

You Are The Evidence

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[0 : 00] I'm a very fortunate man to be called by Jesus Christ to serve as a pastor of this church at this time. I'm a very fortunate and very happy man. I've chosen as our text of Scripture for this World Communion Sunday, Acts chapter 1, verses 1 through 11. In the text, Luke, the author of the book of Acts, records a saying of Jesus which is at once challenging and liberating. It's challenging because of what it calls us to be for Christ in the world.

It's liberating because of what Christ promises to do to enable us to be what He calls us to be in the world. Will you now give attention to then this challenging and liberating word from God, Acts chapter 1, verses 1 through 11.

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day He was taken up after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive after suffering by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, Jesus commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, which He said, You have heard from Me, for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, Lord, is it at this time that You are going to restore the kingdom to Israel? And Jesus said to them, It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the remotest part of the earth. 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 they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing. Behold, two men in white clothing were sitting beside them. And they said to them,

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. Spirit of the living God, you inspired Luke to write these words many years ago. We've heard them many times. And I pray now that in Your mercy and grace, You will take these words off the page, and You will make them come alive in our hearts and our minds as never before. For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[3 : 01] Let me ask you a question. I first encountered it in a poster on the wall of Logos Bookstore in Westwood. It goes like this. If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Arresting, isn't it? Imagine that it became illegal to practice the Christian faith in this city. And imagine that the secret police followed you around for a week or two, tape recording all of your conversations, videotaping all of your activities. Imagine that during your trial, those tapes were then played for the court. Imagine that the court also subpoenaed members of your family, members of your neighborhood, their students to come and testify against you in your trial. Would the court find in the tapes and personal testimonies enough data to convict you of belonging to and following Jesus Christ? If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Now, as good a question as that is, it misses the point. It's off target, which is why it finally does not motivate us.

What Jesus says in Acts 1-8 changes the question. Here's the situation. For 40 days after His death and resurrection, Jesus met with His disciples. Forty days. Oh, I wish I could have been part of that. Imagine a 40-day retreat alone with Jesus Christ in intimate fellowship with the living Savior, where He could teach and preach and unpack His gospel of the kingdom. I was thinking this week, I wish we had a record of what Jesus said during those 40 days. What we need is Charlotte Hopkins or Paul Hadley, these super clerks of session who could record all of the activities there of that retreat.

I would have liked to know what Jesus said about the kingdom and the cross and the kingdom and the resurrection and the kingdom and the Holy Spirit. I'm sure He unpacked all of that. At the end of that 40-day period, the disciples finally ask a question. They say, Lord, are you now at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Jesus answers, it's not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has set by His own authority.

That's a polite way of saying, that's none of your business, disciples. He then states, what is their business? You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in the world. I like how Earl Palmer restates Jesus' words. Jesus says, I am in management, you're in sales. Leave the future to me. In the present, you're going to be my witnesses. I want to focus on the word witnesses. The word Jesus uses here is a legal term taken from the law court. Why use this term here? Why bring in the language and imagery of the law court?

[6 : 20] And what does this have to do with the question about Jesus bringing in the kingdom? Answer, Jesus is on trial. The claims He has made about Himself, especially the claim that in Him and because of Him the long-awaited kingdom of God is breaking into the world, puts Him on trial.

Can He substantiate His claims? Can He demonstrate that His claim is true? You can see then why I said the question on the poster is off target. Yes, Christians are on trial, but only because Christ is on trial. Whenever a Christian is on trial for being a Christian, the one who is really on trial is Christ. The book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul awaiting trial in Rome, and many scholars think that Luke wrote both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts to help prepare Paul's defense. Luke-Acts is a kind of legal brief. It's argued that Theophilus, the one to whom both of the books were addressed, might have been a lawyer assigned to Paul's case to defend him before Caesar. But as you read the rest of Luke-Acts, this legal brief, you'd soon discover that in the final analysis, Paul is not the one on trial. Yes, he's the one standing in the dock. He's the one in the courtroom. But he stands there only because of his allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is Jesus himself who is being tried. He, not Paul, is the issue of that trial.

