

You Will Be My Witnesses

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[0 : 00] Now, I suppose this morning when I mention to you the text that I plan to preach from, some of you will almost inevitably think, well, you know, the man's a missionary, he comes from another part of the work of the church, and it's almost inevitable that he would go to a passage such as that.

I want to preach this morning on what we call the Great Commission. That, in fact, gives me a choice of four different texts. I could have gone to the end of Matthew's Gospel and there read the words of our Lord Jesus Christ where he declares that he has all authority, all has been given to him, and therefore on the basis of that universal authority he sends his people into the world with the Gospel.

He tells them as they are going to make disciples. We could have gone to the end of Mark's Gospel. There we would have found similar words to those recorded by Matthew, where, as Mark puts it, Jesus said, go into all the world and preach the Gospel.

We could have turned to two places in the Gospel of John. We could have gone to the great high priestly prayer in John chapter 17 and noted there that Jesus says in prayer to his heavenly Father that as the Father sent him, so he will send his people into the world.

Or a few chapters later, we could have noted the words of Jesus to the disciples themselves. Exactly the same words that he had mentioned in prayer to his Father.

[1 : 48] He uses those form of words again. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. Or we could have gone to Acts chapter 1, where we read.

And notice there Luke's record of the same event as Matthew and Mark record. And Jesus says to his people there that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

Now, it's very interesting that I would imagine the majority of sermons or addresses that we have read on what we call the Great Commission, they have emphasized Matthew and Mark's perspective.

They have reminded us that it is the obligation of the church that the church is commanded to go into the world with the Gospel. And it's not a wrong thing to be reminded of that.

There is an imperative in Matthew's record of Jesus' words. It's not the, interestingly enough, the command is not to go. If we had a more accurate rendering of that verse, it would be, as you are going, make disciples.

[3 : 07] That's the only command. The only imperative is make disciples. And then there's the imperative in Mark's Gospel. Go into all the world and preach the Gospel.

But if we go to John's account, and if we go to Luke's account, as we have it before us here in Acts chapter 1, we do not find Jesus giving a command.

Neither John nor Luke records Jesus' commission as a command. They record it not as an imperative, but as a simple statement of fact.

They simply indicate that Jesus said to his disciples, As the Father sent me, so I will send you.

Or here in Acts chapter 1, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria. And I think we've sometimes got the balance wrong as we've looked at the church's missionary responsibility.

[4 : 13] As we've considered the church's activity in witness at home or overseas, within our own culture or across cultures. We've overly stressed the obligation, the command, the imperative.

And this morning I want to suggest that there's another legitimate way of reading these words of our Lord Jesus Christ. That comes across to us not so much as a kind of legal binding of the church to an obligation.

But a very, very remarkable statement and indication of the confidence of the Lord Jesus Christ in his people to be his witnesses.

Now, of course, in the grand scheme of our salvation, the emphasis is upon us placing our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That we are called to have faith in him. But I suggest to you that we can read the Great Commission as a statement reminding us that Christ places his trust, his confidence in us.

[5 : 34] You can even read the indicatives in Matthew and in Mark in that light. Jesus makes a tremendous statement as Matthew records it.

All power, all authority is given to me. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded and I am with you to the end of the age. Jesus didn't say to his church, I know your failings, I know your weaknesses.

Now, I want you to go and try to make some disciples. And when you've gathered some people around you, I want you to try to take a few estates further and baptize them.

Then I want you to try to teach them. The Lord doesn't use that language. He sets before us what we could call this tall order. This large request.

[6 : 39] Go, he says, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And you can imagine the disciples thinking, if not saying, what, me?

How can I do that? Couldn't the Lord tone it down a little bit? Couldn't he make his demands a little less? Could he not set the task before us in more modest terms than this international worldwide spread of the gospel?

What me, join those who go into all the world, whether near to home or distant, and share the gospel? It's as if Jesus says, no, I can't tone it down.

I can't make my claims more moderate. You will be my witnesses. You will be. And of course, Luke reminds us how and why that will be.

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 end of the earth.

[7 : 55] A remarkable statement of Christ's confidence in the church to accomplish the task that he has set the church.

