

## ***“My Witnesses”***

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Jan. 31, 2021  
(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's book *Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom: Good News in Times of Turmoil*)

**“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

The word **“witnesses”** Jesus uses is a legal term, a term used in a courtroom. *“Why does Jesus use courtroom language?”* The answer: Jesus is on trial. Even more today than when He stood on trial before Pontius Pilate.

The claims Jesus made about Himself, especially that *in Him and because of Him the Kingdom of God is here*, these claims put Him on trial. Jesus uses courtroom language, because He needs witnesses to substantiate His claims.

When Jesus said this, His disciples were busy speculating about the times and dates of His Kingdom come. Just like many are do today. But Jesus had a more important task for His disciples and for us. We will be His witnesses.

Some of you may remember a question Christians used to ask, *“If you were on trial today, would there be enough evidence to convict you of being a follower of Jesus?”*

Throughout the last century that question could be changed a bit. We maybe don't feel like we're in the courtroom anymore, but maybe on trial in front of the

media and social media. *“If the news media were following you with cameras today, could they catch you being a Christian and spread it all over Facebook and the Evening News?”*

I don't really like this question though. It's too judgmental, too burdensome for my weary soul. I don't want to be put on trial by you or anyone. So I like how a friend has changed this question. If you notice, Jesus is saying we will be *HIS* witnesses, so the question should be:

*“Is there enough evidence to convict Jesus for being the saving Lord of life?” “Is there enough evidence of Him bringing His Kingdom rule into our world?”*

I think that better captures what Jesus is saying, “We will be His witnesses.” It puts the spotlight rightly on Jesus. After all, it is Jesus who really stands before the court. *“Is there enough evidence to convict Jesus for being the saving Lord of life and for bringing in the New Order of God's Kingdom?”*

Here are the words of Jesus again in Acts 1:8,

**“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be My witnesses, MY EVIDENCE, in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, in Greece, in Rome, in all the earth.”**

What a huge responsibility? What a huge privilege? What a huge relief! It is Jesus who is on trial for the claims He made of Himself... and what did Jesus claim of Himself?

**John 6:35 “I am the bread of life, the one who comes to Me shall not hunger, and the one who believes in me shall never thirst.”**

**John 8:12 “I am the light of the world, the one who follows me shall no walk in darkness but shall have the light.”**

**John 7:37 “If you are thirsty come to me and drink; and out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water.”**

**Matthew 11:28 “Come unto me all who are weary and who have over-burdened themselves, and I will give you rest.”**

Jesus put Himself on trial when He made these claims. Can He do it? So if Jesus was put on trial today? Would there be enough evidence to convict Him? For Exhibit A, He points to the unity and love of the Church.

If the congregation of First Presbyterian Church was subpoenaed to appear in Jesus' defense, would our life together be sufficient evidence to convict Jesus of being the Redeemer and King?

In our hurting world, would there be enough evidence at First Presbyterian to convict Jesus of being the One in whom and because of whom the Kingdom of God has broken into our world?

But now the stakes ARE NOT high for Jesus for He is still Lord even if the court rules He is not. The stakes are high for the judge and jury in this courtroom. If they make a mistake, if they come to the wrong verdict about who Jesus is, they walk away from Life.

We will be His witnesses.

In his book, *Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom*, Rev. Darrell Johnson offers four observations about our being Jesus' witnesses and counts the fourth observation crucial to grasp.

1. *"First, being a witness involves the totality of our lives."* The witness we provide is who we are, what we do, and what we say. We provide this evidence of Jesus being the Saving Lord of life.

It's our changed lives. Us becoming more and more like Christ. His character traits within us. We are the evidence when we reflect His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23) Jesus is on trial and we are His witnesses by our changed lives.

The book of Acts records the followers of Jesus becoming like Jesus in deeds of love, using His authority over demonic powers, and welcoming brokenhearted people into their fellowship. Like Jesus, they shared their

possessions with the hungry and poor. They lived in ways that allowed them to seek first the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' trial continues today until the day He returns. It is our deeds today that provide evidence of His claims. Jesus is on trial in our cities and on our televisions and we are His witnesses by our actions.

