

1000 Days of Witness Project: The How
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There's a critical moment in church history. In fact, I'm convinced if you go back through church history—after Christ's resurrection and then His ascension into heaven, right up to the present—this one moment may have been the most critical of all moments. The church had begun in Jerusalem; the Spirit of God had moved among the apostles and those early believers, and they had begun to talk about Jesus. They'd begun to give witness to His reality just the way He said they would. And people had begun to respond. In fact, the first time the Apostle Peter ever preached, three thousand people responded to the gospel, and responded to Jesus, and expressed their faith in Him and were baptized, and became part of this new thing called the church. And this began to build like a bit of a snowball, very rapidly, very quickly. And it wasn't much longer and it was up to five thousand people in this new thing called the church in Jerusalem.

And then, suddenly, the authorities decided 'This has gotta stop. This is getting out of hand.' And so, after a particularly dramatic experience where the apostles had healed a man, and people had responded, and they had preached the gospel in the temple itself, or the temple compound, and people had been responding, the authorities arrested Peter and John. They brought 'em into prison; they kept 'em overnight. And then the next day they brought 'em before the Sanhedrin and the authorities. And they talked with 'em and they gave 'em an instruction. They said, 'You are not to talk at all, to anyone, with that name Jesus.' It wasn't just simply a warning. It was a command; it was an order. And basically what the authorities said is 'You will not speak the name of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem ever again. No one is to speak that name.' It was a critical moment. And I'm absolutely convinced that all of church history hinged on what happened next.

We're told what happened is the church gathered together. And when Peter and John came and reported this to them, it says when they heard this, when this gathering of Christians heard this and they had been told 'You cannot use the name of Jesus, you can't even speak it in the city of Jerusalem ever again'—the authorities' intent was to stamp this out right now, immediate, before it spread anywhere else, to any other city, any other place—they said 'You cannot use that name.' We're told that they lifted their voices to God with one accord. It must have been an amazing thing, because they all began to pray together! And we have the outline of that prayer. We have it written in the follow, in Acts chapter 4, where we're told how they called out to God and they said

"O Lord, Creator of the heavens and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them..."

'You're the One who said something like this would happen, that kings, and authorities, and powers would stand against Your Messiah. You said that through David by the Holy Spirit generations ago. And now we're seein' it...just exactly what You said would happen has been happening!'

"O Lord, Creator of heaven, earth, sea, and all that is in them..."

They get to their request at verse 29, their petition...what they ask God to do at that moment. They say, 'O Lord, grant that Your bondservants, us believers, may speak Your word with all confidence, with an openness. Keep our mouths open, God. Do this while You extend Your hand. Continue to do what You've been doing; continue to heal people and work miracles through your apostles. Go ahead, Father; You continue to do all the things You are going to do, but help us. Help us to tell His story, to speak His name, the name Jesus.'

That was their petition; that was their request. We told immediately what happened right after that, what happened is there was an earthquake. The building literally shook. We're told in verse 31 the building literally shook, and there was a release of the Spirit within their lives, within their spirits, a refreshing, renewing, kind of an energizing of the Spirit within them. And they began, we're told, to speak the word of God boldly; openly is the idea. We're not talking about a belligerent boldness, an in-your-face. We're talking about a simple, calm openness that says 'We are going to use that name, and we are gonna tell His story.' And they did.

The whole history of the church hinged at that moment, and the response was simply to pray, 'Father, keep our mouths open. Let us tell His story. Let us speak His name.'

That particular prayer, and that particular passage, is a directional verse for a project we entered introduced last week, that we'll finish introducing this week, and that's what we call our "1000 Days of Witness." We first mentioned it, we first talked about it, way back in December. And ever since, we've been putting it together to launch during the Easter season. And we started last week; we introduced it, and we're launching it today. And next week we'll connect with it, but next week isn't about this project. It's about celebrating the resurrection. But the project itself begins tomorrow, April 6. It's targeted to run all the way through December 31st, 2011. That's our target date, a thousand days, just under three years.