He withdraws to heaven, and he leaves his people. And we thank him that he leaves his spirit to enable us to do that great task.

Now we have to ask the question, why is it that Christ has such confidence in his church, in these 11, in the 120 that are mentioned later on, in the 3000 converted on the day of Pentecost, and in that growing, burgeoning church around the world.

Why is it that Christ has such confidence? And I think there are two answers that we could explore. And the first answer is that he knows the people that he chooses. He knows the people that he chooses.

He knows them better than themselves. He knows that they can do what he wants them to do. And it's very, very interesting if you study the Lord's choice of his servants throughout history.

[9 : 07] Now these men that stood around him on that mountain as he was about to ascend to heaven, as he stands there and gives them the commands, these men were very ordinary people.

They were not great scholars. They had been with him for three years. The weakness of their faith had been manifested on more than one occasion. He had had to upbraid them at times because of the weakness of their faith.

He knew them intimately. He knew all their flaws of character. He knew all those tendencies that were unhelpful. And yet he says to them, you will be my witnesses.

Who were they? Well, they were fiery galilee and fishermen. There was a tax collector amongst them. There was a former terrorist or freedom fighter there as well, and a number of others.

Look at them in a different light. Think of them as those who sat around that first communion table, that first Lord's Supper. And what do you find?

[10 : 10] Well, you find, first of all, there's a denier there. That was Peter. Peter. He sat at that Lord's table, though that very night he was going to go out after having partaken of the communion, and he was going to deny the Lord Jesus.

But the Lord Jesus didn't say, Peter, I think you better wait until you come to the Lord's table and get this problem behind you. No, he admitted him to the table in the full knowledge that he was going to go out and deny him.

There was a denier there. There was a doubter there. There was Thomas, who was going to deny or doubt at any rate the resurrection until he could prove it with his own hands and with his own eyes.

The Lord admitted him to the table as well. As for the rest, with the exception of John, they were all deserters. There wasn't one who, after that night, would remain faithful to him until the cross was over and he'd risen from the tomb.

They would all run away. They would all flee. They would all keep their heads down. None of them wanted to be known as those who were his followers. Now, these were the first men around the Lord's table.

[11 : 26] And it is to these men that Jesus now entrusts this great task of winning the world for him. And, you know, it was ever thus.

Whenever God chose anyone to do something for him, or nearly always, not absolutely always, but nearly always, he chose people who, in one way or another, manifested huge inadequacy.

When God wanted to start a family that would become a nation, where did he begin? He started with a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman who, in all their married life, had never had children.

We would say that's an impossible place to begin. Sarah found the thing ridiculous to the point of being amusing. And she laughed.

But it happened. Isaac was born. And from Isaac, the nation was established. When God wanted to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt, who did he choose?

[12 : 36] He chose a coward. A man who got himself, despite his privileged royal upbringing, into huge difficulties. Had murdered a man.

Had run away to hide deep in the desert. And when God confronted him at the burning bush, Moses said to him, Lord, I can't do it. I can't do it.

I can't go and speak to Pharaoh. I can't speak. I can't do it. And you know, it's an amazing thing that God actually accommodated himself to Moses' understanding of his own ability.

Now, wouldn't it have been much better for Moses to have said, I find this very difficult, and then wait upon the Lord for the Lord to enable him?

But he never had that enabling. The Lord said, okay, Moses, we'll use Aaron instead. We'll use Aaron. And Moses never was enabled to be a great speaker in that sense.

[13 : 36] He chose someone who was not up to the task. It was the same later on when God wanted to call his people from backsliding and disobedience. He chose a man who deeply felt his inadequacy, Jeremiah.

Lord, I am but a child. But the Lord enabled Jeremiah to fulfill the very, very difficult ministry that he gave to him. And when God decided to call a Gentile city to repentance, he not only chose the most difficult, Nineveh, the fiercest and most intimidating people in that part of the world, but he gave the task to a man who ran in the opposite direction as fast as he possibly could.

He had his mind changed by a strange submarine encounter being swallowed by a great fish. And then three days later, he started moving in the opposite direction, the direction to which God had called him.

