

Setting the Stage: Be My Witnesses  
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September 07, 2008

Teachable moment: those moments come across that you can pause for a moment, and you can turn it into a teachable moment. So let's do that.

Number one—honor and respect those who are willing to step in the arena of public service, and go through the challenge, the scrutiny, the debate, the attacks as well as the cheering...and both can be as damaging to a soul...of politics and government. That is an arena of public service. And we respect those who step into it—Barack Obama, Joseph Biden, John McCain, Sarah Palin, and all the others...right down to the local community service spot. When you step into the arena of public service I respect you.

Number two—cherish, give God thanks for, and respect the American press. Years ago I did a research project studying the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, a man who came over from France to examine American democracy. He was actually looking to do research on American prison systems, and it expanded and it became one of the early, major works of an outsider looking at American democracy, and saying what makes this work. And his observation, and I'm gonna boil it down, I'm not gonna try to quote it exactly, but his observation is there's two really essential things that American democracy needs in order to survive and go forward. Number one is a free press. Number two is a free pulpit. And it must have both...it must have both.

Now there are those people who represent the press that don't live up to the standards and the criteria one would expect of that high calling, and it *is* a high calling. But I tell you what...there are individuals who do, and they work very, very hard at trying to get what's really happening; and I respect 'em. When the New York Times sends a reporter, and they select from their staff somebody who has been around churches like ours, somebody who knows pastors on a friend-basis and is able to discuss with them religious issues from an empathetic position, someone who is thoughtful and careful with his words, his discussion, and his interview process, and he is there to try and get at the truth—I respect that.

When World Magazine sends someone up, and they send someone who has actually reviewed some of the books...he looks at my bookshelf and he recognizes some of the authors, he's actually read some of those...and he can speak with intelligence and insight with respect to the religious field, and he isn't somebody just sent up who doesn't even have an idea of what religion's about—I respect that kind of reporter, who's put in the background study to know what he's dealin' with.

I respect the interviewer that CNN sent, and I've not even seen how she's edited what happened. I really don't...I have no idea what she's editing or not. But I tell you what...I respect the gift for listening in interviewing that that woman has. By the time she was done interviewing me I had learned things about myself that I hadn't known. And off-camera, when everything was done, she genuinely worked to try to understand a point I had made. I was clumsy with it; I'm still clumsy with it. But she genuinely worked to try to understand, to give me the opportunity to clarify.

Then there's my favorite—the young man from the Chicago Tribune. Tell you what, I liked him. First of all, he called ahead of time, said, "Hey, I know you're busy," all this kinda stuff, "but, you know, can I get an interview with you?" And I said, "Sure. C'mon out to my house." And he says, "Give me the address." I give him the address, he punches it into his GPS, and he's followin' his GPS, and it takes him down a typical Alaskan road. And it ends...it ends kinda at a dead end, because the road hasn't been complete yet, and there's this big berm. And he stops, and he looks at it, and he figures, "This must be Alaska." So he takes that little ol' rental car and he attacks it. ☺ You know, my goodness!

But I tell you what, what was special for me was to spend an hour, hour-and-a-half with that young man. He's passionate about bein' a reporter. He's been in the field for ten years, and he runs all over the place, and he sat there and he spent that time with me. And he'd landed in Anchorage at 2 a.m. in the morning; he had to have his story back by like 2 a.m. the next morning. He had about twenty-four hours to produce truth about us, or at least find it and communicate it, and he's workin' hard at it. And the next day the paper comes out, and I know what this guy has been through just to talk to me. And when it's all said and done, he's able to say about five words about me.

See, that's the challenge the press faces. They've got to take all this information and try to put it down into the little packaged slogan, little packaged sound bite, the little 'grabber' or headline that they can come up with. And I don't think these reporters want to do that—I think these individuals want to be able to give us truth. But we ask for the quick sound bite that'll say what we want to hear as we're busy getting on with our life. So you cherish, you respect, that press. They're a gift from our God.

But I'm not a politician, and I'm not a member of the press. I'm a pastor, and I have only one responsibility, one task, one mission that is given to me; and that is to speak and to give witness to the wonder, the glory, the mystery, and the grace of Jesus Christ. That is my task; that is my mission; that is my calling. I'm not the one you look to for policy—foreign, domestic, or local. I'm not the one you ask for analysis of various government officials...as if I know everything that's gone on in their lives. My calling, my mission, my task is simply to give witness to the wonder, the glory, and the mystery of Jesus.

