

Witnesses and Neighbours

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[0 : 0 0] Our God, as we come to your word, we just ask for help, that you would help us to hear what you have to say to us today. And that with the eyes of faith, we would receive it and that we would all be changed.

And so we pray for that now, that you would meet with us through your word, by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, amen. We just finished a series called Practicing the Christian Life.

And next week, we're going to start a new series on Genesis chapter 3. Very foundational text in the Bible. And so on this holiday weekend, I thought we'd take a break, just one week between series, while lots of our friends and families are away.

But also so that we could come back and renew a little bit of our vision and who we are here and what we're all about. So in between series, I'll quite often try to take a week just to rethink who we are and the mission God's given us here.

And the goal of that is really, we might put it as re-enchantment. So we need to be always re-encharmed with who God has called us to be and what we're here for.

[1 : 0 3] And so our natural tendency will always be to drift and to forget and to be bored with our calling, with our mission as a church. And so we need renewal and re-enchantment always in our vision. And so we come back today for just a few minutes to think about our vision and what our church is here in the heart of the city to be about and to do.

And so we've been saying the past year we exist alongside all the other Christians in our city to participate in whatever God would want to do to seek a citywide movement of the gospel.

By helping people to find out about Jesus. Many people don't know about him at all. Find out about Jesus. To follow him in response. To grow in their love for God.

Their love for one another. And then to turn around and seek the peace of our city in whatever way God's called them to do. So that's what we're about here and what we want to do. Acts chapter 1 is foundational for understanding what that's about.

And we never got to look at it in our vision and value series last September. So our vision and value series last September went on for six weeks. And I never got to look at Acts 1. And I knew that you probably didn't want a seventh week.

[2 : 0 7] So we didn't do it. So here we are revisiting. But let's look at a text we never got to look at. And that's Acts chapter 1. So we're going to learn today about what Luke says here.

About the fact of our mission. The nature of our mission. Our problem that we have with it. And then power that we need to seek it.

So let's do that. First, the fact of our mission. So right here in verse 1 of Acts chapter 1. Luke says, In the first book of Theophilus, I've dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.

So Luke says here that he's writing two books. There's a first book and a second book. The first book is the Gospel of Luke. But the second book is Acts. The book of Acts. And so a lot of times commentators will say, You need to think about Luke and Acts as one book in two pages.

Luke-Acts. And here, what does he say? He says, In the first book, I dealt with all that Jesus began to do. Now that means that he's saying that in the second book, he's dealing with all that Jesus continues to do.

[3 : 1 5] And so sometimes people come to the book of Acts and think, The Gospel stories are the ministry of Jesus. The book of Acts is the ministry of the church. But Luke says, The Gospel was about what Jesus began to do.

The book of Acts is about what Jesus continues to do. And so one of the first things we learn here is that the book of Acts is the beginning of the story. And the story of our time, the story of the season we live in, the age of the church, means that Jesus is still the primary actor in all ministry.

Jesus is the agent of every ministry that exists in the world. All Christian ministry. And all that Jesus began to do, that's the gospel story. All that Jesus continues to do.

The story of the church. The story of the book of Acts. And so Ed Clowney, a late theologian in the States, he says that a better title for the book of Acts could have been, By the way, the titles in the Bible aren't inspired.

They're not original. We gave them the titles. And so you can change them. So Ed Clowney says a better title for the book of Acts would have been, The Acts of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit by the first church, particularly the apostles in the first generation.

[4 : 31] That's exactly what Acts is. It's the Acts of Jesus through the Holy Spirit by the first century church. And that's a bit clunky.

It's like how the Puritans wrote their book titles. That's, so we've shortened it to Acts of the Apostles. And if you've read the book of Acts, you know that when you get to the very end of the book of Acts, there is no ending.

The story just stops cold. And the implication of that is really important. And one author talks about how Yusta Gonzalez, that the reason the book of Acts never ends, it doesn't end, it just stops abruptly, is because the story hasn't ended.

It continues on with us. And so the first thing we learn here is that the ministry of Jesus Christ carries on in the age of the church, and that it's our ministry. It's the very ministry that we inhabit, that we're all about here.

