

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 9, 2007**

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Acts 1:1-8

The church, as I said several weeks ago, is on a mission from God. That mission comes into focus right here in the opening verses of the Book of Acts. Here Luke (the author of Acts) recounts what took place between the resurrection of Christ and His ascension into heaven 40 days later.

During those 40 days, the risen Lord Jesus continued to reveal Himself to His followers. He continued to teach them about the kingdom of God and how they were to live as the people of God under the reign of God in their lives. And during those 40 days, He gave them a command, a promise and a purpose.

The command is found in verse 4: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised.” Their orders were to wait until they received what God had promised.

What was the promise? The promise was the gift of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the continuing presence of God in the lives of His people even today. The Holy Spirit would come not only to be with the followers of Christ but to be in them. To take up residence in their lives. And to equip them for their mission in the world. To give them power.

Power for what? Here is the purpose: The power is for witness. The power of the Holy Spirit would be given for this specific purpose: To enable them – and us – to be Christ’s witnesses in the world.

In response to this promise, the disciples asked Jesus a question in verse 6: “Lord is it time yet? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?”

Their question betrayed either curiosity (we want to know what the future holds) or impatience (we want what we want and we want it now). Maybe both. And a misconception, too. The Bible tells us in Deuteronomy 29:29 that “the secret things” – the things God has chosen not to reveal to us – belong to God, and it is not our place to pry into them. But the things God *has* revealed belong to us. These are the things we are to attend to, so that in all our ways we may better love and serve and honor the Lord our God.

The disciples, you see, still didn’t get it. Even after the death of Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, they were still looking for a political kingdom. A national kingdom. A territorial nation-state. They had politics and prophesy on their minds. But Jesus switched the subject. Jesus changed the conversation to the subject of witnessing and the church’s mission in the world.

They wanted a timetable. But Jesus refused to give them one. They wanted to know what would happen when. But Jesus said it was not their concern. He said: “The details of my return are none of your business. It is not for you to know. What *is* your business is the mission I’m giving you” (1:7).

Then He went on: “Listen up, men! Here is what is going to happen: You will receive power – *dunamis*, Holy Spirit power – when the Holy Spirit comes on you. And you will be my witnesses in ever-widening circles, beginning right here in Jerusalem and extending to the ends of the earth” (1:8).

With the gift of the Holy Spirit who came in power on Pentecost (Acts 2), God would make it possible for ordinary people – people like Peter and John and you and me – to have a part in His extraordinary mission to the whole world.

That same mission given to the 11 (the 12 minus Judas) is our mission from God today. That same mission is the mission of the church in the world today. The entire period between Pentecost and the Parousia – that is, between the coming of the Holy Spirit in power and the coming again of the Lord Jesus in power and majesty – however long or short it may be, is to be filled, as John Stott has said, with the world-wide mission of the church in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is a world-wide mission. And it can be carried out only in the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential to the fulfillment of our mission. Without the Holy Spirit it is impossible.

Listen to what John Piper says about this. He points out that the Holy Spirit uses disciples – followers of Christ like you and me – to reach the world. Jesus said: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon *you* and *you* will be my witnesses” (1:8).

Piper makes this observation:

One of the dangers of Arminianism is that it teaches men to usurp the place of *God* in conversion. One of the dangers of Calvinism is that it leads some to deny the place of man in evangelism. If the Book of Acts teaches anything, it teaches that the Holy Spirit wills to reach the end(s) of the earth through us. Until Christian disciples carry the message of Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins to unreached people, they will remain in darkness and rebellion (Acts 26:18). There is no salvation without the witness of a man or woman to Jesus Christ. You and I are an indispensable link in the chain of redemption.

Hear that again: “You and I are an indispensable link in the chain of redemption.” God uses His people – people like us – to reach the world with the gospel. Don’t ever forget that. But that is not the end of the story.

Piper goes on to emphasize the point that the Holy Spirit gives power for world-wide witness. He says.

People are indispensable in world missions, but people alone are useless in world missions. We must have power. Without the power of the Spirit we languish in fruitlessness.

You see, no matter how qualified or gifted or eloquent we may be, no matter how charismatic or charming or clever, no matter how organized or technologically savvy or culturally sensitive or “hip” any of us may be, if we’re trying to carry out the mission in our own power without relying on God and receiving His power, we are doomed to fail. We’ve got to have power. The power of the Holy Spirit. The power promised by Jesus. The promise fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

You and I are indispensable in the mandate to take the message of Christ to the ends of the earth. The church is indispensable in God’s plan. As Len Deibert likes to say, this is God’s “Plan A” and there is no “Plan B.” We are indispensable, but useless apart from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. As it says in Zechariah 4:6: “Not by might nor by (human) power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty.

The power has been given. The power is available to us. To you and me. The Holy Spirit has been given to the church and to every believer in Christ. But the power will be unleashed in us only as we yield ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit and actually open our mouths in witness.

Because, you see, the power of the Holy Spirit is given for a purpose. It is given for witness. Witness to the gospel. Witness to the person and work of Christ and His power to save.

Harrison Ford played a Philadelphia police detective investigating a murder in the movie *Witness* (1985). The movie was set in Philadelphia and the beautiful Amish country of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. It was about a young Amish boy who witnesses a brutal murder in a restroom at the train station in Philadelphia. The boy identifies a corrupt narcotics cop played by Danny Glover as the murderer. Realizing they are all in danger, Ford, the Amish boy and the boy’s mother leave the city to hide out among the Amish in Lancaster County.