But you know, the amazing thing about Jonah is he never entered into the Lord's project at all. He did it reluctantly to the very end of the ministry. He went to Nineveh, he preached the gospel, the Ninevites were converted.

You'd have expected him to be full of praise and rejoicing, but he sits down under his gourd and he complains that it's not fair. He never entered into the work, and yet God used him.

[15 : 06] Go to the New Testament. It's not altogether different. When in the New Testament it was time for the gospel to cross that great cultural divide from Jew to Gentile, who was it that God chose?

Not Paul. Not Paul. He didn't spearhead the Gentile mission, though he was responsible for it later on. God chose Peter, a man with huge theological hang-ups, a man in bondage to tradition and afraid to break with convention, and he didn't really enter into it at first.

But then he did, and he went to Cornelius, and he saw what God was able to do there. When God wanted a minister for a strategic urban congregation, the congregation of Ephesus, to fill a gap between two apostolic ministries, Paul had been there, he had ministered to the Ephesians, and later John was to be resident in the city of Ephesus.

Between those two ministries, who was it that God chose to be the minister at Ephesus? He chose a diffident young man who was losing his way and going through a crisis of personal inadequacy.

He chose Timothy. And read 2 Timothy and see the issues that Timothy had. He was not naturally suited to the task that was allotted to him by the Lord.

[16 : 44] And when we look at those characters, and we look at those situations, and we think of God calling them to minister way beyond their abilities, doesn't it remove every excuse from us?

Whatever excuse we might come up with, with regard to our own personal inadequacy, we will find it mirrored in someone else in Scripture that God chose and God used.

And he didn't allow them to duck out. And he didn't allow them to slide away from their responsibilities. The truth is, as Hudson Taylor once recognized, God uses men who are weak and feeble enough to learn to lean on him.

God chooses men and women who are weak and feeble enough to learn to lean on him. These people included the incompetent, the cowardly, the personally inadequate, the outright disobedient, men bound by tradition, and ministers passing through a time of personal crisis.

It's an amazing catalogue. The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, did he not? But it's not many of the strong and the able and the wise that God chooses.

[18 : 18] And that's not God's normal way of working. He chooses the weak. He chooses those that other people despise.

He chooses the ordinary. He chooses people like you. He chooses people like me. And the Apostle Paul pressed the point, actually, with the Corinthians.

He mentions this in chapter 1. And in chapter 6, he lists a number of serious sins. And then he reminds the Corinthians, he says, such were some of you.

You've been called to be God's witnesses in this world, in this city of Corinth. You're weak. You feel your inadequacy.

You have lives deeply tainted by sin, at least in the past. I suppose it's rather like Paul putting it a different way in another place where he speaks of the church as being the off-scouring of the world.

[19 : 39] And these are the people that God takes and uses. It was said of the Duke of Wellington that he once looked at the raw recruits entering his army and he said, you know they're the scum of the earth.

Not a lot of difference between what he said and Paul speaking of the off-scouring. But later, Wellington could add, as they completed their training, as they were dressed in their uniforms, as they were ready for the battlefield, he could add, it really is wonderful that we should have made them the fine fellows they are.

And is it a strange flight of the imagination to imagine Father, Son, and Holy Spirit looking down at their church and saying to themselves, they're the off-scouring of the world.

But it really is wonderful that we have made them the fine fellows they are. The Apostle Paul recognized that when we are weak, then we are strong.

If we stand in our own strength, we will fail. But if we stand strong in the Lord and the strength that he provides, we can prevail. In him, we have the victory.

[21 : 07] Christ's confidence in his people is partly based in the fact that he knows those whom he has chosen. The second reason why he's confident in his people is because of the spirit that he sends.

The spirit that he sends. 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 end of the earth.

You cannot say that when the Lord Jesus Christ a few moments later ascended into heaven, he left behind him a group of men highly motivated and enthusiastic to get on with the task that he had left to them.

They go back. We do read that they devoted themselves to prayer and had fellowship together. They joined the 120 other believers that were there in Jerusalem.

But they were far more concerned about the internal organization than they were with this international outward-looking task that had been given to them.

[22 : 25] They seemed to be very concerned that they would find a successor to Judas. They were worried about keeping their numbers intact. And eventually they chose by casting lots, they chose Matthias and Matthias he's never heard of again.