And in the context here, it's about the story of Jesus' final days on earth, these first nine verses. And in verse 2 and verse 9, what's mentioned is Jesus' ascension, His rising, His going away into the heavenly realm.

[5 : 34] And when Christ ascends, He's enthroned as King in the heavenly realm over all the universe. And that means two very important things for this ministry that we have, that He's given us.

One is that if Jesus was to stay on earth physically, then you would have to go to Jerusalem or wherever He is to see Him. In other words, the ministry would be local.

But when Christ ascends into the heavenly realm and is enthroned and sends His Spirit, the ministry immediately becomes universal. Immediately because it's the ministry of the Spirit through us, Jesus acting through us, now the ministry becomes global.

It's for all the world. And in verse 9, we're told that He did ascend into heaven and that they saw Him do that. And that tells us also that Jesus Christ, right now in His enthroned status in heaven, is in charge.

And there is a strategy. Jesus Christ has a strategy for the ministry. And that strategy exists in two stages, number one, or two ways. Number one, there's a plan to gather all of His people throughout all the world, throughout all the nations.

[6 : 40] And He's doing it. Even if we don't always feel that way. In our post-Christian city, we might not always feel that way. But the enthroned Christ has a strategy. And we are that strategy.

We have been sent. We've been commissioned to fulfill that mission. He's actually working it through us. And so a couple problems that we face in our time, I think, that this really touches on.

One is sometimes within the church, people will say, we talk about mission too much.

So we use the word missional too often or mission too often. And missiologists, people who study mission full-time or pastors or church folk will just say, mission, mission, mission all the time.

And then eventually the word mission is meaningless because we use it too much. But actually, I understand that concern. But actually, the word mission, where we get the concept of a vision, a mission that we have here at St. Columbus, is from the Latin word missio, which just means to be sent.

And here we learn at the beginning of the age of the church that there is a missio, a sentness about the church. That you can't really use the word mission too much because we are sent.

[7 : 51] It is what we are. We're underneath the banner that we are sent people, commissioned people. Always on mission. Being missional is a word that you can't really over-ascribe.

Because it is the nature of what we are. It's our essence, actually, as people who are carrying out the ministry of Jesus in our time. And then a second problem that sometimes comes up here is people will come to this passage and say, ah, but hold on a second.

When you get down to verse 8 and Jesus says, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to all the ends of the earth, people will say, that's not really a prescription for us. Because who is he talking to here in this passage? And in verse 3 and in verse 8, he's very clearly talking to the apostles. They're mentioned. Who are the apostles? They're the 12. The men who were direct eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ, chosen to plant the first churches. To bring the gospel to the world first. And so people will say, this isn't exactly our mission. [8 : 49] Because this was directed at the apostles. But if you just scan your eyes down, you can see at the end of chapter 1, if you have a Bible, who are the people that were there when Jesus gave these words?

And we're told it wasn't just the apostles. We're told there was about 120 people gathered in a room. And it was men and women and people who were apostles and who weren't apostles. And then in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came down upon all of them and sent all of them to the nations, to the world, to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. And that means simply that you can't come and say, oh, the book of Acts.

It's not prescriptive. It's just descriptive, as some often do. And it is indeed descriptive. But also we learn that this was a commission. The Holy Spirit was sent to who? All sorts of people. All sorts of ethnic backgrounds. All sorts of people. Men, women, young and old. Everybody sent and commissioned that this is the mission of the entire church. And so in verse 8, you've got the great thesis statement of the book of Acts.

[9 : 47] But it's also the thesis statement of the age of the church. And in some sense, it's our thesis statement. And it's where Jesus says, you will be my witnesses. From Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the very ends of the earth.

And if you follow the outline of the book of Acts, chapters 1 to 5 is the ministry in Jerusalem. 5 to 8, Samaria and Judea. From chapter 9 to 13 to the ends of the earth, Paul's ministry and the others' ministry.