The project statement...and we don't have many projects as a congregation, where we try to call everybody to try to be involved in something, because there are so many things that we get going and we're saying, 'You know what, as a congregation we keep our projects limited and focused;...this is one of 'em. And it's very focused. The project statement is this: that we will have an extended exercise, something that'll carry on for quite a while...and a thousand days is an extended exercise...that will establish a prayer-based, Spirit-led witness. We're not talking about walking through programs or going door-to-door or marching. We're just talking about Spirit-led, prayer-based witness, speaking of the reality of Jesus across our congregation as a life practice. The vision that I put in front of you is we as a people, in all our various conditions, in all our various circumstances, in all our various situations, being a people who can and will speak and give witness to the reality of Jesus; who can at any time and any place that the Spirit of God opens the opportunity—we're not gonna bang down the door—but when the Spirit of God opens the opportunity we want to be ready to tell His story, speak His name. Our prayer is that the Lord will give us that opportunity in all our varied circumstances, in all our varied conditions.

The 'why' of that—why of all the different things we could say we want to do this as a congregation, here's what our project goal is for the next three years, whatever it is—why did we pick this? Simple answer when we get to that question "Why?" Number one—it answers God's call upon us. Jesus put it very simply. We...and He was talking to people like you and I, ordinary people who had simply acknowledged Him as our Lord, as our savior, as our teacher. He looks at His disciples, people like us, and He says to us, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" And He goes on and He says, "*You are the light of the world.*" And He brings those two concepts together later when His last instructions to His apostles before He leaves, as the birth of the church, as He gives the direction for the church He says, "*When My Spirit comes upon you, you will be My witnesses.*" Not a maybe; not a possibly; not even a command. It's a declarative statement saying 'This is what you will be.' That's what we are—the people who, generation after generation after generation, in all our varied circumstances and conditions, continue to speak of Jesus and testify to His reality.

But it isn't just that it's His call upon us. It isn't just that that's our task and we have to get to it. There's somethin' else goin' on here, and it's dynamic and it's powerful. We're giving voice to His Spirit within us. Jesus promised His Holy Spirit upon us, that would come into our lives and begin to work in us to renew us, to transform us from the inside out. We weren't to be a people who live by rules; we are people who live by the reality of Jesus' promised Spirit within us. And that Spirit comes in not only to transform us and renew us; that Spirit comes in to encourage us, to sustain us through all the ups and downs of the Christian experience. But even beyond that—not only renewing, not only transforming, not only encouraging and sustaining—that Spirit comes in enabling, enabling us to give witness to Jesus. The Spirit of God desires to use our voice, our mouth...in all the varied circumstances and conditions we find ourselves in the Spirit of God is there with us at that moment, at that place, at that condition, desiring to speak to those around us of the reality of Jesus. That impulse is within us just as powerful, just as inbred as the pull instinct in an Alaskan Husky. It's there. We're called to it, and the Spirit is within us to give voice.

The question is when we look at a project like this that wants to answer that call and give voice to that Spirit within us, the question is 'Well, how do we gonna do that? What does this thousand day project look like? What are the to-do aspects of it?' And last week I told you that the plan we've put together...like I said, we announced it last December, we worked on it since then, and we said, you know, whatever the project is, it has to have certain criteria. We have to have this into the plan if it's going to work around here. And we listed those things last week. And of those five things two of them are fairly easy to address when you design a plan, a workable project. One is the idea of having something that is deliberate and intentional. That's easy to come up with. Having something that has a biblical base—that's not hard. The tough things are the three things that are left up here—finding something that has what I call sustainable simplicity. In other words, if we're gonna go for a thousand days on this we need something that doesn't have a whole lot of moving parts; and the parts that it does have need to be very durable. It's something that we can do and keep on doing, and we don't need vast plans, organized systems, and complicated procedures to get it done. So it has to be sustainable.

This project has to be expandable. In other words, we can start with...our intention is to start with ten people tomorrow morning. Ten people tomorrow morning, and have it expand from there, where next Sunday the entire congregation joins in. And we can go on week after week adding whoever wants to join in, right up to day 999. It has to be expandable.

And lastly, it has to fit who we are, how God's wired us, and what we're like as a people in all our varied situations and circumstances. That's kind of a challenge. How do you come up with a plan, and a system, and a project that can do that? That would work equally well with that teenage girl in seventh grade at the local middle school, to the widow living at the Pioneer Home? The guy that's working on the slope two weeks out, two weeks back; the firefighter; the businessman; the accountant; the schoolteacher—all our varied conditions, schedules, and situations—how do you come up with a project that fits us, is expandable, and is very simple so that it can last? What do you come up with?

