

Faith That Changes the World

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- [0:00] Every time we have an opportunity to focus on the call of the church to bring the gospel to the nations. So this is a wonderful theme. But the whole idea of world mission presupposes that we have something worth sharing.
- ! And that presupposes a certain understanding of what we mean by the word Christian or Christianity. What do we mean when we talk about the Christian faith?
- What is it that we're sharing? If you ask most people in a place like D.C. what is Christianity, you'll hear a variety of images. Some people will say, well isn't it just kind of like a therapeutic tool?
- Sort of a coping strategy when life gets tough? Spiritual resources. Some people associate the word Christianity with an outdated morality, with superstition.
- Back when people believed in the supernatural, before science and the enlightenment. At worst, people will think of Christianity in association with judgmentalism and bigotry and partisan politics.
- [1:08] So why would any of that be worth sharing with the world? When we hear these images of Christianity, they bear very little resemblance to the electrifying, world-changing force we encounter in history.
- The Christianity that, for instance, completely transformed the Roman Empire from the inside. The Christianity that birthed the hospital and the university.
- Completely reshaping how we care for the sick and pursue truth as a society. The Christianity that has inspired some of the greatest art and music and literature ever created by human beings.
- The Christianity that stands as one of history's most powerful engines for justice. Ever observed. Challenging oppression.
- And resisting totalitarian regimes. And abolishing the slave trade. And advancing civil rights. And defending the unborn. And caring for the poor and the immigrant.
- [2:14] And laying the foundation for universal human rights in the West. Or the Christianity that has compelled millions of men and women to give up everything comfortable and familiar.
- And to move to places and to love and serve people they've never met. In order to bring the gospel to them. These two images of Christianity don't even seem like the same religion.
- And I would go a step further. They're not the same religion. So what do we mean when we talk about Christianity? What is this dynamic world changing force that we have seen at work throughout history?
- What makes it possible? Whenever we see this kind of Christianity at work. It is always characterized by the three same features. And these three features were present from the very beginning.
- We fortunately have an eyewitness account of the birth of this movement. Recorded in the book of Acts. By a physician named Luke. And in his record, Acts chapter 1.

[3 :17] We see these three features emerge that came to define this world changing movement. We now know to be the Christian faith. So we're going to look at this passage together.

And let's pray that God helps us understand what he's trying to say. Lord, we thank you for your presence. We thank you for your love and your grace that come into our lives in abundance.

And now we pray that in that love and grace you would illuminate your word. Open our hearts to receive it. That you would speak to us and tell us what you have for us this morning, Lord. And that we would be receptive and responsive as we put ourselves under your word.

We pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen. Amen. So the first characteristic we see when we begin to read this account in the book of Acts. From Luke to Theophilus.

Giving him a record of the events of the birth of the church. Is this. We see that the true world changing dynamic force of Christianity. Is marked by a living hope in the risen Christ.

[4 :18] It's marked by a living hope in the risen Christ. One of the things that we need to understand is that in the decades before. And after the coming of Jesus. There were dozens of people who claimed to be God's Messiah.

This was not unique to Jesus. There were dozens of messianic movements. And in every case the same thing happened. A messianic leader would emerge and gather a bunch of followers and make lots of promises.

That leader would eventually be captured. That leader would eventually be killed. And Rome didn't take kindly to that kind of thing. And then after that leader's death the same thing would invariably happen.

The movement would kind of putter along for a little while. And then it would collapse. And everybody would go home. And that would be it. And that happened over and over and over and over.

With one exception. After Jesus was crucified. Not only did the movement continue. It exploded. It exploded in a way that has baffled historians ever since.

[5 :29] Somehow a tiny low class rabble of social outcasts. And miscreants. And former slaves. Over a period of about 200 years. Grew into a movement that completely transformed the known world.

There were miraculous works. There were mass conversions of thousands at a time. There were old class structures were demolished. Old prejudices were broken down.

The rich became willing and eager to serve and care for the poor. Not through government assistance programs. Those didn't exist. Out of their own pocket. And these Christians had such a dramatic impact on the known world.