And then the book of Acts just stops. Why? Because, well, because we know that in the book of Acts itself, the apostles and the disciples took the gospel to Antioch, to North Africa, to the Greek isles, to present-day Turkey, to Serbia, to Romania.

To Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Italy, maybe to France. And then in extra-biblical texts by tradition, we also believe and know pretty well that apostles took the gospel all the way to present-day Iraq and Iran and Saudi Arabia.

And probably to India and maybe even further than that. But nobody came to Scotland. Not in the first century. Nobody came to Scotland in the first century. Nobody.

[10 : 58] These apostles weren't here. They don't exist today. We. The book of Acts never ended because we are here. We're here in Scotland in the 21st century. In 2025. In Edinburgh specifically.

And so the work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit is our ministry. He is the actor and we are his agents. We are his witnesses. We're being told here. And that means, and I'll move on, that the word apostle, sometimes in the Bible it's used with a capital A, we might say, for the 12.

But the verb is often used 79 times, in fact, across the New Testament to be apostolic. What does that mean? It just means to be sent. And so none of us are apostles, but all of us are apostolic in the sense that we have an apostolic witness.

We're sent. We're on mission. So the fact of mission. Secondly, what is this mission? What's the nature of it? Well, verse 8 is the big idea. You will be my witnesses.

So the word witness is the key word. And in Greek, the word witness is the word martyr. So oftentimes we think of a martyr as a person who is killed, murdered for their faith.

[12 : 06] But originally the word martyr simply means to bear witness. And a person who bears witness is only one who gives reliable testimony about the thing they're testifying to.

So it's actually a judicial word, a courtroom word. So to be a witness is to give reliable testimony, to tell the truth, in other words, is the basic meaning of the word witness. And here, when you read the book of Acts, when you get past the first few chapters, people start to tell the gospel in all sorts of countries in the first century.

And these are people who did not see Jesus resurrected before the ascension. And so some have come and sometimes said, well, witness, you have to actually be an eyewitness. And the eyewitnesses were the first people, we learn in verse 2, that he appeared to them physically.

They were indeed eyewitnesses. But when you get to the rest of the book of Acts, you realize all these people are talking about the gospel to others. And they didn't see Jesus physically alive before he ascended.

Which means the idea of witness is not just for the first people who saw him physically rise from the dead. It's for anybody who is able to bear testimony, to tell the truth about what God has done for them.

[13 : 20] And so what does it mean to be a witness? What is our calling? If you're a Christian today, what is your calling as a witness? And we could put it something like this. A witness is a person who tells the truth, tells the story of what God has done through the story of Jesus Christ in their own words, through your own words, in a way that somebody else can hear it.

So that's what it means to be a witness, to tell the story of Jesus Christ, the truth about what he's done to save the world, in your own words, in a way that another person could hear it, in a way that they could hear it and receive it and understand it.

And so the lesson here is really clear. I'll say it as simply as possible, I think, because it's important. And that's this. We're being told here that we have to talk to people about Jesus.

It's as simple as that. We have to talk to people about Jesus. And it's been pointed out by others that to be a witness, to be called to this, is not to go out and tell people about theology.

It's not to go and present doctrine and doctrinal systems to people, though, of course, truths of doctrine are involved. Instead, it's just to go and tell the story of what God has done through Christ in the middle of history, in whatever way you've been able to receive it, in order to give it to somebody in a way they can receive it.

[14 : 38] And let me give you one example. John chapter 4, the woman at the well. Jesus encounters this woman at the well in John 4, and he tells her everything she had done in life, her relationships.

And she's changed by him, and she's forgiven by him, and she receives the word of eternal life, as he puts it, the water of life. And what does it say right after that? She goes out into her little Samaritan village, a woman who had no standing in her culture.

She's poor. She's alone. And with great courage, she goes into her village, and it says that she told everybody, come and see a man who told me all that I ever did.

And by implication, what that means is she's saying, come and look at a man, see a man, Jesus, who told me all that I ever did and forgave me, who loved me to the point of forgiveness. That's what she implies there.

She, with great courage, went in and just told her story. And she told it in a way that other people could hear it and said, come and see a man who knows everything I ever did, loved me anyway, and forgave me.

[15 : 42] That's the basics of all it means to bear witness. And the second thing that we're told about bearing witness here in Acts 1 is that the object of that witness, what are we witnessing to?

And, of course, Jesus, all that he came to do for us. But also in verse 2, verse 3, verse 9, it says that he taught them, he told them to bear witness to the kingdom.

So another part of this is he says, don't, you know, you bear witness to Jesus uttermost and to the whole of the kingdom. And what does he mean by that? For 40 days, it says that he taught them about the kingdom of God before he ascended and told them then to go and bear witness.

And what does that mean? Well, I think it means this, that in verse 9, when he ascends into heaven, he becomes the king of the cosmos, the king of the universe. He goes into the heavenly realm.

He presents his blood to God the Father. And he says, by this priestly work that I have done for my people, for your people, Father, you will never demand payment for them again.

[16 : 44] They're redeemed. And then he says, and I will continue to be your priest. I will continue to intercess for you. I will continue to represent you before God, that you're always forgiven.

Your sins cast away as far as the east is from the west forever. And I'll continue to be your king, your cosmic king. And I'll continue to be your prophet working through the Holy Spirit to tell you, you are a son, you're a daughter of the king.

That's his cosmic ministry for us, Jesus. Prophet, priest, and king ascended in the heavenly domain. And then he left them to say, now you, you on earth, you witnesses are to be prophets and priests, representatives of God in wherever God has put you, holistically, to point people to the future kingdom.

What does that mean? It means that witness is not only by word, it's not only by gospel, message, proclamation, but it's also by deeds. Witness by word, witness by deed. It means that we're here to be holistic in our evangelism, that we're to testify to the kingdom, all that God is up to by the way we live.

And so we've been looking at the Sermon on the Mount on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, sorry. And a couple weeks ago, what did Jesus, what did Jesus tell us? He said, they ought to, you ought to live in such a way that people see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven.

[18:05] Or Ephesians 2, you are his workmanship created, recreated in Christ Jesus for good works. And we learn here that witness, the work of witness is by both word and deed, holistically, together, interdependent, never to be separated from one another.

It always, it always works together. People in the modern world do not want to be objects of a mission. They don't want to be your object.

And the important thing to see here is that what Jesus is calling us to in Acts chapter 1 is exactly to see that you should never have anybody as your object.

Instead, he's saying, go into the world and love people. Love people so much that you want them to find the truth and the hope that you found, and you love them by meeting their needs.

You love them by meeting their needs and giving them the truth that you found in your life. The mission is never to make anybody an object. It's just to extend the love of Christ into the world. And so let me give you a few ways you can do that very practically.

[19:08] So here's a very practical, everyday lifestyle method for being a witness in the world. Number one, have non-Christian friends and cultivate those relationships.

Know people. Relationships are everything. Number two, be public about your faith. Never hiding your faith. In humble confidence, always, with humility yet confidence, always being ready to be public that you're a Christian at any time.

Help others see that you're different, yet not that weird. Okay, that's very important. Public about your faith. Different, a little bit weird, yet not that weird. Number three, be zealous for good works. Paul even uses the language, outdo other people. Be competitive about your service. Meet other people's needs. Do good works. Be competitive about it. Outserve.

So that people can see that you're different and give glory to the Father who is in heaven. Want to know what makes this person so different. Number four, bring your friends who aren't yet Christians, who don't yet know Christ, to your dinner table.

[20:18] And mix that community with Christian friends so that Christians and non-Christians can be friends with one another in communities. In order that people might begin to belong to a community of faith so that they might become people who think, I could believe this.

I could believe this. There are people who believe this who aren't that weird. Right? And then number five, don't be afraid. Be loose and fast with invitations.

Don't be afraid to invite. Invite people into the community, to the church, to events, to all sorts of things. Invite people to read with you. Invite people to come and talk. Invite people to coffee. Invite, invite, invite.

Those five things, I think, are a lifestyle of being a public witness. Now third, we have a problem with this. Of course we do. Our problem. We have a problem with it.