So the question is not, if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? The question is, if Jesus were on trial for being the saving Lord of life, would there be enough evidence to convict him? Which is why Jesus speaks the way he does at the end of that 40-day period. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses. He is saying, look, I have a much more important task for you than speculating about the time of the final in-breaking of the kingdom. I've made claims about myself that put me on trial before the world. I need witnesses. The court is rightly going to ask for concrete evidence that I am right. And you, you, you will be the evidence in Jerusalem and Samaria and Judea and to the ends of the earth. Wow. You are the evidence. What a privilege and what a responsibility. You know, we who have been in the church for a long time have become so familiar with the claims of our Lord that we have lost the sense of how audacious they really are. Remember his first sermon? It was a one-line sermon. The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of God has come near. The time is fulfilled. History has reached a major turning point. The kingdom of God has come near. God's recreating and redeeming rule is breaking into the world.

This is the dawning of a brand new age. Remember those simple one-line sayings that are scattered throughout the gospel? I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger. Whoever believes in me will never thirst. I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't walk in darkness. You'll have the light of life. If anyone is thirsty, and everyone is thirsty, come to me and drink, and out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water. Rivers of living water. Come to me, all who are weary and who are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Wonderful claims. Claims which touch the tender parts of the human spirit. Claims which touch every aspect of human existence.

[10 : 20] But is he right? Can he deliver? Can he make this happen? The court wants to know, does he satisfy the longings of the human heart? Does he fill the emptiness? Does he break the power of addiction? Does he bring light into the darkness? Does he give peace? And in his defense, Jesus calls in witnesses. He points the hurting, seeking, doubting world to exhibit A. He points the world to the church, to you and to me, and he says, there's the evidence. There is the evidence that I am who I claim to be, and that I can do what I claim to do. So I ask, if Jesus Christ were on trial in this city for being the saving Lord of life, would there be enough evidence in this city

to convict him?

If the court subpoenaed Glendale Presbyterian Church, would we constitute sufficient evidence to convict Jesus Christ of being the Redeemer and the Master? If the secret police videotaped our gatherings together, when we worship and when we talk out on the patio and when we have commissions and when we meet in oikos groups, and then played those tapes before the world, would the judge and jury of the world find in those tapes enough evidence to say that Jesus Christ is the one who brings a whole new world order. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my evidence. Now, the rest of the book of Acts unpacks what all of this means, and what I'd like to do just briefly is hold before you four observations the book makes. The fourth one is critical. How many observations? Four. Which one is critical? The fourth. First, being Jesus' evidence in the world involves the totality of our lives. That is, we offer concrete evidence that Jesus Christ is the saving Lord by who we are, by what we do, and by what we say. Being His witnesses involves being, doing, saying, all in concert, character, deeds, and speech, all three in concert. We provide evidence in the world, and the evidence by who we are, by the kind of people we are becoming. We are being changed. We're becoming more like Jesus Himself. We are beginning to take on the fruit of the Spirit, so our life begins to radiate with His love, and His joy, and His peace, and His patience, and kindness, and goodness, and His gentleness, and faithfulness, and self-control. We provide evidence that Jesus is alive and active by our deeds. This is a major theme in the rest of the book of Acts. The followers of Jesus began to do the very same things Luke records Jesus doing in His gospel. Like Jesus, the followers become channels of grace and mercy. Like Jesus, and in His name, the followers exercise authority over the powers of evil.

Like Jesus, they welcome into the family the brokenhearted, the outcasts, and the marginalized. Like Jesus, they freely share their possessions with the hungry and the poor. Like Jesus, they live simply so they can seek first the kingdom. And like Jesus, their mouth and their hands become instruments of healing.

And we provide evidence that Jesus is who the New Testament says He is by our speech.

Something about our speech is different. We speak as those who are aware that we're speaking in the presence of a living word. We name the name of Jesus. We tell the good things He does.

[13 : 59] So being evidence involves the totality of our lives. Was it Friedrich Nietzsche who said, I will believe in your Redeemer when you look redeemed? Something about our person, something about our actions, something about our speech is to demonstrate that the crucified Nazarene really is alive and can make a difference. Now that's a big challenge. How can we possibly live up to that?

