

1 "HIS LAST WORDS, HIS LAST WILL"

Acts 1:8

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

George Orwell, the renowned author of 1984 and Animal Farm, once wrote, "we have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men." In today's church, the obvious is revolutionary. Nothing is so poorly obeyed as the "obvious" commission of Jesus. When the obvious is restated and applied, the church is shaken at its foundations.

The commission of Jesus was stated in each of the four Gospels and in the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts is a continuation of the gospel narratives. It is written in chronological sequence and follows an easily discernible geographic pattern, a pattern specified in Acts 1:8: "Jerusalem...Judea...Samaria...the end of the earth." The Book of Acts may be divided into three segments (1-7, 8-12, 13-28), with the first segment showing how the early church continued in Jerusalem the work that Jesus had begun (Acts 1:1). The second part concerns Gospel progress in Judea and Samaria, and the last part "to the ends of the earth."

Verse eight of Acts one contains the last words that Jesus Christ spoke to His disciples just moments before His ascension to Heaven. The Gospels of Luke and John reveal that the first time Jesus met with His disciples following the resurrection He charged them to be witnesses to all nations. He repeated the charge at least once the same evening. He repeated it again later on the mountain in Galilee as recorded in Matthew 28. And now He is outside the city of Jerusalem, 40 days later, just before His ascension. Thus, the commission should be quite obvious to us. However, one practical question will reveal that we have actually paid it very little attention. *How much of what you do, think, say, or make impacts the whole world?* You see, Jesus was *intense* about *world involvement*, but *relaxed* about *methods*. *We reverse this!* We go to one conference after another on methods, but side-step the necessary involvement.

Jesus' command called for action. The Great Commission was never given just to be studied. It is a plan for action. In this study, we will merely examine it again, using Acts 1:8 as our foundation. But, the critical question is: Will you make yourself available at each step for the fulfillment of the Great Commission?

I. STRATEGY FOR GOSPEL ADVANCE

First, we see in this statement the *strategy* for Gospel advance. The strategy is contained in the word "witness." This is a cosmopolitan word with an overload of content. The original word is "marturia," which should inform us immediately that this is not a tame word. It is the word from which we get a transliterated English word, the word "martyrs." So, the lifestyle

pictured in this word is a risk-taking lifestyle. To be a "martyr-witness" is a life-and-death proposition.

Virginia Owens wrote, "Being a Christian is an extreme position, not a safe one. One doesn't follow Christ down the middle of the road toward respectability." One theologian who had begun to appreciate the "extreme position" of Christianity wrote, "Let us collect all the New Testaments there are in existence, let us carry them out to an open place or up on a mountain, and then, while we all kneel down, let someone address God in this fashion: 'Take this Book back again; we men, such as we are now, are no good at dealing with a thing like this, it only makes us unhappy.' My proposal is that like the inhabitants of Gadara, we beseech Christ to 'depart out of our coasts.'" These writers have begun to grasp the radical "martyr-witness" demand of Jesus.

Martyr, this word "martus," occurs over 30 times in the Book of Acts, and is one of the keynotes of the book. It informs us that we are to forget any thought of a "safety-first" lifestyle. A farmer took his dog hunting in the woods several miles from his house, only to discover that he had forgotten his lunch pail. He put his gun down and told the dog to stay by the gun until he returned. While the farmer was gone, a forest fire swept through the woods and the dog was killed. Later, the farmer found the dog's charred body beside his rifle. He sadly said, "I always had to be careful what I told that dog to do, because he would always do it." Christian friends, Jesus Christ wants us to be so concerned with doing what He says that *we forget about the forest fire.*

A biology professor expressed a matter-of-fact rule of science in class one day when he said, "Self-preservation is the first law of nature." A Christian student smilingly observed to him after class, "It's most interesting to see the contrast between nature and grace. Self-preservation may be the first law of nature, but self-*sacrifice* is the first law of *grace.*" He was right!