You have a responsibility, too. And it begins right now. You must take it seriously and responsibly. It will not be light, and it will not be easy. It is work. It is your responsibility to demand that I am able to verify that statement from scripture, that when I say my task as a pastor is to make known the wonder, the glory, and the mystery of Jesus, you are responsible to say, "Larry, show me that in scripture." You have to make sure that I didn't come up with just a certain...certain phrasing that had a cadence to it, that rang true to your heart. You need to say, "Is that really the way God wants it?" from scripture, just like you need to examine the candidates and decide, with respect to their character, their competence, their record, their ethics...you need a responsibility to examine that when you go into that voting booth. You have a responsibility to vote knowingly. When you read the press, you have a responsibility to say, "Where is this reporter's sources? What is the context of what is said? What is the pattern of this writer's writing? Can we trust it?" You have a responsibility to be sensitive to what you read and what you accept. And you have a responsibility to make sure that no—and I mean *no*—preacher simply provides you with sermon sound bites.

So, let's look at scripture—Acts 1. We're going to be working through the book of Acts this year, start to finish, and it's a follow-up to a study we did last year. We went through the gospel of Mark start to finish. We're not going to be able to read the book of Acts out loud in total, but we'll be reading extended portions of it. And I'll be walking you through it as we go through this particular year. And when we turn to this book of Acts you are turning to a second book in a companion set, a companion set of volumes. Luke, one of the men who followed the Apostle Paul, made a commitment to and produced two written records where he reviewed and he worked at the eyewitness testimonies with respect to Jesus. He investigated, he talked, he put these together. And the first volume he produced was the book of Luke, which provided a record of what Jesus' ministry was when He first came, how He ministered to people, what He said, what He did, and then His resurrection. And then, after that, he started and he wrote a second volume—the book of Acts.

And that's what we'll be studying this year, the book that follows up on the gospel of Luke. And this'll be showin' us what happens with the early church as it started, and what was its mission, and what was its task that God gave it. And we'll be looking at it this year and how they followed that once Jesus had left. So that's where we're at.

This first chapter has a very simple function to it, and you just need to understand that as we read it. The main thing, like many books, this one starts out...and the number one thing that first chapter is to give you a sense of the setting—what's all the components here, what's happening, and then to make you want to turn the next page. That's all chapter one's doin'. It's setting the stage and trying to make sure you want to turn the next page.

Now, the flow of that is something you'll sense as we read through. And so, let's read through. Begin at verse 1, and we'll read all the way to verse 12, and you'll begin to get a sense of the flow of this opening chapter. It starts out like this. The writer Luke says

*The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and to teach,*

...and he's referring here to that first volume in that companion set; he's referring to the gospel of Luke. He says

*The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs,*

He had risen from the dead, He'd been crucified, He'd been risen from the dead, and He spent time with His whole circle of apostles. And He gave them convincing proofs. We're told that Thomas sat there and said, 'You know, I won't believe it unless I can see Him or touch Him.' And Jesus showed him and said, 'Here I am; now touch Me.' and He let him touch. We're told one of the first reactions of the apostles when they saw Jesus was they did not believe for joy. In other words, it sounded too good to be true. And it's...I just love the incidence—Jesus sits there and says, "Give Me something to eat." So they give Him somethin' to eat, and He *eats* it! And when He's eating it, you know, it makes it very clear—*ghosts don't eat*. 'It's really Me. I'm alive.' And so He does that, these convincing proofs. And He does them for over a period of forty days, the text says,

*...and speaking to them the things concerning the kingdom [the rule of God]. Gathering together then,*

...verse 4; He brought that group together...

*...He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you'd heard from Me."*

Jesus had given them a promise, and the promise was this. He said, verse 7...he said, verse 6,...verse 5...

*"For John baptized with water, but you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit..."*

'The Holy Spirit's gonna be poured out in your life...'

*"...not many days from now."*

*So when they had come together after hearing that, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time that You're restoring the kingdom of Israel?"*

You know, they linked the idea of the Spirit of God being poured out into His people and the coming of the great and glorious kingdom of God as coming at the same time, and so they're saying, 'Does this mean the kingdom's comin' now?'

*And He said to them, [verse 7], "It's not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;"*

'You're not gonna know the day, the hour, the century. But,' He says, verse 8, 'you will receive power...'

*"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."*

*And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on,*

And this must have been an amazing thing. They're just...one minute they're talking with Him, and then He begins to be lifted up.

*...and a cloud received Him out of their sight.*

He kinda disappears into this cloud, and then He's gone! We're told, verse 10 ,

*And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them;*

These are two angels...

*...and they also said [to these apostles], "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."*

In other words, they said, 'Guys, stop staring. Get movin'. And that's exactly what they do. Verse 12 tells us they went on back to Jerusalem, and they began to wait.

They waited together...not just the apostles, but there was others gathered. There was about 120 of 'em. They waited in one main place where the disciples were staying. The others would continually gather there. They were praying, and they just kept waiting. Jesus said to wait, and somethin's gonna happen, not many days. And so they're waiting and praying.

And they make one action step. They do...they do request...they decide that 'You know what, there's eleven of us. There were twelve; we lost Judas. We need to replace him so we make sure that we have twelve.' And so that's what they do. They add a twelfth member to the group. And they cast lots and identified that person, and he's named in the very last part of this chapter. And that's kind of the opening of the book of Acts.

The focus of that opening...we kinda walked through the flow of it, and we're just gonna use a...put a focus to it and answer some of the initial questions as we introduce this particular book. The focus to it is the idea that Jesus was appointing some individuals to be His witness...to be His witnesses. Verse 8 is kind of the focal point of the chapter, the defining point in the chapter. And when we say that, what do we mean when we say, "...be My witnesses"? It's very simple. It just means that He appointed certain individuals to testify with respect to His reality. Very specifically, later on when they're talking about this ministry and Peter's describing it a little bit more, he'll make it very specific that "...it's a witness with us of His resurrection," verse 22, when they're appointing the replacement apostle. They said, 'You know what? We want somebody that will witness with us of His resurrection.' And that was a requirement, that was the focus, that was the direction—somebody to bear witness to the reality of Jesus, specifically that He's alive.

Next question, then, that comes is, well, who are these people that were appointed? And the quick answer is they're the apostles. And we're speaking very specifically here of those eleven in verse 1. They're the ones that were chosen among all the other followers of Jesus, and there were other followers. These were the eleven chosen to be witnesses, to be sent out by Jesus. And they were the ones that were set apart for that. And when you come down to verse 21, and they're going for that replacement, they're replacing Judas and they're picking the twelfth one—and they give a sense of exactly what was really important criteria to be one of these apostles. And when they looked for the replacement, it says 'You know, among the men who are here,' and there's quite a few men who had seen Jesus, they said, 'You know, we want one of these to be an apostle, and it has to be one of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us.' And they chose, as we said earlier, Matthias to be...to join those eleven, become the replacement apostle, one of the twelve.

Key thing here—Peter's saying that 'Our call to be witnesses, to give testimony to the reality of Jesus, is that we be eyewitness testimony.' This unique group of twelve had to consist of men who had been with Jesus from the very beginning when He was baptized, to the very end when He disappeared up into the heavens, among the men who had been there after the resurrection, when He gave convincing proofs, the ones who had actually heard Him and seen Him, the ones who knew His habits, they knew His tone of voice, they knew His mannerisms, they knew exactly what He had said, and they had been there exactly when He did what He did. These were people who had seen Him. And there were a number of those, but only twelve were set aside to be these unique witnesses. That's who we're dealing with in chapter 1.

Well, where are they to be witnesses? Answer—in Jerusalem; and then even further in all Judea and Samaria; and finally, even to the remotest parts of the earth. These men were tasked with making sure their message, their witness, their testimony did not just stay in Jerusalem, but went out through the region and ultimately would spread across the world. That's the 'where.'

When. When were they to do this? The text is kind of...it sets the drama of the two chapters up, because He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, that promise of the Holy Spirit. So when we're in this chapter, they've been told, 'Wait. Don't do this yet. Don't go out there yet. Wait for that Spirit, because that's...*that* is when you're gonna be ready to do this. Don't try to do it until that.' And so they're sitting there waiting.

He tells them, "*You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*" They're waiting; the clock's ticking, and it's supposed to happen soon.

