

## Last Words

Acts 1:6-14

### Introduction – Review

We began our last discussion by looking at the promise of our Lord to His disciples that is found in the “Book of Action” or Acts, chapter 1. While the disciples stood on the mount of Olives with their resurrected Lord, with the wind twisting their garments and deep emotion tugging at their hearts, they heard their beloved Teacher deliver His final words.

#### The Promise!

Jesus told the disciples not to try to anticipate the timing of the coming of the kingdom, but to anticipate the coming of the Spirit. As we are told in Acts, chapter 1, verse 8a, He said,

*but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses . . .*

#### The Power!

Notice that Jesus did not tell the disciples, “When the Spirit comes upon you, you shall begin to witness.”

Jesus Christ is concerned with who we are before He ever commands what we do.

The church in America today is primarily ineffective, but not because it is not doing anything. The church today, in fact, is making more noise and is busier than ever, but is making very little forward motion. In the last ten years, there has been more information written on the creativity, organization, and procedure of the church than in the previous fifty

years. It has been the topic of news more often in the last few years than in the previous twenty-five. The church today has manuals on everything from telemarketing to group therapy.

If the average pastor were asked, “What does your church do?” the answer would be a long winded answer that might include everything from strategy schemes to mission statements. The next question might be, “Do you have any Excedrin?”

George Gallup said, a few years ago, “Never before has the church made so many inroads into society, and yet at the same time, made so little difference.”

#### The Person!

Much of the problem in the church today centers around the fact that one very important principle has been forgotten. We have forgotten who we are. We have mistaken motion for movement. We have replaced the Person with the program.

That is why I find it fascinating that Jesus Christ did *not* say, in verse 8, “but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall develop methods and strategies and purpose statements; you shall begin a door to door canvass; you shall begin an evangelistic campaign for the greater Jerusalem area . . .”.

#### The Priority!

Jesus said, in verse 8 of Acts, chapter 1, “There is a Person coming, and when the empowering Person descends [this is the priority], it happens to be a life-time occupation. When He comes,”

*. . . you shall be My witnesses . . .*

You might say, “Stephen, do you mean we’re not supposed to witness or campaign or canvass . . .”

No, I am not saying that. While we will have opportunities *to* witness, Jesus informs us that we are *to be* witnesses. Jesus is saying, in effect, “I’m giving you something altogether more demanding.”

You cannot go out on Thursday night or Saturday morning for an hour of visitation and say, “I did it.” You cannot put a fish on your bumper and say, “Wow, am I a testimony or what?” You cannot put a hundred bucks in the plate and say, “I did my part.”

Jesus Christ is telling us that we have a life-long occupation and that is, to witness.

Has it ever occurred to you that Jesus never told you to become salt and light? He never said, “Would somebody please volunteer for salt duty . . .?” In Matthew, chapter 5, verse 13a, He tells us,

*You are the salt of the earth . . .*

What does salt do? It creates thirst; it prevents decay; it cleanses; it flavors food. It is interesting that Jesus did not say we were sugar, although I wish we were sweeter.

I remember when I taught my kids how to eat oatmeal – not the pre-made kind, but the kind you boil and then let sit for awhile before adding a little butter and a pinch of salt. At first my kids did not want to eat oatmeal, “No way, yuck!” But then came the part my kids liked – where you lightly sprinkle brown sugar over the top, then add a little milk, and voila. They ate three bowls apiece. Why? It was sweet! They said, “Dad this is good. I can taste the sugar.”

You would not say, “I loved that meal because I could taste the salt.”

Unlike sugar, salt is good only in so far as it draws attention to the food. And by the way, salt is not for collecting, it is for sprinkling. What we happen to have in the church is a collection of salt. That is okay, as we are supposed to gather together and sharpen our saltiness. However, the world cannot be contacted from inside the church. As the title of one book reads, “We need to get out of the saltshaker and into the world.”

Jesus also never asked any Christian to consider becoming light! He said, in Matthew, chapter 5, verse 14a,

*You are the light of the world. . . .*

The purpose of light is to dispel the darkness so you can see your way. You, ladies and gentlemen, are salt and light. What you do flows out of who you are!

Now look back at the key word in Acts, chapter 1, verse 8. Circle the word in the middle of the verse – “*witness*”. It happens to be a key word throughout the “Book of Action”. It will appear in one form or another twenty-nine times.

This word “witness,” sweeps us into the drama of a courtroom. There is the gallery, the jury, the person standing trial, the prosecuting attorney, and the defense attorney. The courtroom drama is carried along by the cross-examination of the witnesses.

This word, chosen by God to represent who we are, implies that the Christian is a witness called to take the stand in a trial. Who is on trial? Jesus Christ. In this metaphor, the Defense Attorney is the Holy Spirit; the prosecutor is Satan. The world is the jury who must decide on the basis of the testimonies of the witnesses, as we testify to the truth of the Lord.

