, sharing the gospel did not seem to be the main concern of the disciples in the opening verses of this book. You see, in v.6 we read that they kept asking Jesus (imperfect tense), “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” The disciples were interested in setting up earthly kingdoms. They wanted Rome to be overthrown. They wanted the people of the world to come under the rule of Christ by a single act of divine power. They knew that when Christ begins His rule, they would rule with Him. The resurrection of Christ renewed their hope of the Messianic promises of a coming kingdom. But what they wanted and what the Lord wanted were not the same. Christ first wants to rule over individuals through their faith in the gospel of Christ.

I’m afraid that Christians in our day are much the same way. Witnessing and missions are not our priority. We are more concerned about building our own little kingdoms here on earth. We are more concerned with maintaining fellowship with our own circle of Christian friends. Are you more concerned about the political state of our country than you are the kingdom of God? Jesus said in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world...”

A research team discovered that about seven of ten unchurched persons have *never* been invited to church. Furthermore, the vast majority of the unchurched with whom they spoke have never had a Christian share their faith with them.¹ Obviously, most are not doing well when it comes to sharing our faith.

So notice how the Lord sets their priorities straight. He says in v.7, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.” He told them that God the Father would decide when the Kingdom of God would come upon this earth. They should not speculate about such things. Instead, they should focus their attention on something more important. So notice that v.8 begins with “but” (*alla*), which is a strong adversative in Greek. Then Christ says in v.8, “you shall be witnesses.” Though Christ uses the future tense here, I believe it is not a prediction, but a command to His disciples, and to us, that we be witnesses. It should not be treated as an option. That is one of the main purposes of the Church. Paul said in Php. 2:15 that we live “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” His statement is likely based on the words of Jesus in Mt. 5:14, “You are the light of the world.”

¹ Pulpit Helps, April 2005, pages 23, 31.

Now since witnessing is so important, I want to share with you some important truths about witnessing from our text.

I. GOD WILL ENABLE YOU TO WITNESS

If you ask the average Christian, “Do you witness?,” the vast majority would have to answer “no” if they were honest. LifeWay Research recently found 80 percent of those who attend church one or more times a month, believe they have a personal responsibility to share their faith, but only 39 percent have told another person about how to become a Christian in the previous six months.² Why is that? In modern America too many have been influenced by the belief that it is wrong to suggest that faith in Jesus or any other faith is the only way to God. Thus, they saw we should not try to convert others. Then many people feel inadequate to witness of Christ. They are too shy, or they feel they don’t know enough, or they just don’t have enough boldness. But it is OK to acknowledge your own inadequacy, for that is the first step in discovering that *the Lord* can enable you to do what He asks you to do. We must all realize our own inadequacy before we will trust in the power of Christ. In 2 Cor. 12:9 God said to Paul, “. . . My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Then Paul concluded in the next verse, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” It is only when we acknowledge our weakness, and then depend on the Lord for strength, that we can experience His strength in our lives. He also said in 2 Cor. 3:5, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves. . . , but our sufficiency is from God.”

Only weeks before Jesus spoke these words, Peter came to realize that he did not have the strength in himself to be a bold witness for Christ. In the face of opposition he even denied Christ three times. Jesus knew the disciples were weak from the standpoint of the flesh and they could not face what lay ahead of them unless they were given power from above. That is why Jesus said to His disciples in Mt. 26:41, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Peter found out how weak he truly was. Peter came to realize his own inadequacy, and we need to recognize our own inadequacy.

So what is the source of the power we need to witness for our Lord? Well, we need spiritual power, not the power of the flesh. Zech. 4:6b says, “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of host.” Therefore, Christ did not immediately send them out to witness, but as we see in v.4, they were commanded to wait for the power they needed before they went out. Then, Jesus said in v.8, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. . . .” He gave them a great responsibility, but He also gave them a great resource to accomplish it. Someone said, “The task ahead of us is never as great as the Power behind us” You can have all the power you need to be a witness if you are only willing to be a witness, and trust God to give you the power you need through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer, and we can be filled with the Spirit, and empowered to witness for our Lord.

Now there are several truths about the power of the Holy Spirit that I want to share with you. First:

A. The Nature of this Power - Here Christ promises “power.” It is from the Greek word *dunamis*, from which we get our English word dynamite. So we are talking about a real, dynamic force working in the lives of God’s people. The disciples were looking for political power to rule with Christ over the world. But Jesus promises them a different, more noble kind of power. That is the kind of power we should seek. Have you experienced this power in your life?

² www.lifeway.com/Article/research-survey-sharing-christ-2012

B. The Recipients of this Power – Again, v.8 says, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you....” Who can we include in the pronoun “you” here? I want to point out that the power of the Holy Spirit was not limited to the apostles. Stephen, a deacon, was filled with the Spirit and became a bold witness for Christ also, as we read in 6:5 and following. Even so we can experience the filling of the Holy Spirit as we witness in Jesus’ name, for the power was promised primarily for witnessing. Furthermore, I like to refer to the Great Commission in Mt. 28:19-20. There Jesus commanded His disciples to make disciples of all nations. Then He promised, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Since the *promise* continues to the end of the age, then the *commission* continues to the end of the age. That also means that the promise of the Holy Spirit’s power must extend to us today.

However, this promise is limited to believers in Jesus. Only believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit according to Romans 8:9. I would also say that this promise of power is also limited to Spirit-filled believers. So you need to be saved, and you need to have an attitude of obedience and faith to be filled with the Spirit. Does that describe you?

C. The Purpose of this Power – Why does God promise us power? He does not give us power to beat up on people, or gain military victories. Why, then, does He promise us this power?

1. For Changed Lives - Notice Christ says that we are to “be” witnesses, not just “do” witnessing. A changed life is a powerful witness for the Lord. The apostle Paul was a great example. We have people in our church who have experienced a great change of life. So be sure that people at work and elsewhere can see that change in your life. You can’t be a witness if your life doesn’t back up your verbal witness.

2. For Understanding His Word – To be a witness you have to share some basic gospel truths from the Word of God. That seed, planted in a believing heart, brings new life. So we have to know and understand the Word of God to be a witness. Well 1 Jn. 2:27 tells us that the anointing of the Holy Spirit teaches you and enlightens you concerning the truth of God found in His Word.

3. For Help and Boldness in Speaking – Jesus said in Luke 12:11-12 that the disciples should not worry about what they will say, “For the Holy Spirit will teach you ... what you ought to say.” I believe that promise applies to us. Then in chapter 4 of Acts they prayed for boldness, even in the face of threats against them. Then in Acts 4:31 we read, “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Cf. Lk. 21:15; Eph. 6:10; 18-20).

4. For Conviction of Sin and Giving a Harvest – When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost in the power of the Spirit, we read in Acts 2:37, “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” Peter told them how to be saved, and 3,000 were saved in just one day! (cf. Jn. 16:8; 1 Cor. 3:6).

So the power to be an effective witness does not rest with you, but with the Spirit.

II. BE SURE YOU WITNESS ABOUT JESUS

What are we to be witnesses of? What are we to say? Notice carefully what Jesus says. He says that we are to be witness “unto me”.³ And the word “Me” is in the emphatic position in Greek. So we are to witness about *Him*. For example, in Acts 1:22 an apostle had to be a "witness to the Resurrection" of Christ and in 10:39 Peter says they were witnesses of the life and work of Jesus. Why should Jesus be the focus of our witness? It is because He is the Savior of the World. He is the only way to be saved from sin. Acts 4:12 says, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” So He should be the focus of our preaching and teaching and witnessing. Let’s talk about Jesus, and not ourselves.

The Holy Spirit is our example. Jesus said in John 16:13-14, “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth.... He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.” The Holy Spirit doesn’t even want you to witness about Him, but about Jesus. He is interested in lifting up Jesus!