Running through the questions, we come to the 'How', and this is the one that really stands out distinctive is...how they gonna do this? We know they're gonna do it because they're eyewitnesses, but is there anything else to it? And our text actually points towards that. He says 'You shall receive power; you will be enabled, you'll be empowered, you'll be given the ability to do that when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. Then you shall be My witnesses.'

In essence He's sayin', 'You know what? Don't do this until you've been given the ability. And you'll get that, the power and the ability to give effective witness and testimony to Me, when the Holy Spirit is poured out into you, giving you that ability.'

This is what's intriguing to me here. If you look at it up in verse 1, talking about Jesus, Luke, the writer, says that He gave the instructions, the orders to the apostles, by the Holy Spirit. And then, a little later in the chapter, when he's talking about replacing Judas and he quotes some Old Testament scripture that indicated that that was something that needed to be done, he speaks about the Old Testament scripture. He says the scripture,

*...which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David...*

Here's what's intriguing to me about this...these individuals have been told, 'You are going to be a witness for me. At the foundation of the church, you are there to give witness and testimony to Me and My resurrection. And I'm gonna give you My Spirit to do that.' It's gonna be the very Spirit that spoke through Jesus in His ministry. And it's gonna be the very Spirit that was speaking in those Old Testament prophets. These men are being told 'That Spirit is gonna be speaking through you.'

What an amazing thing! Let's reflect for just a moment, think about what good news this is, that Jesus, as He left, set everything in place so that there would still be on earth an effective witness and testimony to the reality of all that He is, all that He's done, all that He's said.

Look at our nation right now. Try to get an accurate, authoritative idea of our political candidates and what they're like. I mean, look at the struggle to really know what's in their hearts, what's in their agenda, what's their...what's their record, what's their character, what's their competence.

And Jesus arranged that when the question of the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, the risen Savior of mankind...when the question came as to who is He, what is He like, what did He say, what are His values, what are His importance, how competent is He, what's His character...He made sure that we would have an authoritative witness to Him. And it's in the scriptures. It is what the church has been given.

So what do we do with it? Number one—we need to listen. We need to listen. And here I'm just gonna speak pastor-to-people. You don't know what a rare and liberating experience it is for a pastor like me to have a congregation that would do what you did last year. You not only let me, you encouraged me to just, week-by-week-by-week, stand in front of you and just read the gospel of Mark, and take you through it so you, yourselves, would actually see and hear what Jesus said and did. You didn't demand catchy slogans. You didn't demand three-point outlines. And you did not demand motivational speeches. You just said, 'Show us Jesus in the scriptures so we can speak confidently and accurately with respect to Him, not just parroting what we heard somebody said He said.' That's what we do. It's not exciting. It's hard work. But that's what we do. We listen.

Number two—we preserve it. This is a tremendous, tremendous treasure we've been given in the scriptures and the apostolic witness and testimony. And the church has not always dealt with that with diligence. It was given us once, and once for all. And every generation, every...every community of believers needs to be absolutely dedicated to make sure that it is effectively passed on each generation. And that is a responsibility.

And number three—is to extend it, to make sure that this testimony does go out, in fact, to the uttermost parts of the world. The question that immediately rises at that point is "Why? Why? Why can't we just absorb it here? Why can we just discuss it in the walls here? Why do we take it out there where people may get angry with it? Why?"

Here's the interesting thing about Acts chapter 1—we're given the answers to almost all the questions you would normally have picking up a piece of literature and reading the opening chapter. We're told who's involved. We're told how they're gonna do it. We're told how it's gonna happen and when it's gonna happen. We're given all those kind of things, what they're gonna do. You know what the one question...the one question that is absolutely not answered in the first chapter of Acts is "Why?" Why would Jesus insist on having a group of people committed to getting this testament out? Not tasked to rule the world, to change everything...they are simply tasked 'Get this message out, accurately.' Why is that so important?

The best study tool is a driving study question. As we go through the book of Acts, that's the question I want you to take with you—the question chapter 1 doesn't answer. Why? Why is this message so important, so vital, so critical, that Jesus took His most trained followers, said, 'I'm gonna give you My Holy Spirit...get this message out!'

And I think when you answer that question you're gonna have a whole new grip on the wonder, the glory, and the mystery of Jesus Christ.

Let's stand.

[Congregation sings closing blessing together.]

Go in Christ's grace. Amen.