We can't. We cannot on our own. So wait for the fourth observation. The second observation follows from the first. All believers are called to be witnesses.

This is not just the job of the professionals, of the ordained clergy. All who belong to Jesus Christ are to provide evidence. And this is another major theme in the book of Acts. The proof of the in-breaking kingdom of God was given by the non-professionals, by all the people. In fact, when the early church came under persecution and the church was driven out of Jerusalem and scattered into the Roman Empire, only the apostles remained in Jerusalem, which means it was the witness of the non-professionals that turned the Roman Empire upside down. I want to say that again. It was the evidence provided by the non-professionals that turned the Roman Empire upside down. If the kingdom of God is going to spread throughout this city, it has to do so through all of us. You know, the fact of the matter is, you all have access to spheres of the life of this city that we pastors will never have access to. One of the things I'm careful to do, if you ever take me out to lunch and I meet your friends, I'm very careful not to tell your friends who I am. I do not tell people I'm a pastor. But once I do, the conversation's over. I hate it on a plane trip to sit down by somebody. You know, I'm a pretty nice-looking guy. You sit down there and we get to talking and then you find out I'm a pastor. End of conversation. You have access to parts of the world we as pastors will never have access to. And if the life of the kingdom of God is going to penetrate and permeate those spheres of life, it has to do so through you. How is the business community going to know that Jesus Christ brings a whole new world order unless those in the business community provide the evidence?

[16 : 41] How are those in the legal world going to know that Jesus Christ is the Lord of justice and mercy unless those who practice law provide the evidence? How are those in the media world and in the medical world and in the educational world going to know the good news unless those who live in those worlds provide the evidence? I've said to every church I've served that I'm jealous of

you. I'm jealous of the kind of opportunity you have. As a pastor, I often feel locked in the four walls of the church and I long for that opportunity to be in the marketplace where the good news has not yet been heard.

Perhaps at this point it would be helpful to make a distinction between witness and evangelist because I feel some people a little bit nervous. Not all witnesses are evangelists. Isn't that good to hear? Evangelists are uniquely gifted people within the body of Christ. All witnesses need to be committed to the work of evangelization to support that work, but not all witnesses are evangelists. Peter Wagner suggests that only 10% in any body, any church, have the gift of evangelism. And so David Watson says those 10% need to be encouraged and nurtured to exercise those gifts, while the 90 who don't have that gift, who have other gifts, need to be relieved from the guilt that they're not doing evangelism the way the evangelists do. But, says Watson, that does not remove us from the responsibility of being witnesses. We are all witnesses. We are all to give an account for the hope that is in us, as Peter says. I think what Peter has in mind is that as we do and say and be in the world, people are going to notice something and they're going to start asking questions. What's wrong with you people?

What gives? What's your secret? All of us are in the courtroom. We all are to provide the evidence. How? How in the world are we possibly going to be that kind of influence in the spheres where God has called us? We can't. Not on our own. Wait for the fourth observation. The third observation naturally follows from the first and second. An essential dimension of this witness is community, people living together around a common center. In fact, in many ways, community is probably the most powerful evidence of the saving lordship of Jesus Christ. He comes into a broken, alienated, balkanized world to create a new humanity, a new family. On the night before He was crucified, Jesus prayed that those who believed in Him might be one, as He and the Father are one. And then you remember the next line, so that the world might believe you sent Me. Jesus is saying that the unity of His body is the final apologetic to the world that He is who He claims to be. There is to be a quality of love in the body of

Christ that can be found nowhere else. There is to be a love shared in the church that can be found nowhere else in the city. As you know, nothing has damaged Jesus' case before the world court like His splintered church. Many a jury has made the wrong conclusion about who Jesus is because of the divisiveness of His church. I'm not referring to the fact that different people worship in different ways. There are different denominations. I think the world recognizes that we can worship God in a whole lot of different ways. I'm referring to the fact that different Christian groups cannot humble themselves enough to get together for the common good of holding Christ before the city and causing His kingdom to grow. We don't have to agree with each other on everything. We simply need to embrace one another as members of the body of Christ and learn to disagree agreeably. More specifically, we must resist the propensity to major on the minors and minor on the majors. We must not let the form of government or styles of worship or styles of Lord's Supper get in the way. We must major on the major, on Jesus of Nazareth, Him crucified and risen from the dead. If He's the center of our community, if He's the one holding us together, then there can be this rich, wonderful, colorful diversity.