In my previous church I had a visiting partner that loved to talk about himself and what he had done. He would brag about how much he had given to the church and so forth. Needless to say, not many came to the Lord or to church because of him! So when you talk to people, don’t witness about yourself or your own ideas and theories. The Christian worker is to be a witness of Christ and His Word. We do not originate the message; we receive the message and share it with others.

So what are we to say when we witness?

A. Tell What Jesus Did to Save Us - In Luke 24:48 Jesus says His disciples were "witnesses of these things," namely the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Cor. 15:1-4 Paul declared what is the gospel. We are to talk about His death for our sin. He died in our place. He loved us that much. Not only that, but He also was buried, and then rose again from the dead. We serve a risen Savior. He is alive, and He can still enter into hearts and change lives today. And because He is risen, ascended, and seated at the right hand of God, He is Lord (2:36). And praise God, He is coming again. In fact, look at what the angels said in v.11, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” People need to hear more about the promise of Jesus to return to save His people, and judge this wicked world. The signs of His coming are increasing.

So if you talk with someone, and you find out that they are not a Christian, don’t focus your conversation upon the church. The church cannot save him. Only Christ can save. So talk about Christ. Tell saved people about your church. Tell unbelievers about your Savior. Vance Havner said, “The Gospel isn’t something we come *to church* to hear; it’s something we go *from church* to tell”.

B. Tell What He Has Done for You – While the focus of our witness should be on Jesus, it is certainly proper to tell what *He* has done for you. After all, a witness is one who tells what he has seen, heard, or experienced. In Acts 4:20 the apostles said, “For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” Do you have a testimony of what the Lord has done in your life? Can you tell of a time when you trusted in Christ as your Savior? Can you tell of how He has changed your life? Then bear witnesses for Christ!

³ The best Greek texts have μου μαρτυρες, which could be translated “My witnesses,” but it (μου) could be an objective genitive, “witnesses of Me,” so the meaning would be the same as μοι.

We have answered how it is possible to be a witness, and of whom we are to witness. Now, the next truth I want to share is this:

III. UNDERSTAND WHERE WE ARE TO WITNESS

In v.8 Jesus goes on to say, “you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Someone said, “The church that does not reach out, fades out”. So let’s look at each of these areas, and try to apply them to us today. First, we are to witness:

A. To Our Jerusalem – The disciple would not have started in Jerusalem. That is where Jesus was rejected and crucified. It was the seat of governmental power. It seemed to be a most unlikely place to begin the Church of the Lord. But in spite of its wickedness, the Lord wanted to manifest His grace first in Jerusalem. D.L. Moody once said: “I can imagine that Peter said, ‘Lord, do you really mean that we are to go back to Jerusalem and preach the gospel to those men that murdered you?’ ‘Yes,’ said Christ, ‘go, hunt up that man that spat in my face, tell him he may have a seat in my kingdom yet.’”

There are several applications we can make from this. First, we should be willing to witness in hostile environments. It would have been easier to start in Galilee, but Christ commanded them to begin in Jerusalem. The public school can be a hostile environment to witness. The same can be said of many places of work. Second, Jerusalem was the spiritual home of all Jews. It became the home base for the early Church. Even so, witnessing begins at home. To the healed demoniac Jesus said, “Go home, and tell what great things God has done for you.” Is there someone in your family that you should witness to? Furthermore, before you should go out of state or out of the country to serve as a missionary, you should first demonstrate that you are willing to witness here at home! Finally, Jerusalem was a strategic location to begin. Jews and God-fearing Gentiles went there for major religious festivals from all over the world about three times/year. David Anderson pointed out that we should witness in the capital cities, just as Jerusalem was the capital of Judea. That is certainly true. We need to support his ministry to key legislative leaders and support the planting of churches in Richmond, Washington D.C., and other capital cities.