What is that problem? Let me just list a few ways we struggle. Number one, we feel guilt in our lives because we're not often active witnesses. And guilt reverberates stiffness, paralysis.

[21:23] Guilt creates paralysis. And so sometimes the more guilt you feel over Acts chapter one and other passages like it, the less you actually will engage in a lifestyle of witness.

Guilt is a terrible motivator. Christ has removed it from you. Don't feel guilty. You're not, you're saved. You're safe. Number two, we struggle because we fear people.

And we think, will I break this relationship? Will I hurt my relationships? If I'm a public witness, we need courage. Courage and wisdom. Courage like the woman at the well had in her little village, her little town.

Courage and wisdom. Number three, we feel inadequacy. So we come and think, I need more training. There's a very important question to ask. It's very real. How do you evangelize in an age where people do not have any interest in the church, do not have any interest or believe in a sacred order at all, a moral order at all?

Or even think and completely deny any sense of a need to be saved from anything. How do you talk to people about the gospel at an age like that? So there's a real issue there where we do need training.

[22 : 31] But sometimes even getting to that, even getting to that issue is blocked. And the reason it's blocked is because the most fundamental problem we have, and it's the simple fact that we don't want to.

We just don't want to be a witness. And I was reading recently, Glenn Scrivener wrote a helpful article about this. He says, we may ask why words of witness aren't more forthcoming. The answer might touch on hostility from the world, secularization, fear, outdated cultural analysis, and so on and so forth. Yet underneath all this lies an uncomfortable truth.

Our love for people is lacking. We don't want to because we struggle to love people. To love them enough to want to give them truth and good works in a way that they can receive and hear the gospel.

Tim Keller says, we often don't ever face the problem of how to rightly evangelize in our age, in our context, because we've never actually tried. And so if we never actually try to speak the word of the gospel to anybody, we don't even know exactly what our needs of training will be.

[23 : 38] Right? So sometimes the most important thing you can do is take the step of becoming a public Christian, embracing a lifestyle of witness, to then even learn the exact training you might need in your life.

To even seek it. Now this is not an us problem. No guilt at all here. This is not an us problem. This is a human problem. This goes back to the beginning. So if you look down here at verse 6, when they had come together, this is what they said.

After a 40 days of time with Jesus, the apostles said, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel? Now you see, boy, John Calvin says there are as many errors in this sentence, this question they ask, as words.

They have been spending 40 days with Jesus Christ, being discipled by him about the kingdom and about their job as ministers and witnesses. And the first thing they say is, okay, Lord, are you going to today restore the kingdom to Israel?

And what are they asking? Boy, basically Jesus has said, you are going to extend my ministry into all the world. It's going to be very costly. You've been called to give your life away to this.

[24 : 48] And some of you are going to even lose life and limb for it. And they turn around and say, okay, so what you're saying is you're going to march to Rome, kick Caesar out of the throne, take the emperor's seat and restore the kingdom of God right now.

And we are going to be in charge of the treasury. That's what they're saying. Right? You're going to make us comfortable. You're going to take over the empire. That's what you're saying. They completely missed it. Why? Because they struggle with the same problem we struggle with.

And that's a market mentality. What's the market mentality? The market mentality is to say, I want to get, not to give. I exist to be comfortable. I walk down the Royal Mile most days at some point. And if you've walked down it, you've walked down it. Yeah. Right behind St. Giles is the statue of Adam Smith. Adam Smith is the father of the modern economy, the father of the modern market, who studied at the University of Edinburgh and then Glasgow, I think, if I remember correctly.

And Adam, what did Adam Smith say? He said, what drives the market? What drives the modern world? The invisible hand. And what's that invisible hand? The invisible hand that's pushing everything that you don't see? Self-interest.

[26 : 00] Self-interest drives the market. And the market sometimes creeps into the spiritual mindset. And the market mentality says, boy, I just, I'm here to come to Christianity to get, not to give.

I've gotten the gospel, but I don't, I'm not here to give anything. And Jesus actually said, I came here to give you everything and then to send you on a costly mission. No cheap grace.