Now, let us play this drama out a little further. In any courtroom proceeding, one of the primary attempts of the prosecuting attorney is to discredit the testimony of the witness. How is that done? By discrediting the character of the witness. How that witness lives, talks, and acts outside of the courtroom has direct bearing on their testimony inside the courtroom.

Much of the church’s testimony is discredited in court by its lack of character. As Warren Wiersbe said so well, “The church that once told the world to repent is now being told by the world to repent.”

Jesus Christ is giving us the responsibility to live in such a way that our testimony as witnesses will not be discredited. The question becomes, “If you were called to take the stand today in the defense of Christ, would there be anything in the way you live that would hinder your credibility as a witness?”

### **Two ways to serve as a witness**

Let me suggest two ways to serve as a witness. You can serve as a witness:

1. through the way you live;
2. through the words you speak.

To ask me which way is more important would be like asking a pilot which wing on his airplane is more important. You need both. And, when it comes to

speaking, the words you speak must be carefully considered.

We, the witnesses of Jesus Christ, are living in a day that has become “post-Christian”. That is, the Bible and Judeo Christian values and ethics are no longer the standard. In fact, to begin a statement by saying, “The Bible says,” no longer commands respect or attention. According to research published in *The International Christian Digest*, in the 1930’s, 1940’s, and even the 1960’s, sixty-five percent of Americans respected the Bible as the standard of authority. In the 1990’s, barely thirty percent believed that the Bible is anything but a collection ancient legends and stories.

### **The Challenge of the First Century . . . and the Twentieth!**

George Hunter, the dean of Asbury Seminaries School of World Mission and Evangelism, wrote that the church today has several things in common with the early church, as we testify of Christ and the gospel. We can therefore, learn from them. Let us discuss several of the challenges faced then, as well as now.<sup>i</sup>

### **They faced a population with little or no knowledge of the gospel**

1. First, they faced a population with little or no knowledge of the gospel.

Our society does not know what it means to be washed in the blood of the Lamb or that they need to come to cross of Calvary.

When the man stood up on the *Phil Donahue* TV show a few years ago and shouted, “Jesus is the Answer,” the crowd responded with, “What’s the question?”

It is not enough today to slip a tract under someone’s windshield and think, “That’ll learn ‘em!” I am not saying that there is no power in the Word of God, I am simply saying that you cannot approach people today without the understanding that they do not even know the basics of what the Bible says anymore!

In a rather humorous way, David Jeremiah told the story of a Sunday School class. I found the same story in one of my library books. Let me read it to you.

*A pastor was teaching a class of Sunday School children, and he asked them, “Who broke down the wall of Jericho?”*

*A boy answered, “I didn’t do it!”*

*The pastor turned to the Sunday School teacher and asked, “Is this typical?”*

*She replied, “Pastor this boy is an honest child – I really don’t think he did it.”*

*Such a response really upset the pastor and he went straight to the Sunday School superintendent and told him what happened. The superintendent said “Well now, I’ve known the boy and his teacher for a number of years and just can’t picture either one of them doing such a terrible thing.”*

*In total disbelief, the pastor called an emergency deacon meeting and reported the entire story. After a moment of awkward silence, the chairman spoke up and said, “Listen, Pastor, just find out how much it cost and we’ll pay the damages.”*

In a previous generation, at least the major stories of the Bible were generally known by the public. Let me read a true story of the difference it made.

*During World War II, after Hitler had marched his way across France, demanding the unconditional surrender of the Allied forces in Europe, thousands of British and French troops dug in along the coast of northern France in a last-ditch effort to hold off the German forces. Trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk, they knew they would soon be obliterated by the Nazis.*

*British soldiers began sending a message across the English Channel. Just three words: “And if not.” Was it a code – some secret message? No. It was a reference to the Old Testament episode when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo stood before the pagan King’s fiery furnace and said, “Our God is able to save us, and if not, we will remain faithful to Him anyway.” As unbelievable as it seems today, that message was immediately understood by the British people. In the days that followed, fishing boats, pleasure cruisers, yachts, and rowboats set out from the shores of England, and rescued 338,000 Allied troops.*

Our generation would have never gotten the message. In fact, when you approach an unbeliever with the words, “God said in the Bible,” only one out of three Americans even knows what that means.

### **Their society was a pluralistic society with many gods and many religions**

2. Secondly, their society was a pluralistic society with many gods and many religions.

Twenty years ago, this would have been ridiculous to apply to America. It could have been said, “Sure there are other religions in America, but they can’t make inroads, we’re too solid. In America, it’s apple pie, Chevrolet, and God.”

Well, the first two have not changed, but now it is many gods.

Much of what is happening around us is coming at the same time the evangelical community of believers seems to be the least interested in doctrine. Doctrine divides; love unifies. Down with stuffy theology; down with the walls – up with love and unity, hugs and kisses, and down with all that theological stuff that divides.

This was evident as my wife talked to a lady recently. The lady said that she was a Mormon and was trying to be a good Christian. How does Mormon and Christian end up in the same phrase?