See the Calvary-sacrifice that is at the very heart of God's grace, and then be reminded that the first principle of Christian discipleship is in these words of Jesus: "If any man will come after Me, let him *DENY HIMSELF*, and *TAKE UP HIS CROSS*, and follow Me." To deny myself means that I say to myself what Peter said about Jesus when he denied Him: "I never heard of the man; I do not know the man." To "take up his cross" means that the Christian walks in daily death to his own will and wishes in order to follow Christ.

Bruce Morgan wrote, "The trouble with Christians is that nobody wants to kill them anymore." Eugenia Price echoed that thought when she said, "The greatest sin of the church is that it has TAMED Jesus Christ." The kind of witness which is called for in Acts 1:8 is quite apparently of such a nature that it gets us into constant trouble (but also produces in us constant joy, and is attended by constant miracles).

A meeting of hundreds of religious leaders from across America was held in which the agenda was, "How can we be used to turn this nation back to God?" Each attendant was given opportunity one evening to make a brief response to the question. One black leader arose and said, "Brethren, Christians in America will never again have the desired impact on this society *until they lose their fear of dying,*" and he sat down. Many in the meeting concluded that his may have been the best answer given by anyone present.

Years ago, a great missionary spokesman named Robert Wilder visited tiny Hope College in Michigan to bring a chapel message on world missions. He placed a large map of India in the front of a chapel and installed a metronome before the map. In the message, he declared that every time the metronome clicked, a soul died in India without ever having heard of Christ. That day, Christ and His world vision captured the heart of a young college senior named Samuel Zwemer. As the vision flamed in his heart, he asked God to place him in the hardest spot on earth.

In the course of time, he established residence on the Island of Bahrein in the Persian Gulf, at the very heart of the Islamic world community. This island was often identified in newscasts and newspaper reports of the recent "Gulf War." Zwemer began to print and circulate Gospel tracts in the Arabic language, though he hardly had the approval of the Islamic government of the island. In one week, Zwemer's two small daughters, ages four and seven, both died from illness and the oppressive heat. Samuel Zwemer asked the Bahrein officials for permission to bury the bodies of his two precious daughters on the island, but permission was refused on the ground that they were Christians and their bodies would contaminate the soil. Zwemer appealed and permission was granted—if he would dig the graves himself. He did so, and after the burial, he erected a marker which said, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive riches." This is the heroic, give-all-unto-death lifestyle Jesus called for.

One early missionary society sent 70 missionaries to the nation of Cameroon, the vital "hinge" between west Africa and south and south central Africa. (Incidentally, the Muslims are engaged in a concerted effort today to "capture" Cameroon.) Of the 70, 68 of them died on the field. The average life span of these 70 after arrival on the field was 1-1/2 years! Many of them actually shipped their coffins with them to the field, knowing that it was unlikely they would return! This is the heroic, give-all-unto-death lifestyle Jesus called for.

A family of missionaries went to China with a "faith missions organization" to proclaim the Gospel there. They went as public school teachers. They were there when the Tiananmen Square Crisis occurred. When they returned, they came back as typical furloughing missionaries—with a box of slides and a visual presentation of their work. "Have slides, will show" seems to be the universal motto of furloughing missionaries. When their presentation and explanation was concluded, a question-and-answer period was allowed. One church member stood and said, "Weren't you afraid you would die over there?" The calculated answer of the husband was, "No, because we *died before we went*." This echoes the word "martus," or "martyr-witness."

Charles Crowe, Methodist pastor, was driving around the Chicago Loop to his church one morning, as he had done many times before. The church building was renowned as having on its top the tallest steeple of any church building in North America, and on top of it was a large cross. On this particular morning, as Pastor Crowe passed in front of the building he saw a considerable group of people gathered on the sidewalk in front of the building, and they all were looking up. He leaned forward in his car and glanced upward to see what they were gazing at. He turned into the parking lot, parked his car in the "Reserved for Pastor" place, then hurried back around to the front of the building and joined those staring upward.

On top of the cross was a painter with a bucket of paint attached to his suit. He was buckled in place to the cross, and he was slowly painting his way down that metal cross. The cross perceptibly swayed against the sky with every movement he made. The people were watching his delicate and dangerous work. After a few minutes, Charles Crowe left the gathered crowd and started toward his office in the church. Suddenly the Holy Spirit seemed to say, "My child, you have driven that same route hundreds of times and never before was anybody on that sidewalk looking up at the cross. What made the difference today? Simply this: TODAY THE CROSS HAD A MAN ON IT! The world will always stop to see when a true man is really on the cross."