That one of the Roman emperors. Who disliked them very much. Reluctantly had to admit. These are the people who are holding our empire together. In other words.

Christianity in the first few centuries. Does not behave like a movement. Whose leader has been executed. It behaves like a movement where the leader is more alive than ever.

[6 :38] In verses 1 through 3. Luke writes. In my former book. Theophilus. He's referring to the Gospel of Luke. That's volume 1. The Gospel of Luke. In my former book.

I wrote about all that Jesus began to do. And to teach. What's the implication? In this book. I'm going to write about all that Jesus continues to do. And that's exactly what the book of Acts is all about.

Luke tells us that after the resurrection. Jesus presented himself to them. And gave many convincing proofs. That he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days.

And spoke about the kingdom of God. Christianity as a dynamic. World changing force. Is based on a living hope.

In the risen Christ. In other words. It's based on the belief that the resurrection is not a myth. It's not a pleasant idea. It's not superstition. It's based on the fact that there is strong compelling evidence.

[7 : 35] That the resurrection is a historical fact. And that makes all the difference. Because if Jesus is dead. There's no difference between Jesus and any other religious leader.

Just pick the one you like the best. Or pick none of them. It doesn't really matter. If Jesus is right now alive. If Jesus is somebody who has overcome death.

That makes him the most important person in all of history. And that means it's all true. That means everything he said is true. And that means that Christianity alone.

Is true in a way that no other religion is. The prophet Muhammad did all he was ever going to do before he died. Buddha did all he would ever do before he died.

Joseph Smith did all he would ever do before he died. But what Luke is saying here. Is that what Jesus did before his death. Is only the beginning. It's only the beginning.

[8 : 41] How has this movement. Started by Jesus. Had such a dramatic impact. On the world. It's because Jesus continues to lead this movement. Up to this very day.

So real Christianity. The kind of Christianity. That changes lives. This high octane muscular steel spined Christianity. Is driven by a living hope in the risen Christ.

I remember years ago. Hearing the head of a very prominent well known. Christian denomination. Here in our country. And very well represented here in DC. I remember hearing an Easter sermon.

Preached by this head of this prominent denomination. And the point of the message was this. It doesn't really matter whether Jesus actually rose from death. What matters is whether or not he's risen in our hearts.

Meaning what matters is that we continue in his teachings and traditions. With all due respect. Have you ever heard anything more uninspiring.

[9 : 43] In your whole life. I mean can you imagine saying that. To the Christians in Rome. Who were risking their lives. To care for the victims of the plague.

Who had been abandoned by their own families. And these Christians would go in and care for these plague victims. And in many cases the plague victims would get better. And the Christians would get sick and die.

Do you think they were compelled to do that because of tradition? Tradition can't even get you up in the morning out of bed. There's nothing inspiring about tradition. Right.

Nick Kristof. Not a Christian. Occasionally writes about Christians. And he wrote an article a few years back in the New York Times. And he observes in this article that he says wherever he goes.

Anywhere in the world. Where there is the greatest suffering. Places where everyone else has pulled out. All the NGOs. They've all pulled out. Even the local governments have pulled out.

[10 : 42] He says you always find Christians. Christians. Now why do you think that is? It's not because of tradition. It's because if you believe that Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death.

And you believe that through him we can overcome sin and death. And that one day we will be risen like he was risen. That means we have nothing to fear. And guess what?

That's something the entire world deserves to know about. That's the kind of thing that makes you get up and leave. And move halfway around the world. Because if that is true. Then everybody needs to know it.

It's the most important message there is. With all due respect. Christian tradition without the risen Christ. Is a religion for the dead and the damned.

And it has very little to do with real Christianity. Real world changing Christianity is driven by a living hope in the risen Christ. The second thing we see in this passage.

- [11:45] The second marker of a vibrant empowered movement. Is that it is marked by a total dependence on the Holy Spirit. A total dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Verses 4 and 5. On one occasion while Jesus was eating with them. He gave them this command. Do not leave Jerusalem. But wait. Wait for what? For the gift my father promised.