Don't know what that says. Maybe the whole exercise was a waste of time and a waste of energy. They should have been thinking outwards when in fact they were thinking inwards.

We see it earlier on that day when Jesus was received up into heaven they were upbraided by these two men that stood by them in white robes these two angels and they said men of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven?

Why are you so taken up with your personal relationship with Jesus Christ? He's commissioned you to go out. He's commissioned you to go into the world.

Don't stand here nostalgically looking up. Think outwards. Think wider. Think of the task that he has given you to do.

[23 : 42] He will come back as you have seen him go. That's enough for you now. You've often heard it said in sermons that the Dead Sea is dead because it has no outlet.

And I think there are many Christian lives many Christian churches that know something of that death. It's not an ultimate death of course but it's a deadness of the heart, a deadness of the soul, a deadness of the spirit precisely because there's no outlet.

That we receive, we receive, we receive, we take in and our spiritual digestion breaks down. We need to be passing on.

We need to be moving out. We need to be sharing what we have received ourselves with other people. We will be held accountable. We can be sure of that.

But that's not the emphasis I want to make. It's not so much our accountability. It's Christ's confidence in us. Christ's confidence in his church.

[24 : 51] And Christ was confident because he was to send the Holy Spirit. And we see the tremendous transformation that takes place in chapter 2 of Acts.

These apostles who had withdrawn, who were in the upper room, who had battened down the hatches, who wanted to keep the world out. when the Holy Spirit came upon them, the world knew it had happened.

The tongues of fire were seen in the upper room. The language, the spiritual speaking in tongues, that was heard in the upper room.

The sound is a mighty rushing wind. That was contained within the apostles' experience in the upper room. And yet it was only a matter of moments before the world outside knew.

And Peter, not preaching in the upper room, but preaching in the open air to this great, vast concourse of people who were saying, what's going on? These people are different.

[25 : 52] The fear had gone, replaced by a holy boldness. The tendency to look inwards had gone. There was an outward emphasis.

And that day, in the power of the Spirit, Peter ministered in 3,000 men and women were converted. And if Peter had ever had any doubts about his role in the Great Commission, if the apostles had any doubts as to whether God could use them in this world, there was the evidence before their eyes.

That empowered by the Spirit of God, nothing was impossible. And you know, the coming of the Spirit gives that Great Commission a very interesting twist.

Have you ever reflected on the fact that the Great Commission is not repeated after the coming of the Holy Spirit? We might think that these words of Jesus are fundamental teaching for young Christians and young churches.

Paul didn't share that opinion. Not once in his epistles does he pass on the Great Commission. When he writes to the Philippians, it's not there. Ephesians, it's not there.

[27 : 07] He does speak of God's mission in Romans, there's no doubt about that, but he doesn't pass on the Great Commission. It just doesn't happen. Neither does Peter.

Neither does John. Neither does the writer to the Hebrews. Not in all the epistles and the later writings of the New Testament do you find the Great Commission repeated.

And I find that very strange. And it makes me scratch my head and wonder why that should be so. And perhaps the answer is this, that what happens when the Spirit comes upon the church, he takes what is external, he takes what, if you like, is law, and he internalizes it in the Christian's experience.

He writes it on the Christian's heart. He makes us enthusiastic about entering into the Lord's great international project. So it's not a matter of just doing our duty.

It's not a matter of keeping the Great Commission as if it was law. It's not a question of gritting our teeth and buckling down to our responsibility.

[28 : 19] It's rather that the Spirit creates in our hearts a desire spontaneously to speak and to live as Christ's witnesses in the world.

Paul puts it like this. He talks about our relation to Old Testament law, and in a very real sense, the commission of the Lord Jesus belongs to that Old Testament law.

Yes, it's recorded in the New Testament, but the point of demarcation between the Old Testament and the New Testament is the coming of the Holy Spirit. And Paul, writing in Romans 7 and verse 6, puts it like this.

Now we can serve God not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit. We keep God's law, of course, but it's not external to us.

It's not legalism. We keep God's law because he's written it on our hearts. He's built it into our Christian constitution. Our desire is to honor him and to love him, and if we love him, we keep his commandments.