Today the world is saying to the church what Thomas in his doubt and ignorance said about Jesus, "Unless I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails ... I will not believe." They are looking for the unassuming sacrifice of a Christ-centered Christian, or they will not believe.

It would be well for us to pause a moment and remind ourselves of the only alternative to this Christian lifestyle. Jesus said, "Whosoever will save (protect, defend, preserve) his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." The first clause defines the safety-first, me-centered, save-myself-at-all-costs lifestyle. The second clause defines the investing, self-disinterested, other-centered, other-building, Christ-consumed lifestyle — the lifestyle of a Christian.

Two travelers were caught in a heavy blizzard in the far north. As they struggled against the storm, they came upon a man frozen in the snow and thought to be dead. One said, "I have enough to do to keep myself alive; I'm going on." The other said, "I cannot pass a fellow human being while there is the slightest breath left in him." He stooped down and began to warm the frozen man by rubbing him with great vigor. At last the poor man opened his eyes, gradually came back to life and animation, and walked along beside the man who had restored him to life. And what do you think they saw as they struggled along together? They saw the man who took care of his own safety— frozen to death in the snow. The "good Samaritan" had preserved his own life by the vigorous effort required to save the other man. The friction he had produced had aroused the action of his own blood and kept him alive. The rule never fails. "Whosoever (Christian or church) will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."

C. S. Lewis captured the adventure of the Christian life when he had this to say in a child's fantasy story entitled The Last Battle: "I'd rather be killed fighting for Namia than grow old and stupid at home and perhaps go about in a bath chair and then die in the end just the same." Friends, we are going to die one way or another. The Christian commitment is "that Christ may be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death."

To paraphrase Jesus, "Believer, you are my *evidence*, my *credentials*, my *arguments*, my *recommendations*, my *publicity*, my *advertisements*, my *commercials*." And, the Cross is at the center of any true representation of Christ. George Bernard Shaw asked, "Must a Christ be re-crucified in every generation because the world lacks imagination?" The answer to your

question, Mr. Shaw, is "Yes," and we are to be the unselfconscious lambs. "You are my martyr-witnesses." This is the strategy of Gospel advance.

II. SOURCE OF THE GOSPEL WITNESS

Second, we note the *source* of the Gospel witness. The source of the Gospel witness is seen in the threefold occurrence of the word "you." "*Ye* shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon *you*, and *ye* shall be witnesses unto me." The "you" and "upon you" are plural. The commission is given to the whole Body of Christ and is fulfilled by each member of that Body. You, dear Christian, are involved big-time in the strategy of Jesus. You are the source of the Gospel witness.

Note that the word "you" outnumbers the mention of the Holy Spirit by three to one in this verse. This certainly does not minimize His role; it *maximizes your responsibility*. Who is the "you"? Not angels, nor supermen, nor special people. The text identifies the "you" in the preceding verses. Verse 2 specifies them as "the apostles whom Jesus had chosen."

Friends, all the apostles were *men*. This does not minimize the role of women; it maximizes the responsibility of men. The Holy Spirit apparently anticipated the problem of Christian history, that men would tend to easily abdicate their responsibility and turn it over to women. So, today we have mission groups in our churches called "Women's Missionary Society." Thank God for concerned, Godly women; but this is primarily a man's responsibility! You see, if you capture a man, the God-appointed leader in society's basic unit, you stand an excellent chance of capturing everybody in his constituency; but if you capture one of his constituency first (wife, children), you may never capture the leader or any others in his constituency.

Early one cold Good Friday morning some years ago, the People's Church building of downtown St. Paul, Minnesota, caught fire. It was shortly after midnight and the fire department was hindered by the cold in its attempts to put out the fire. By the time they had adjusted, the building had burned to the ground. Early the next morning, church members and townspeople began to gather on the corner where the building was still smoking and the ruins smoldering. The building had been a kind of art museum for religious art, as well as a church building; and, thus, it was a popular spot for tourists.