Which you have heard me speak about. For John the Baptist. Baptized with water. But in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Now friends. I find this very surprising. Because if anyone seems ready for mission. It's these guys.

These are Jesus' disciples. Now become apostles. They're witnesses to the risen Jesus. First hand. They had heard his teaching. And sat under his teaching. For his entire earthly ministry.

- [12:45] Many of them. And yet Jesus insists. Don't go yet. Why not? Well I think the point is very clear here. Because knowledge is not enough.

Passion is not enough. I mean Peter had passion. He had more passion than any of us. Not enough. Cultural influence. Money.

Strategy. Technique. Not enough. Mission requires power. And that power comes from the Holy Spirit.

And friends. This is another difference. Between the kind of weak. Anemic. Therapeutic. Christianity. And the Christianity that changes the world. The difference is the power of the Holy Spirit.

All of the great revivals throughout history. The Celtic revival. Of the 5th through 7th century. The Great Awakening. The East African revival. Of which by the way. We are direct spiritual beneficiaries.

- [13:47] The Chinese house church movement. The explosion of faith in the global south. You know that now. The vast majority of Christians. In the center of Christian activity. Is not in the west. It's in the global south.

Places like Asia. And South America. And Africa. Right? 70% of the world's Christians live there. So we're the outliers. It's because of a movement of the Holy Spirit.

None of these things are the result of personalities. Or programs. Or techniques. These are movements of the Holy Spirit. What this means is that the church. A Christian community. Is much like a sailboat.

The sail has to be filled with wind. In order to go anywhere. Or do anything meaningful. If you've ever tried to push a sailboat.

It doesn't go well. We can't control the wind. But we can have some control over the sail. Is it up? Is it aligned?

- [14:42] Right? So in order to go anywhere. You have to put up the sail. And you have to align it with the wind. So that you can catch the wind. You can be filled by the wind. When it blows. That's how we are called to think about the Holy Spirit.

You know. Charles Spurgeon is among the greatest preachers who ever lived. His ministry and the ministry of his church. Transformed literally thousands of lives. And so a lot of people would visit him.

Wanting to learn from him. And a group of young ministers. Just getting started in their ministry. They visited him. At his church. Because they wanted to learn his secrets. They wanted to learn the secret to his success.

And so they get there. And Spurgeon says hey. And he shows them the big beautiful sanctuary. And then he says hey. Let me take you downstairs. I want to show you the boiler room. And the ministers are confused.

This is back in the day. When steam was the thing that powered everything. And so the boiler room. Boiler room was where that steam would be generated to power everything in the building. But boiler rooms tended to be very unpleasant places.

- [15:48] They were hot. They were dirty. They were down in the basement. And these ministers were really confused and put off. They're like we don't want to see the boiler room. What are you talking about? You know they're here for preaching advice. They're here for strategy.

They want the technique. They want like what is the secret sauce of the Spurgeon ministry that's making all of this happen? How are you impacting all these people and growing so rapidly and changing so many lives? And you know maybe they would learn how to write better sermons.

But Spurgeon insists. No I really want to show you the boiler room. So they say okay. And then they go downstairs. And Spurgeon leads them down into the basement. Opens the door.

And they see about a hundred people sitting there in prayer. And Spurgeon smiles. And he says this is my boiler room. Whenever Spurgeon was asked about the secret of his ministry.

He always replied the same way. It's because our people pray. Our people pray. So in other words he would say it's not about Spurgeon at all.

- [16:50] It's not about. He was a great preacher. But it's not about the preaching. It's not about the strategy. It's not about the technique. He says all of this that you see is a work of the Holy Spirit. And it happens because my people pray.

What are they doing? They're putting up the sales. They're aligning the sales with the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit is coming in and filling those sales. And propelling that ministry forward. That's how it happens.

So the work that Jesus has given us to do is a spiritual work. And it requires spiritual power. If we want to see human hearts turn toward God.

If we want to see relationships healed and restored. If we want to see human beings becoming more fully human. Those are things only the Holy Spirit can do.

You know we often think of prayer as something that we do before the real work begins. But if we understand what this is saying. It means that prayer is the real work.

- [17:50] Prayer I would argue is our primary job. And everything else is subordinate to that. And everything else is subordinate to that. If we believe that. For those of you who do believe that.

I want to specifically and very clearly ask you right now. To commit to praying for a movement of the Holy Spirit in our congregation. This is something that some of us have been praying for for a while.

And I know a number of you are already praying for this. But I would love to see all of us praying. I would love to see a boiler room of prayer and intercession. Made up of everybody in this room.

You know that we can't fit in a basement room downstairs. Because there's too many people who want to be a part of the prayer group. I want to call us as a church. We're at a very pivotal moment in the life of our church.

We keep talking about this move to Shaw. It's really a move to a city center location. And it's going to enable us to continue to do a lot of the things. That we're already doing. But it's going to greatly expand what we're able to do.

[18:52] But yet if we rely on that. If we think it's about the building. Or we think it's about the neighborhood. Or we think it's about a new vision that we've laid out. That we've completely missed the boat. Nothing will happen of any consequence.

Unless the Holy Spirit does it. Let's please commit to praying for that. A movement of the Holy Spirit. Pray that your pastor would become more charismatic. Pray for me.

Pray for me. I didn't grow up in that tradition. I'm baby stepping my way in. Baby steps Bob. I'm baby stepping my way in. Please pray for me.

I've had experiences of the Holy Spirit. Enough distinct experiences to shift and convince me of the power and potential of the Holy Spirit. But I need more.

And I pray for you. Please pray for me. Pray for the pastoral team. Because we need it.

[19:51] So real world changing Christianity. It is animated by a living hope in the risen Christ. It is empowered by a total dependence on the Holy Spirit.

And then finally. It is marked by an outward facing commitment to gospel witness. An outward facing commitment to gospel witness. It says.

Then they gathered around him and asked him. Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel? Can you imagine what Jesus might have been tempted to say?

Now he's perfect. He's risen. He's glorified. Maybe he wouldn't have the same temptation as many of us. I can imagine him just. Really? Right? That's your question?

Right? After all they've seen and heard. They still think that the only reason or the main reason Jesus has come. Is to make Israel great again. And so Jesus gently rebukes them.

[20:50] He says. You know. It's not for you to know the times or dates the father has set by his own authority. In other words. God has a plan for Israel. And it's going to happen in his own time. But here's what you need to focus on.

He says in verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. And in all Judea and Samaria.

And to the ends of the earth. And as he says this. We need to imagine concentric circles. Jerusalem's where they are now. And then if we go out. The broader region is Judea. And okay.

Judea. That still makes sense. But then all of a sudden we're getting into Samaria. Well these are dirty. Unclean. Impure. People. That we didn't think God had anything to do with people like that. Okay. Well that's making us really uncomfortable.

And then we go out another constituent. And then he says to the ends of the earth. And by this time they're all looking at each other like what? And this is not just a map.

[21:47] It's a theological statement. God's mission moves outward. God's mission moves outward. It crosses ethnic boundaries.

It crosses geographic lines. It crosses cultural boundaries. It crosses moral boundaries. The gospel is not meant to stay near the center.

Or to serve those at the center. It is meant to expand outward. It's the only thing it knows how to do. And so he's essentially saying. If you want to keep in step with the gospel.

If you want to align yourself with the movement of the Holy Spirit. Then you need to move outward as well. I think there's a necessary correction that we need to hear.

Churches constantly face the temptation to turn inward. All churches. All communities. Face the temptation to organize ourselves.

[22 : 48] Around prioritizing our own needs and our own preferences. And to shape church life around what feels comfortable and familiar and convenient.

It's human nature. It happens in every church. The path of least resistance is to do this. Right? But that has never been the purpose of the church.

That is not why the church exists. The church does not exist for itself. The church exists for the sake of the world. The church exists for the sake of the world.

And this is one of the clearest differences. Between a kind of anemic therapeutic Christianity. And a real world changing Christianity. Is because therapeutic Christianity says.