There is also evangelical Catholic. How did those two terms ever end up side by side? The Protestant reformers who protested the deification of Mary and the necessity of the sacraments for salvation must be rolling in their graves.

While our society at large seems interested in experimenting with spiritual things, at the same time the believing community is confused about true spirituality.

### **They faced a hostile society with the potential of persecution**

3. Thirdly, the witnesses of the first century faced a hostile society with the potential of persecution.

As Tim Downs explained, we, the Bible believing community, are becoming viewed as more and more radical, right wing, and politically incorrect. To hold to the Bible and publicly declare the truth of the Bible

will eventually reach the courts as another form of creating emotional distress.

I talked with a friend who is a staff pastor in one of our country’s leading churches, which has a radio ministry that emanates from the pulpit of that church. He told me, “Stephen, our ministry retains three lawyers just to handle the lawsuits brought against us by people who’ve taken issue with the Biblical content of our program, and who claim we have no right to say what we say.”

Eventually, we may have to say, “We will obey God rather than men, we will continue to preach and teach the Bible.”

How do you reach the first and the twentieth century???? Jesus Christ said, “You can’t!!!! So, I’m going to send my Spirit to empower you, so that He, through you, can.”

## **The Plan!**

Now, what is the plan????! The last part of verse 8 tells us. Look at that verse again.

*. . . and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, . . .*

(that is your own city or community),

*. . . and in all Judea . . .*

(that is reaching out further into your own country),

*. . . and Samaria, . . .*

(that is a different culture, yet it is on the same continent as yours),

*. . . and even to the remotest part of the earth.*

(that is every culture).

You might say, “But, wait a second, that’s really not the plan; that’s geography, not strategy!”

However, that is the genius of our God, who knew that strategies would come and go; that effective methods would change and develop. He simply said to “go.” And, through the empowering, enlightening Person of the Holy Spirit, you will develop your strategies – for your own town and for the cities of Brazil; through the hills of Tennessee and for the jungles of the Amazon; for the concrete jungles of New York and LA. He simply said to “go.”

### **Key clue to the plan – Matthew 28**

Now, His words in Matthew, chapter 28, give us a gigantic clue by giving us the product. In other words, if you want to know whether you are accomplishing the plan, take a look at the product. In Matthew, chapter 28, verse 19a, He said,

***Go . . . and make disciples . . .***

What is the product? Disciples; other witnesses.

You might ask, “But Lord, won’t that take a long time? Wouldn’t it be quicker to tell us to go and win souls; go out and elect conservatives?”

We are to make disciples.

The church in America has, for the most part, forgotten the plan.

We are to start in Jerusalem – that is home. Home is the toughest place to reach. The people know you; grew up with you; work with you. We are to start there. But, do not stop there!

At this time, we have nine hundred families in this church, which represents a little more than two thousand people. In one year, if each family reached just one person, we would reach nine hundred people. In six years, we would reach thirty thousand people. In eleven years, we would reach one million people. In one generation, we would reach the population of planet earth.

So, what is the response of the disciples? Go back to Acts, chapter 1, verses 9 through 11.

***And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, “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 modern day vernacular, this might be, “Why are you just standing there looking? He’s coming back. But remember, He told you to go to Jerusalem and wait. So, go back and wait.”

Continue to verses 12 through 13a.

***Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room . . .***

The words “upper room” in the original Greek, are one word which was used specifically for the study and prayer room of a rabbi. There is a good chance that a rabbi or even a member of the Sanhedrin, who had come to Christ following the resurrection, lent his study to these men.

Notice what they were doing. Look at verses 13 and 14.

***When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James, the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to . . .***

(. . . writing church growth manuals; discussing how they could make disciples in thirty days or less; writing their memoirs, “I knew Jesus personally; I was there when He went up!” . . . No, these all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to . . .),

***. . . prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.***

How simple! There was none of the baggage; none of the stuff that we get so carried away with. They just prayed.

Out of that prayer meeting would come men and women ready for Pentecost – when the Spirit of God would move in and impact that whole city for Christ. These were they who would turn their world upside down.

Where is your Jerusalem? Where is it that God has placed you, a witness on the stand, to testify in defense of the Lord through your life and with your lips?

During Vince Lombardi’s years at Green Bay, the Packers were humiliated by an opposing team. The Packers did everything wrong. The very next day at practice, Coach Lombardi stood up with a football and said, “Gentlemen, I’ve seen enough. We’re going to start over, right at the very beginning! The object I am holding in my hand is a football.”

One of the jokesters on the team reportedly said, “Please, Coach, don’t go so fast.”

The church must return to the basic truth. According to this passage, you are not a computer technician, salesman, executive, painter, secretary, or teacher – that is what you do. Instead, you are a witness; a person called to take the stand in the

courtroom of your influence, to testify for the name | and cause of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> Christianity Today, (Dec. 16, 1991).