The gospel is beautiful. It's amazing. It's free. And then it's costly to us. And the disciples here are struggling with that. The old self comes back into our lives and says, boy, I don't really want to be on mission.

And I think it's harder than ever. And what is the key? What's the key today is, as we draw things to a close, to break through. And the key to break through is 1 John 4.19.

We need, we need not only, we need, we need more than a market mentality. We need an experience of covenant mentality. And to get that, we need an experience of love in our lives. [27 : 02] 1 John 4.19, I go forth in love. How? Only because he first loved me. And the key to break through and to become a witness is actually to have experiences of the love of God in your life over and over and over again.

You have to be at a place in your life where you say, I can go and love in word and deed to people that God has put me around because of how much he first loved me. It's the experience of love that we need in our life.

Communion. The real joy, the real key to a ministry life of life of witness is the fact that we've experienced such great love. And I'll move to the final, very brief conclusion by just saying this. We all know, we all know that real joy in this life does not come from seeking your own self-interest. The story of every celebrity in the world has taught us that over and over and over again. That you can seek your self-interest to the uttermost and you will be miserable. But if you're able to give your life away for something that's far greater, a mission that's so much bigger, you will actually find deep, deep satisfaction and deep, deep joy in your life.

[28 : 12] The world has never been safer than it is today. The world has never been as comfortable as it is today. The world has never been as easy to live in as it is today.

We have never been as wealthy as we are as a society, as this very moment. And yet, people are more miserable, sad, lonely, anxious, and struggling with depression than ever before.

Why? Part of the reason is because as long as you don't have a mission, a vision in life that is far bigger than you, you will struggle to ever have joy.

So let me conclude with this, the power we need. And I just said it. We need a 40-day discipleship program. That's what we need. Jesus gave them a 40-day discipleship program.

And not literally, we don't need that. But what I mean by that is, Jesus puts it this way in Mark chapter 1. Follow me and I will make you fishers of people. The prerequisite for being a person in witness, fishers of people in this life, is that you actually have to be following Jesus.

[29 : 20] And so I want to come and ask you this morning, not are you a Christian, but to the Christians in the room, are you following Jesus Christ? And those are different things.

You can be a Christian and not be following Jesus right now. The prerequisite to be a fisher of people is to follow him in order to fish, in order to seek, to be a witness, to love people in our city. Right? Are you following him? Are you seeking him? Psalm 27, we prayed earlier. Are you seeking to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord every single day? In other words, you've got to have daily moments of worship and wonder or you will not ever be a public witness for Jesus Christ.

If you're not receiving the communion, the love of the gospel, if you're not realizing that, boy, let me say it finally like this. If you are not in a place right now where you're experiencing the fact that you are his mission, it will be very difficult to go and seek the mission that he's given you.

So you've got to come every day at some point and worship and wonder and say, I am the object. I am the object of God's great love. I am his mission.

[30 : 30] The missio dei, the mission of God, is me. That's what you've got to say every single day. You know, we say, people don't want to be the object of mission in the modern world.

And I get that. I agree with that. But, boy, neither did we. You know, you say, I don't know. People just don't like it. But you didn't want to be saved.

You didn't want to be rescued. You were the one that shook your fist. We, I, right? And yet Jesus in the middle of history came in love and rescued you before you ever even asked.

And in the same way, boy, daily communion with God that I am his mission. He loves me. He knows me to the bottom. He loves me to the sky. I, that's the only way, that heart posture, that we'll be able to step out our door and be people who live a lifestyle of public faith.

Let us pray. Father, we ask that you would make us witnesses. And, Lord, we recognize today that we are witnesses. So, Lord, teach us to be that. So, give us courage and wisdom.

[31 : 34] Courage and wisdom. To seek the vision you've given us in this city center church for our city, wherever the little place you've put us, to speak the gospel and to love people by meeting their needs.

Awaken us, Lord. Shake up the dust. Shake the dust off of our hearts on this. And we ask that you begin right now as we close with singing with a fresh encounter with you, communion with you.

So, give us that gift now, oh, Lord, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.