Our project is simply a sustained prayer...a sustained prayer that will be repeated each Sunday as a congregation, and then carried into our daily personal lives...every Sunday for a hundred and forty-two (142) Sundays we'll pray this prayer with the desire and the intent that all of us will take this prayer and begin to incorporate it and carry it into our daily lives. It's simply a project built on the model set by that early church on that critical day when they were told "don't speak the name of Jesus." Now, we don't have authorities telling us not to use the name of Jesus. We got people saying "Don't bother to talk about that. We got more important things to talk about." We got things that are distracting us, that we're excited about, that we wanna talk about, that we begin to forget to talk about Jesus. We got all kinds of things that pull us away from speaking His name. But we go back to this simple prayer... "Lord, give me the confidence, the calm openness, to tell His story, to speak His name." That's the target; that's the direction we want to go, is a simple prayer that we can pray each week that becomes a prayer of our daily lives. And as we go forward new people can just join in that pattern.

Not only is it built after the Acts 4 model; it's similar to what we do with our benediction every week at the end of the service. It's a prayer song we sing at every service, and we pray for God's blessing on us as a congregation. And as we do that people carry it into their private lives. We had...a father came up to me this fall, and he says, "You know, I was on a hunting trip with my sons, my two teenage sons. And we were out there hunting, and it was over a weekend. It was over a Sunday. And we were out there and," he says, "my boy says 'We oughta have church today, Dad.'" These are two young guys, they play hockey, all kinds of stuff; they're out there with their dad, and it just intrigues me that they'd sit there and they'd say, "Dad, we need to have church today. It's Sunday." And he goes, "Ok, what are we gonna do?" And they said, "Let's sing the blessing." And I'm just trying to picture these two hockey guys and their hockey dad out there singing the blessing, you know, as they're hunting for moose.

Had a young couple in our church this...about two weeks ago, went into the...that evening they were gonna pray the evening prayer with their little daughter, ok? And they got around her in bed, and they were gonna pray for her, and they said, "Well, let's pray." And she said, "Let's pray the blessing." And the father came back to me and says, "I don't even know when she's been in our service to learn it. I didn't know she ever picked it up."

It has permeated our life that much. And it's a prayer, one of the first prayers that comes to my lips when I'm prayin' for people in our congregation in the private of my office. "*Lord, bless 'em, keep 'em, cause Your face to shine upon 'em, turn to them and be gracious to them, and give them your peace.*"

That's what we want, is that kind of prayer that we can pray as a congregation, and we can carry out into the daily lives and permeate our congregational life. So what we did is I brought Joel into my office, and I said, "Joel, we need a song. We need a prayer song." So Joel's gonna come on up here and bring his guitar.

And he looked at me and he goes...I described what we're interested, and what we needed, what we wanted. And we looked at it and he goes, he says, "You know, we're gonna have to have a song that...man, if we're gonna use it like we use the blessing, that way, we're gonna need a song that lyrically connects with the content that's what we want and that's biblical and true, and a prayer that we know God would answer. And number two, it needs to be lyrics that we can easily remember and retain, and kinda click and connect with us." And then he goes, "Man, the music, Larry...it's gotta be simple. It's gotta be music that's a little bit catchy, that people don't have a hard time picking up on it. And since it's gonna have to be a capella, it has to be a melody and the music has to be something that we can all get into easy and carry with us, and easy to remember. And Larry, it's gonna have to be a song you can lead."

And about that time I'm lookin' at Joel, and he's lookin' at me, and his next comment was "Larry, we need to pray." And pray we did.

And the elders have prayed about this, and the staff has prayed about it. And we do have a song, a prayer. And so I'm gonna have Joel just sing it, and then we'll look at the lyrics. So Joel...

Joel: It's very simple, intentionally so.

In every circumstance give us confidence
to speak Your word as Your Spirit leads,
giving witness to the One with power to save,
Jesus Christ, full of truth and grace.

Father, extend Your hand,
Father, confirm our words.

In every circumstance give us confidence
to speak Your word as Your Spirit leads,
giving witness to the One with power to save,
Jesus Christ, full of truth and grace.

Larry: [to Joel] Stay right here still.