I want church to be easy. I want my needs to be met. I want good care. I want good programs. But please don't ask too much of me. Don't make it costly.

[23 : 50] Don't make it uncomfortable. Don't make it inconvenient. Now compare that to the Christianity that actually changes the world. Compare that to St. Patrick.

Who returned voluntarily as a missionary to Ireland. The land of his former captors. Because he believed the gospel was worth more than his personal safety. Compare that to the Christianity of the Moravians in the 18th century.

Who launched one of the most sacrificial missionary movements in history. You know some Moravians voluntarily sold themselves into indentured servitude. So that they could share the gospel.

And live among enslaved people. Compare that to Lillian Thrasher. Who went alone to Egypt in the early 1900s. With no guaranteed funding.

And founded the first orphanage in the country. And trusted daily prayer to provide food and medicine and protection for hundreds of children. Compare that to the pastors of the Zion House Church Network in China.

[24 : 53] Who are right now sitting in prison for their faith. These people all understand that the church exists for the sake of the world.

It exists for the sake of the world. So for us. There's a real inflection point for us. How do we think about and understand our mission?

What is the why behind our presence here? What will the why be when we move in a few weeks? What is the why? Why do we get up? Why do we drive? Why do we worship? Why do we show up and serve?

Why do we do anything at all? What's the why? Who's it for? Or is it all just for us? So that it can make our lives easier? So that it can be a source of comfort and community? All that is great.

But is that really the why? Or do we understand, like the apostles, that Jesus has also commissioned us through them? We stand in the same tradition.

[25 : 52] So when we move, we will be a city-centered church. But we need to have a similar theological geography. We're called to be his witnesses, right?

In Shaw. In Northwest DC. In all the DMV. And to the ends of the earth. In many ways, we are blessed and fortunate that many people from the ends of the earth come and live in the DMV.

So we should pray and hope and desire to become more international in the people that we're able to reach here. But what this also clearly means is that we should be compelled by the gospel, if we want to be an Acts chapter 1, verse 8 church, to support and encourage international missions.

This is why we support missionaries. This is why we support missionary organizations. This is why we pray for missionaries and pray for mission in the global church. In many ways, friends, our church should do so more than other churches because we are direct beneficiaries of that missionary tradition.

There was the East African revival that happened in Africa. It was one of the lesser-known revivals, but it produced an incredible outpouring of conversion and movement of the Holy Spirit.

[27:10] At some point, the gospel was brought to Africa by missionaries, but then it took root there. And it became a distinctly African Christianity. And then we have the East African revival, and that grows up.

And one of the main churches impacted by that was the Anglican church. Guess who supported the planting of this church by providing spiritual oversight?

The Anglican church in Rwanda. Guess where I was originally ordained as a priest? In the Anglican church of Rwanda. We are the result of a missionary movement toward the West because at some point, the locus of Christian activity shifted.

The locus, the core of the church, the heart of the church is no longer in the West. And at some point, these African Christians began to look over at the United States and began to say, well, that's the mission field now.

And so they began to see and support churches like ours as missionary outposts to re-evangelize the West. So we are direct beneficiaries. It has come full circle.

[28:10] How can we not prioritize and support and encourage international missions when there are so many millions and millions of people in the world who have yet to hear the gospel, who live in unchurched, unreached places?

So this is why it's a priority for us. And the reason is because we're committed not to the therapeutic, anemic Christianity that many people think of, but to the dynamic, world-changing Christianity of history and, I would argue, of Scripture.

Marked by a living hope in the risen Christ, a total dependence on the Holy Spirit, and an outward-facing gospel witness. Let's pray. Our Lord, we thank you, and we pray for your Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit. And we pray that all that we say, that we wouldn't even care about it because of anything in us, that we would be so filled and animated by your Spirit that we would be compelled by your Spirit.

Lord, that there would be no greater joy than to throw ourselves, than to realize the truth of... Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

[29:23] Lord, that we would see our purpose is to pour ourselves out for the sake and for the life of the world. Lord, we pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Amen.