[21 : 14] But once anything or anyone else is allowed to have His place, fragmentation begins, community disappears, and so does this contagious evidence that He is doing something new in the world.

The jury of the Roman Empire watched as Jews and Gentiles, blacks and whites, slaves and free, male and female, learned to live together around the common center, and the jury concluded, behold how they love one another. As I see it, our world is also looking for something else in community. It's looking for authenticity, people who mean what they say and sing, and it's looking for depth commitment. It's looking for vibrancy, it's looking for fire, it's looking for passion, and it's looking for a community that has answers, that is willing to make bold statements, is willing to say there is right, there is wrong, some things are bad for your lives.

But most of all, the world is looking for a community in love, the kind of love the New Testament calls agape, the kind of love that brings down barriers and builds bridges. You know, we who live in Glendale and in Los Angeles at large have the golden opportunity to be incredibly powerful evidence in the midst of all the ethnic tension. We have the opportunity, and I believe responsibility, to demonstrate that people of very different cultural backgrounds can learn to live together around Jesus. Think of the hope that we can give the city, think of the hope that we can give our country if

this church were to model the multicultural nature of the kingdom of God.

That's a tall, tall order. How can we possibly do it? We can't. Not on our own, never in a million years.

Which brings us then to the fourth observation. Being Jesus' evidence in the world is a promise, not a command. The risen Lord did not command the first disciples to be witnesses. Mark that.

[23 : 33] Please, please, please mark that. Jesus did not command us to be witnesses. Jesus in this text does not command us, go and be witnesses. He does not issue a command.

Well, I'm sorry about that. He does issue a command in this text, doesn't he? Wait. It's not go, it's wait. Wait for the promise of the Father.

He does not command us to be witnesses. He promises. He promises to do something in those disciples which would automatically make them into evidence. You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. I'm going to say it again. Being witnesses is not a command. It's a promise.

To paraphrase Jesus, the Spirit of God is going to come upon you. I am going to baptize you. I am going to immerse you in and overwhelm you with my own Spirit, with my life and my love and my glory and my joy and my power, and you will thereby be my evidence. I think that's a tremendous relief.

The risen one does not order us to be and do and say what we cannot be and do and say on our own. Instead, he makes a promise. I'm going to do something to you and in you, and when I do that something, you're going to be different. You're going to have all the power you need to be and say and do the kingdom. And that is precisely what the rest of the book of Acts is all about.

[25 : 09] Jesus keeping his promise. He did it. He baptized that first group of disciples. He flooded them in his Spirit, and they became a robust and winsome and contagious evidence that something new was happening in the world. The city of Jerusalem was shaken, not only because they saw bold preachers like Peter and James, but because they saw that new community with a new quality of love and new priorities. And Luke says that because of that, thousands were added to the church daily. The fact of the matter is, the story does not end with the last chapter of the book of Acts.

Jesus has kept his promise throughout all these ages, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, has written other chapters using other people.

And now he's writing a new chapter. And you and I have the privilege and responsibility of being the new evidence. The challenge for us today is not get out there in the city.

You'll never hear me give that challenge. For the fact of the matter is, we are already out there in the city. We are already out there in Glendale and La Cunada and La Crescenta and Pasadena and Eagle Rock and Burbank and North Hollywood and Studio City and Los Angeles. We're already out there.

We're already out there in corporate headquarters, in medical offices, in law offices, in studios, in broadcast booths, in schools. We're already out there. So the challenge today is not get out there. The challenge is open up out there. Open up to the free, dynamic, creative power of the Spirit out there.

[27 : 07] Open up out there and let the Spirit melt you and mold you, break you, fill you, and use you. If Jesus Christ were on trial in this city for being the saving Lord of life, would there be enough evidence to convict him? If he were on trial in this city, which he is, and you and I were called into the court to establish the case against him, would we constitute sufficient evidence to convict him of the one who makes all things new? Yes, because it's a promise. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my evidence.