Let me walk you through the lyrics really quick so you see it. It's a song that has a repetitive theme. It's given in the first part. There's a two line bridge, and then we repeat that. The first opening line is one that takes us back to that Acts 4 prayer, and it's 'In every circumstance give us that calm openness to be able to speak Your word as the Spirit leads. Father, we're not doin' this...we're not rushin' out there to set our own stage, our own agenda, and everything else. Just give us confidence to open our mouth when Your Spirit makes it right.'

And then, secondly, 'Giving witness to the One with power to save,' and Joel was very particular about this particular line. He said, "You know, it's hard for us to give witness to Jesus the way the apostles did. They actually saw Him after the resurrection. They saw Him crucified; they saw Him after the resurrection." As one of our earlier songs said, Thomas actually touched Him. We can't give witness to that. But we can personally give witness—all of us who acknowledge Jesus and have come to exercise faith in Him—we can give personal witness to His glory as it's described in John chapter 1, "...*the glory that is full of truth and grace.*" We can give witness to the truth we've found in Jesus, and the grace we've found in Jesus.

The bridge line goes back to that Acts 4 passage. And what happens there is they ask God, 'Continue to make Yourself real. We're not gonna put any limits on what You want to do and how You wanna do it. Just continue to extend Your hand, working what You desire to work. Father, You make Yourself real to people around us, and confirm our words as we speak of the reality of Jesus.'

That's the song...pretty simple. Then we go back and we repeat the last part right there. And what we're gonna do is Joel's gonna have us sing it together right now. Can you do that, Joel? And Loren, you've got the altos over here, right? And sopranos... [☺] Let's go.

Joel: Let's try it.

In every circumstance give us confidence
to speak Your word as Your Spirit leads,
giving witness to the One with power to save,
Jesus Christ, full of truth and grace.

Father, extend Your hand,
Father, confirm our words.

In every circumstance give us confidence
to speak Your word as Your Spirit leads,
giving witness to the One with power to save,
Jesus Christ, full of truth and grace.

Larry: Thank you, Joel.

Tell you what...when we first started that blessing song so many years ago it sounded far worse than what you did just now.

One question I need to address at the end. We went through that song again. We start the 6th. The congregation starts the 12th. The question I want to address at the very end—is it really too simple? You're saying, 'Larry, you announced this back in December. You've told us to wait and launch it at Easter. It's taken you this long to come up with that?' This is totally not what I expected. I thought we'd be doing something very similar to the type of thing we did when we launched the financial project to get into this facility and completed it last November. That project...man, we spent four months as a congregation preparing for that before we even talked about it. There was a system in place; we had all kinds of things in place in terms of communication, and people having different assignments and tasks, and everything else. And I thought that's what this was gonna be.

Not at all. And it isn't that I didn't try to come up with something more complicated. And I had teams of people trying to come up with something more complicated with me—the elders, the staff. But every time something...we'd get started, every time we'd start get going, something would happen. And I'd find our church was on fire, or having to move our offices, or one of my closest friends dies. And through all those months what astounded me as I kept trying to put together a plan...God gave me more opportunities to witness to the reality of Jesus, both publicly and privately, thank I have had in the past thirty years in the ministry.

God will answer this prayer. We don't need a plan; we don't need a program. You don't need to be trained to be gifted theologians, and you definitely don't need to be trained to be evangelistic closers that can 'bring 'em to the point and cross the line.' All we need is the Spirit of God opening the door and opening our mouths to speak of the reality that is most centered to all of us—Jesus. He can do that; He will do that. We need only ask.

Expectations? I cannot picture the future. I gave up on that. I can't. I just know we serve a God who can do exceedingly, abundantly, beyond anything we can think or imagine. I could not imagine what would happen when we set out under God's call to become a thousand people in one place at one time, praising God with one voice. That happened last November, and I couldn't picture it. I didn't know what it would be like. I did not know it would be at a communion service, gathered around a cross in this building, on this piece of property. And I have no idea what will happen now that those thousand people in every circumstance, in every condition, scattered across this community, across this state...wherever...speak His story, and speak His name. I don't know what that will produce. But I know God's in it.

Let's stand.

Last time...next hundred and forty-two Sundays we add a different song. We will use this at other times and other places. But we'll close each service in the future with that other song for a hundred and forty-two Sundays. The Lord willing, it'll be the last one we do will be Christmas Sunday, 2011. But this Sunday let's close with this.

[Congregation sings the blessing song.]