Right behind the pulpit had stood a replica of "The Appealing Christ," an eight-foot-tall, gleaming white marble statue created by the Danish sculptor, Thorsvalden. As an aside, Stanley Jones, missionary to India, was on a tour of Copenhagen, Denmark, years ago, when the guide brought them to The Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen, where the original of the statue was kept. The statue pictures Jesus standing with face bowed to the ground, hands extended to the world. It is based on Matthew 11:28, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." As the group was leaving the church, the guide asked, "Did anyone see the Master's face?" Jones answered, "How could we? It is bowed down to the ground." The guide quietly answered, "That's the point, sir. If you would see the Master's face, you must first kneel at His feet!"

When The People's Church building burned, the statue fell with the floor and caved into the basement below. In the late morning of the following day, several men of the church secured permission to go down into the ruins and see if there were any valuables that survived the fire. They found the statue, streaked and charred, but unharmed except for a large chip out of the square base. They carefully cooled it down, and late that afternoon they picked it up and carried it out of the ruins and onto the street corner. They assigned six men to cordon it off so the passersby and observers would not damage it, then they went back down into the ruins to look again. When they returned to the corner a short time later, the crowd was no longer merely staring down into the ruins of the destroyed building. Instead, they were jockeying for position around the circle, all trying to get a look at the great sculpture.

May I spiritualize the illustration to make a crucial point? You see, Jesus had been *in* that church all the time, but He had been "chained to the pulpit," and the people on the street had never seen Him. It was only when the church caught fire (!) and the men of the church (!) picked Him up and carried Him out onto the street corner (!) that the "outsiders" saw Him for the very first time! You, Christian believer, are the source of the Gospel witness.

III. SUBJECT OF THE GOSPEL WITNESS

Then our verse points out the *subject* of the Gospel witness. Jesus said, "Ye shall be witnesses UNTO ME." Our witness is not to focus on a church, or a denomination, or a creed, or a doctrine, or a system. It is to focus on Christ. It is our happy privilege to present Him as He presented Himself in His Word, as Redeeming Savior (Acts 1:3), as Risen Lord (1:3), and as Returning King (1:11). What a fathomless Subject! What a captivating theme.

A painting on the wall of a German art gallery illustrates this part of our assignment. The picture shows Martin Luther, the great German reformer, preaching in the high pulpit of a German church. He has a Bible in one hand, is pointing a protruding finger with the other hand, and his mouth is open as if caught in the act of proclamation. He is preaching the Gospel. You see both preacher and audience. But, if you look closely, you observe a peculiarity. No one in the audience is looking at Martin Luther, the preacher! As you follow their gaze, you make a happy discovery. In the corner of the building, there is the dim but unmistakable form of Jesus, the Son of God—and every eye in the place is on Him. They are listening to Luther, but they are looking at Jesus! This is the desirable outcome of our witness for Christ. We proclaim Him, and He introduces Himself through our witness, so that the attention of the "listener" rests finally on Him.

IV. THE SCOPE OF THE GOSPEL WITNESS

The text also reveals the *scope* of the Gospel witness. Note carefully its closing words, "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me BOTH in Jerusalem, AND in all Judea, AND in Samaria, AND unto the uttermost parts of the earth." So, the *near* people are our assignment—"Jerusalem"; the *neighboring* people are our assignment—"Judea"; the *neglected* people are our assignment—"Samaria" (Samaria represents the people of your worst prejudice); and the *next* people are our assignment—"unto the uttermost part of the earth." And note carefully that it is not "either/or" with regard to these people, it is "both/and." Jesus Christ seriously expects us to take on the

whole wide world! How? By learning and following the disciple-making strategy by which we *see the masses through the man*, and *build the man to impact the masses*—the strategy Jesus followed with His Twelve.

The Book of Acts is one of the few books in the Bible that conveniently outlines itself. Chapters one through seven reveal the witness of the early disciples in Jerusalem; chapters 8 through 12, in Judea and Samaria; and chapters 13 through 28, "unto the uttermost parts of the earth."