Then Christ says that we are to witness:

B. To Our State and Nation (Judea) - They were to carry the gospel to their own nation. We need to send some of our people on mission trips to other parts of Virginia. That is reaching our Judea. We also need to reach our nation for Christ. We have sent a team to Portland, Oregon twice in the last two years. It looks like our church will have the opportunity to help plant a church there next year. Two from our church went to Texas on a disaster relief mission. Even if we cannot personally take the gospel to our nation, we should support others who can. Part of our World Hunger offering is supporting mission work in the United States.

Next, Christ says that we are to witness:

C. To Different People (Samaria) - We read in John 4 that the Jews did not have “dealings” with the Samaritans, and yet Christ told His disciples to be witnesses in Samaria. So “Samaria” represents taking the gospel to people who are different racially, culturally and religiously, people we don’t normally associate with.

Jesus gave the example for us in witnessing to the woman at the well, as we read in John 4. We need social contact with lost people if we are going to influence them for Christ. More of us

need to learn Spanish, for we are seeing more Hispanic immigrants come into our country, and they need the gospel too. Who is reaching the inner city of Petersburg with the Gospel? Our State Convention is sponsoring an outreach on Nov. 12 called "Bless Petersburg." Will you participate? Who is reaching the inmates in the jails? I'm thankful that the Good News Jail ministry is doing so. Are you willing to cross cultural barriers and share the gospel?

D. To the Ends of the Earth - Jn. 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." So they were also to take the gospel to Gentiles. Salvation was not restricted to Israel. Someone has said, "The first work of the whole church is to give the gospel to the whole world".

Of course, this means that a Christian witness must be willing to go away from our homes, wherever the Lord leads us. We will see many examples of that truth in the book of Acts. We see it in chapter 8 when the Jerusalem disciples were scattered as far as Antioch by persecution, and when Philip went to Samaria, and then toward Gaza to bear witness. We see it in chapter 9 when Peter traveled to other parts of Judea, and then in chapter 10 when he traveled to Caesarea to witness to the Gentile Cornelius. We see this truth in chapter 13 when Paul and Barnabas went sent out to preach the gospel to other nations.

We just heard recently from a young man who used to live in our community who has gone with his family to share the gospel with the Kurdish people. Pray for him!

Who among us will go on the next International mission trip?

Finally, I want to point out to you that:

E. The Scope of our Witness Should Be Inclusive – A little word is left out of most translations of v.8. Jesus actually said "both (*te*) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The church must witness both at Home and Abroad. We have a tendency to concentrate our efforts in just one area. But the church as a whole is to reach the lost both at home and abroad. We cannot exclude anyone from salvation in Christ.

Conclusion: I wonder if there is anyone here today who hasn't trusted in Jesus as your Savior? Perhaps you will acknowledge that you do not have a testimony of how God has saved your soul. If so, let me point out something to you. Do you realize that these words have been largely fulfilled? In Mt. 24:14 Jesus predicted that the gospel would be preached in all nations as a witness to them, and then the end would come. The only explanation for the fulfillment of this prophecy is the fact that Jesus is who He claimed to be. God must be real, for the disciples could not have accomplished this great task on their own. Furthermore, the end is rapidly approaching. Through missionaries, through radio, and through the Internet, the gospel is penetrating to all nations, and to all people groups. Just last month my audio sermons were downloaded within 12 nations. So trust in Jesus before it is too late.

Finally, what is this text saying to those of us who are saved? We need to recommit our lives to being a witness of Jesus Christ. The greatest work you can do is have a part in leading someone to faith in Jesus Christ. One upcoming opportunity to be a witness will be our prayer walk outreach the next two Sunday afternoons, and our Trunk or Treat outreach on the 31st. God will give us opportunities to witness through prayer and gospel conversations. So trust in the power of the Holy Spirit. He will enable you. Share about Jesus. He is the Savior. And be willing to go anywhere, and talk to anyone. Is there someone in particular that the Lord wants you to witness to? If so, make a commitment to talk to that person this week. Perhaps you feel a need for more

training. I hope we will offer witness training within the next few months. When we do, sign up and participate.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Paul L. Maier, *First Christians: Pentecost and the Spread of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977);. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).