There is much more to the plot, but at the center of it all is this young boy, who was the only witness to the murder.

A witness is a person who can say: “This is what I saw.” Or: “This is what I heard.” Or: “This is what I experienced.” A witness is a person who can testify – as in a court of law – to what he or she knows to be true. Witnesses set forth what they have seen with their own eyes, what they have heard with their own ears, what they have experienced personally and thus know to be true. That is their role.

The first followers of Jesus were witnesses to Him in just this way. They could say of Jesus in a way we cannot: “We saw Him with our own eyes. We heard Him with our own ears. We were eyewitnesses of the things we declare to you.”

You and I can’t make the same claim they did. We weren’t there to see and hear and experience what they did. But you and I are witnesses nonetheless. And our witness is not merely second-hand. We don’t simply point back in history to a person who lived and died a long time ago, or to events which took place in the past. In our witness we point to the living Lord Jesus who is at work in the world today through the Holy Spirit. We bear witness to the Son of God and Savior of sinners who has changed our lives, set us free from our sin and guilt, and given us hope and joy and peace and power for living.

“You will be my witnesses,” said Jesus. “And I will give you the power you need.” The power of the Holy Spirit is for witness.

How does Jesus want us to bear witness to Him? William Barclay, the Scottish Bible scholar renowned for his commentaries on the New Testament, has written that “the real witness is not the witness of words but of deeds.” His point is that your life will speak more powerfully to others than your words. If there is a disconnect between our words and our life, our words will be of little or no effect. Barclay appears to be saying that if the witness of your life is consistent, it won’t be necessary to speak about Jesus and what He has done for us.

Barclay has a point. But he is only partly right. He is right that the witness of our lives is of enormous importance, because it is true that people are watching more often than they are listening. Words alone aren’t enough, especially if the witness of our words is contradicted by the witness of our lives. It won’t matter a bit how much we talk the talk if we don’t walk the walk.

The witness of your life matters. But so does the witness of your words.

I’ve quoted this famous statement by St. Francis of Assisi before: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

Here is the point: It *is* necessary to use words. It *is* necessary as God gives us opportunity, to give a verbal witness, if we are going to point people not to ourselves but to Jesus.

Remember what the Bible says in 1 Peter 3:15. I keep coming back to it again and again: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have (in Christ). But do it with gentleness and respect.”

Your life *and* your words. Both are essential to your witness.

Where does Jesus call us to be His witnesses? To the disciples He said: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8).

In other words, we are to be His witnesses right here in our community – this is our Jerusalem. We are to be His witnesses in our region and nation – that is our Judea. We are to be His witnesses in other cultures – that is our Samaria. And we are to be His witnesses in other nations, even to the ends of the earth. Wherever there are people who need to hear and respond to the gospel, that is where, in Jesus’ name, we are to be His witnesses.

Jesus is calling His church – His people – to be “world-class Christians” who understand, as Rick Warren says, that we have been saved for service and made for a mission.

What can we do to take part in the world-wide mission of the church? Let me suggest three things.

First, we can *pray*. Prayer, as I said at the missions program last night, is the motor or engine of missionary outreach. For some of us, we may have physical limitations that prevent us from involvement in some ways. But prayer is something all of us can do.

Pray for the spiritual harvest. Pray, as Jesus instructed His disciples in Matthew 9:38, for more workers to go out in Jesus’ name. Pray for the workers God has already sent into the field – missionaries like Ruth Benham at George Mason University, Mark and Nancy Smith in Arizona, Dan and Nancy Painter in France, Phil and Diane Thrash in Germany, Dan and Catherine Burns in Kazakhstan, Paul and Elizabeth Branch in Argentina, Randy and Martha H. in Malaysia, and Robby and Joyce Hamd in Lebanon..

Pray for open doors for fruitful witness. And for opportunities to witness in your life this week.

Second, we can *give*. Support missions with your gifts as well as your prayers. Never forget that the world-wide mission of the church costs money.

Third, we can *go*. Consider – seriously – the possibility that God may want you to go and serve Him on the mission field in another nation, to people of a different culture in a foreign land or even here in America.

I told you two weeks ago about my experience of coming to faith in Christ in my home church in Pennsylvania 40 years ago. In that little country church we probably had around 100 people in attendance on a normal Sunday. It was a small church, but there was a passion for missions in that church that was palpable.

Out of that little church have come several long-term or career missionaries, including:

- My brother Mark and his wife Nancy, who have been working with Native Americans in Arizona for more than 20 years now.
- A woman who has been serving in Honduras with a church planting team for the last 10-15 years.
- A married couple who spent 5 years as missionaries in Indonesia.

- Another couple who served several years in Indonesia and now use their gifts in ministry at the headquarters of their missions agency.

I think that is pretty remarkable for a small church. And I think: Maybe God wants to do that kind of thing with us here at Faith. This church has a commendable track record of sending and supporting both youth and adults in short-term missions. Praise God for that! I praise God that this is a missions-minded church.

But maybe God wants us to be more than a missions-minded church. Maybe God wants us to be a missionary-sending church and a missions-going church. Maybe God wants some of us to be longer-term missionaries as well as serving on short-term missions. Maybe God is calling *you*.

Would you think and pray about that?

Until the Great Commission becomes the “Great Completion” – until the world-wide mission of the church has been accomplished, we have a mandate to fulfill: To be Christ’s witnesses in the power of the Holy Spirit to the ends of the earth.

Lord, let it be so. To the glory of Your name. Amen.