*The real measure of the power and effectiveness of a local body of Christ is: How far does its influence reach? **God seriously expects the local church to take on the whole world!*** After all, Jesus did it with twelve men, and He did it before telephones, televisions, telethons, and tel-electronics. He only had *tell-a-person!* Yet, He impacted the civilized world of that day through His small, rag-tag group of men.

Today, we tend to think that we must win our communities at home before we give the attention He commanded to the world. But that order is reversed. "The light that shines farther necessarily shines brightest near home." Every church should be plotting constantly how it can get the Gospel to as many places in the world as quickly as possible; and its goal should be to build world-visionary disciples who will impact the entire world to the ends of the earth 'til the end of time. God said, "Ask of me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession" (Psalm 2:8). Then why do we *not* have the heathen for our inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for our possession? The only possible reason is, *we are not asking!* Quite apparently, the church-at-large does not have on its heart what God has on His heart. What about your church? What about you?

Note, too, that the verse says, "both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." It is not "either/or," it is "both/and." We are to be witnessing in all these places at once, and we are to have them all on our hearts. How? By building a vision for the whole world, and then by building individuals to implement that vision. The scope of our assignment is the whole world.

V. THE SECRET OF THE GOSPEL WITNESS

Jesus' words reveal, finally, the *secret* of the Gospel witness. "Ye shall receive power," He said, "after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you." Note the title, "Holy Ghost." Most Christians prefer the better translation, "Holy Spirit," and for obvious reasons. I like the term, "Holy Ghost," for one reason. We think of a ghost as the part of the person who remains when the body has departed—and that's Who the Holy Spirit is. The best simple way to think of the Holy Spirit is as Jesus without a body. The Holy Spirit is essentially Christ's Replacement in the earth, doing what He did, and carrying on His work.

A little boy said to his mother, "Mama, how does God make it rain?" Then, as an afterthought, he answered his own question: "Oh, never mind, I already know. He gets the Holy Spirit to do it. After all, He does all the work!" The Holy Spirit is the Executive Person in the Godhead. Today, He does all the work!

Then think of the word "power." The Greek word for power is the word "dunamis," and we all know that we derive our English word "dynamite" from that Greek word. However, that association creates a significant problem for us. We associate the word "dynamite" with something highly explosive; and, thus, we tend to expect a highly explosive experience of God's power as representative of Jesus' promise. The problem is two-fold: one, there is no highly explosive experience in the Gospel; and two, the Greeks didn't have dynamite! Dynamite was invented by Alfred Nobel (of Nobel Prize fame) in 1866! To translate the word "dunamis" by our English word "dynamite" is likely to be misleading, causing Christians to seek a "boom" experience instead of allowing the Holy Spirit to produce the efficiency of character and vocation which marked the life and ministry of Jesus.

The power of Acts 1:8 is the power of character transformation, the power of illumination, the power for communication, the power for steady action. It is power *to* witness, as well as power *in* witnessing. Someone defined character power as "the forceful expression of personality," and this is a good definition of God's power. It is the forceful expression of God's personality. It may take the form of a cataclysmic display, but it is far more often expressed as *persuasion* deep within a person's character, and *conviction* that impacts him and others around him. The works of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus—conviction (John 16:7-11), illumination (John 16:13-16), communication (John 15:26), and world impact (Acts 1:8)—fall far more into the area of dynamic persuasion than the area of demonstrative "boom" experiences.

Note that this power is "received." "Ye shall *receive* power." It is not achieved; it is received. It is not attained; it is obtained. No great talent is required to receive a thing. Both rich men and paupers may receive something that is offered. Presumably, one simply takes it. God is eager to give you the power of the Holy Spirit—but only on His terms and only for His purposes. He has commanded you to be filled with the Holy Spirit, the Person who is God's power.

I John 5:14 says: "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us." Since He has commanded us to be filled with the Spirit, we may be confident that this is His will. Thus, we may expectantly ask Him to fill us with His Spirit and simply receive His Fullness. Then we may confidently know that the Person of the Holy Spirit is always "traveling with us" as we live to fulfill the Great Commission of our Lord.

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