[29 : 28] It's a wholly different motivation. And that applies to the Great Commission as well. Are we not told that it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks?

Paul puts it like this, 1 Corinthians 9, 16, a recent translation. Reads a little bit different, but it's helpful. Preaching the good news, Paul says, is not something I can boast about.

I have an inner compulsion put there by God that makes me do it. Gives you a wholly different perspective. And you see, Jesus says, you will be my witnesses because he knows what the transformation of the coming of the Spirit is going to accomplish.

He knows that you can't be an authentic Christian. Christian. You can't be an authentic church without engaging in witness by life and by speech.

You can't be a New Testament Christian unless it's there. Or let's put it another way around. You are a New Testament Christian if you've been born again by the Holy Spirit to a new and a living hope.

[30 : 45] If you have repented of your sins and put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are a Christian. And therefore, you will be his witness. It goes with the presence of the Spirit in the heart.

An earlier 20th century missions writer called Roland Allen put it like this. Missionary zeal does not grow out of intellectual beliefs, nor out of theological arguments, least of all out of conferences, conventions, consultations, but out of compassion flowing from the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

It's the kind of compassion that you see even in unconverted people when they're in the face of material catastrophe or physical illness.

They look at somebody and they feel for them and they want to help. Now, the Christian is a person who sees people not just as bodies, but who sees people as living souls.

And they're mindful of their eternal destiny. And they know that there is a place called hell. And those who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ under the judgment of God will go there. And the Christian can therefore never look at his neighbor, can never look at his friends, can never look at the world outside and not be reminded of that.

[32 : 08] The Christian wants to do something to make it different. That may be to pray. It may be to speak. It may be to live a testimony before others. It may be to pass on a piece of literature.

But there's that in the Christian heart, that sense of compassion. He wants to reach out to those who are without Christ and without hope in the world.

That was in the heart of John Knox. It's the 450th anniversary of the Scottish Reformation this year. In 1560, in a few days, with a handful of friends, John Knox compiled the Scots confession.

It's a remarkable confession. It breathes this spirit of witness. It starts with these words. Long have we thirsted, dear brethren, to have notified unto the world the sum of that doctrine which we profess.

Do you have that hunger in your heart? Do you have that thirst in your heart? You long to share with others what you've got. You want them to taste and see that the Lord is good.

[33 : 19] Henry Martin understood this very well. Henry Martin, the great missionary to the least evangelized part of the world of his day, the Middle East.

He wrote, the spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions. The nearer we get to him, the more intensely missionary we become.

That's the key to the growth of the church, the spread of the gospel. Witness to the world at home and overseas. It's not appointing committees.

It's not trying to fulfill an obligation. It's simply living close to Jesus. If we live close to him, in the power of the spirit, we will enter into his priorities.

The spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions. The nearer we get to him, the more intensely missionary we become. Christ is confident in his church.

[34 : 26] He knows that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God through the witness of his people. He's confident in them because he knows them. He hasn't made any mistake in choosing them.

And he's confident because he's empowered them individually, corporately, with his Holy Spirit. His cause cannot fail.

As Christians, we can say in this, as in every other struggle and battle, that through him we have the victory. It is because of those realities that Christ resides his trust in us this morning.

An amazing thought, a humbling thought, but an entirely biblical thought. Let's remain seated and bow together in prayer. Our gracious God and our Father, we humble ourselves under your word.

We're amazed as we read it. The task that has been given to us is naturally beyond us, but you make no mistakes. We give thanks for the experience of the Apostle Paul, that when we are weak and we know it, then we are strong.

[35 : 44] we rejoice in the enabling Holy Spirit who resides in the church never to leave the believer, never to leave the church as a body. And we give thanks for the great triumph that that will achieve.

And we pray, therefore, that as we go out tomorrow to serve the Lord in the world where he has placed us, that we would have the privilege of knowing that we are his witnesses, that we can share what we have in him with others and that they can come to know him too.

Lord, that is the longing of our hearts. Men, women, boys and girls in the communities round about us and across this wide world would come to know and love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ, our great king in our head, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen.