

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (20-2-1994 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

You will be my witnesses
Acts 1:8
Additional Bible Reading: Luke 24:36-53

Introduction

Although the Apostles we read of in this book were unique, and have no successors today, in some ways we are called to carry on their tasks. They were commissioned to be witnesses; they laid the foundations of the church in that the church was built on their ministry and teaching. We are not laying the foundations of the church, but we, like them, are called to be witnesses to Christ. We have not known Him as they did, not having seen Him with our eyes or heard Him with our ears. Yet we do know Him, we are His and He is ours. His power has touched our lives and is continuing to do so. He has made all things new; we are not the men and women we once were.

As we consider Acts 1:8, we are going to apply it to our own lives. Some people have looked at this subject under three heads: (a) the Focus of our witness is Christ, (b) the Scope of our witness is the world, and (c) the Power of our witness is the Holy Spirit. We are going to consider the first and the third of these heads. The matter of scope, i.e. geography, can be summarized as witnessing in ever increasing circles. The early church were called to witnesses in Jerusalem, where they lived, then in Judea, the adjacent area, then further afield, Samaria, and places where they would encounter hostility, on to the ends of the earth. We equally have a responsibility, not only in personal activity but also by prayer and giving, for evangelising the whole world.

So we will focus on the Lord's requirement of us, and the Lord's provision for us, in the matter of witnessing.

The Lord's requirement of us

You will be my witnesses. In Isaiah 43:10, Israel was called to be God's witness in the world. Now in Acts, the Church of Christ is called to be God's witness in the world.

We are to witness to Him, not to ourselves, to a church or a denomination, to a certain preacher or set of ideas. This needs to be made clear, because many get no further than talking about their organization, or their own ideas. People want us to join their group, increase their numbers, support their society, and accept their doctrines. But the distinctiveness of Evangelical Christianity is that we are concerned to speak of Christ, and to urge men to be rightly related by repentance and faith to Him.

And there is no doubt where our emphasis will be – the eternal Son of God, the One through whom God has fully revealed Himself. We must point to His great work of Atonement and sin bearing on the Cross of Calvary. This was God's greatest work. We have a great Master, and a great message to bring to the world. We must point to Him as the only Saviour. He is not one of many religious options in our pluralistic society. There are not many paths up the mountain to reach God, only this one.

God requires three things of men – repentance, personal faith, and whole-hearted surrender of life and possessions. Eternal issues hang on a man’s response to Jesus Christ. He will be the judge at the end. The Christ to whom we bear witness is the Christ of the Cross, the Gospel, the New Testament, not the Christ of men’s theories and speculations and much modern theology.

But we must do more than just *bear* witness, we must *be* witness. Not advocates, but witnesses. Not heralds, but witnesses. In the deepest sense, we have to know what we are talking about. We are living proof of the message we preach. We must be clear we are saved and renewed. We are the trophies of what Christ has done and can do. Be a witness that there is peace with God, there is newness of life, that character can be changed, hatred can turn into love, lions turn into lambs. In Christ we can become better husbands, fathers, sons, wives, mothers, daughters, friends, employers, employees, neighbours, citizens.

Our lives should witness to the fact that it is possible to live wholly for Christ even in a world where materialism is so dominant. We must show that Christ can be found in trouble, He brings comfort in pain, calm and peace as we face an unknown future and prospect of death. We must witness to what we have known of Him, received from Him, and be able to say with the Psalmist, **Come and hear all you who fear God, and I will declare what he has done for my soul** (Psalm 66:16). Say with the Apostles, **We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard** (Acts 4:20).

Nothing is so effective when it comes to witnessing than personal testimony. When plied with questions and problems which we cannot answer, we can speak with conviction of the reality of Christ in our life. **One thing I know, though I was blind, now I see** (John 9:25). George Whitefield said, “I would not preach an unknown Christ for ten thousand worlds”. It was said that a mark of the Puritans was that they preached a “felt Christ”. Only what comes from the heart reaches the heart.

We witness effectively in proportion to the reality of our experience of Christ. If we have a present, living and growing trust in our Saviour, an up to date experience, we can speak with conviction.

The Lord’s provision for us

This enormous requirement that the Lord makes of us can appear daunting. We feel helpless, cowardly, acutely aware of the inconsistencies in our lives, what to say and how to say it. We also face the difficulties of the days in which we live, when there is little respect for the Christian faith, ignorance of the Bible, much modern religion has misrepresented the Gospel, and there are so many distractions. As yet we have unique opportunities. Because most people give the church a wide berth, the only way they are going to hear the Gospel is through individual Christians being witnesses.

Do you feel weak for the task? You are in good company – was there ever anyone more cowardly than Peter, and indeed the rest of the Apostles? Was anyone more dogged by pride and self-seeking than James and John? Did Paul not admit to weakness, fear and trembling? Think of the odds stacked against them – the vast religiosity and bigotry of the Jews, the intellectual power of the Greeks, the military

might of imperial Rome. They had this new religion about a crucified Jew being the hope of the world! They could not have looked more ridiculous.

There is great danger in meeting problems with the wrong answer. There is danger in finding all manner of substitutes for the Holy Spirit. Some put their reliance in orthodoxy and right doctrine. Certainly there is a crying need for right doctrine. Men need the truth of the Gospel. Men need the truth as it is in Jesus. But the truth on its own is not enough. Neither is it enough to be well organised and business like, though this is important in its place too. We must not rely on these things either. Similarly, techniques and skills in pastoral practice, stress on counselling, are all valuable in their place. A leader or minister with a good biblical background, and as much learning as he can take, helpful if he knows Christ history, and can read the Bible in original languages. Yet there are awful snares, temptations and perils attached to these things, men can become conceited because of their education and qualification – and rely on these things instead of the Holy Spirit.

Once a young pastor went confidently into the pulpit, proud and assured of his abilities. The service was a total disaster, and he left the pulpit feeling confused and humiliated. The verger said to him, “If you had gone into the pulpit the way you came out of it, you might have come out of it the way you went in.” In a sense, the better organized, the more gifted, the better qualified we are, the greater our danger, because we may use these things as a substitute for the Holy Spirit.

Not only must we have the right message, but we must also have the right method. To rely on anything other than the Holy Spirit will lead to failure. The Holy Spirit used all that Paul was, but Paul had to come to an end of himself first. Our testimony of God must be divine in origin, and also divine in operation. Human intellect and skill and eloquence cannot empower it. There is no point in holding up candles to help the sun to shine. No point in preaching Christ of Calvary unless we have the power of Pentecost. How often we try to do what only the Holy Spirit can do. We can be so afraid of Pentecostalism that we try to pass over the power of Pentecost, with its fire and flame.

The answer to our situation is the Holy Spirit of God, the third person of the blessed Trinity, the one for whom the disciples waited at the first Pentecost, who now dwells in every believer in Christ. The Holy Spirit distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. He reminds us that the Gospel is not only a creed and a moral code. He brings life, transforms character, he raises the sinner from death, imparts the life of God into man’s souls, makes him adequate for all God calls him to do and to be. Apart from Him, theology and organisation are bare skeleton and dry bones. Because of the Holy Spirit, God is not only with, among and through men, but He is in men. He burns the truth into our souls and writes it on our hearts.

The Holy Spirit can take and fill and use men who, by this world’s standards, are fools, and weak and despised. “All God’s giants are weak men who have done great things for God” (Hudson Taylor). They have reckoned on God being with them. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit has allowed them to delight in their weakness and insults and difficulties, because **when I am weak, then I am strong** (2 Corinthians 12:10). God has promised, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

When the Holy Spirit is allowed to fill and dominate, then He performs a transformation. Consider how cowardly Peter was made bold. The proud are made humble; fools are made wise, when God's love is shed abroad in their lives. He will sanctify and deepen our natural gifts, quicken our mental faculties in heavenly things. We receive a newness of consciousness of Christ, a new aliveness in prayer, and Christ's grace is more visible in our lives. New fruitfulness in service, abundant life and new power.

Is this a vision we have lost? Have we become so concerned about orthodoxy that we preach it powerlessly? The great need for churches and individuals is power. A powerful truth – but we are preaching it powerlessly. Power from God is our duty, our need and our privilege. The One who indwells must fill, dominate and control. We must become empowered men of God. Renounce self-management and hand ourselves over to God Himself. We possess by being possessed. All reservations have to go, that He might fill and control, that the fire of God might fall. He is not meant to be at our disposal – we are meant to be at His.

Lindsay Glegg once likened it to a man trying to sell a factory to a prospective buyer. He promised that he would have this and that put right before the handover. But it turned out that the buyer was not interested in the building – only in the site. He intended to pull down the old factory, and build on the site an electric generator, giving warmth, light and heat to thousands.

It doesn't matter who we are. Our personality is a site which the Holy Spirit wants to use. "Seek Him. Yearn for this power. And when the power comes, yield to Him. Let Him loose you and manifest His power in and through you" (Martin Lloyd Jones). **If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39).**