Being witnesses involves the totality of our lives. It's huge. As Christians, something about us, our actions and our speech provides evidence that the crucified Jesus is alive and that in Him and because of Him a whole new order of life has broken into the world.

If you're like me you're saying, "*Oh my, how can we possibly be that evidence?*" On our own, we can't. Wait until the fourth observation and a weight will be lifted.

2. Second observation, "*All believers are called to be witnesses.*"

This is a major theme of the book of Acts. Evidence of God's Kingdom was being provided and is provided by all believers.

One of the important things of the Christian life is to know that we all live out our faith in the courtrooms of our jobs, our community organizations, our schools, our families and our neighborhoods. If the Kingdom is going to spread throughout our city's life, it is going to do so through us

individually, probably more than together. You go places that I will never go. Yes, I'm a professional and it's my job to be a Christian, so to speak, but if the light of Christ's Kingdom, of Jesus being Lord, is going to get to the places where you want it to be, it is most likely going to get there through you as a witness.

For the fact is, if you're a Christian, you have no choice about whether or not you will be a witness of Jesus Christ. The only choice you have is the quality of that witness. How then can we be an effective witness? Once again, on our own, we cannot... Once again, wait for the fourth observation.

Let me say though. This doesn't mean you have to have the gift of evangelism. Often I hear in our society that the most profound witness is not with words. It's a changed life, an act of forgiveness, or a deed of kindness that makes someone feel less alone in the world.

The Apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:15, "**Always be ready to give account for the hope that is in you.**" We are all in the courtroom. Hopefully someone will say, "*Hey! What's wrong with you? Why are you so hopeful, so alive, so free? What's your secret?*" We are all in the courtroom. All of us are to be Jesus' evidence.

3. The third observation, comes from the story of Christians in the rest of Acts: *People living together in unity, showing God's love to each other and the world.* In

many ways, the Christian *community* is probably the most powerful evidence of the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom breaking into our world. Unity maintained through His Spirit, celebrating the Lord's Supper together, and offering our loving-acts-of-kindness.

During the plagues of Europe, this was seen in Christian communities not afraid to love their neighbor. During the illness, they took in people abandoned by their families and banished from their towns, when they had come down with the plague.

Two things happened by Christian communities caring for people. 1. They witnessed to the goodness of God by sharing His loving care. 2. The rate of recovery for people with the plague was higher in the Christian communities, where they cared for the ill. Thereby, the number of Christians grew as they experienced evidence of Christ's Lordship.

Mercy and care seems the most prominent way Christians share the Gospel in our world today. With so many religions and unreligious people, it is often our actions of care, forgiveness, and mercy that best communicate what we believe Christ did for us. Jesus showed us the Father's love, grace, and mercy. Now we can love others.

This unity of God's people was Christ's hope for us His Church. On the night before Jesus was crucified He prayed that we, the believers throughout the world "would

**be one”** even as He and the Father are one. Then check this out. He adds this in John 17:21, **“So that the world might know that You sent me.”**

**“So that the world might know that You sent me.”** Jesus was saying that the best evidence of who He is, of all His claims, is the unity of the Body of Christ. The unity of the Church throughout the world.

Imagine if every Christian throughout the world worked together to eradicate the suffering of our world. Famine, disease, injustice, and needless sufferings. We would be such a great witness to the Kingdom of God, wouldn't we? The quality of love in our church for each other and for the people of our city: these are our evidence for the love of God shown in Christ Jesus.

This is all a heavy burden though, when you consider what it really looks like to care for people consistently. It's tiresome. How can we as individuals and as a church be and do such great evidence for the Lordship and love of Christ?

It's a tremendous burden and in fact, and we cannot do it: At least we cannot do it on our own. We come now to the fourth observation about being Christ's witnesses.

4. *Being a witness is a matter of promise, not command.*

It's a promise, not a command.

If you notice, in Jesus' words, Jesus did not command His disciples to be witnesses. He did not say "*Go, be My witnesses.*" Rather, He promised to do something in His disciples that would make them into His evidence.

**"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be My witnesses."** Acts 1:8.

His command to the disciples was to wait for the Holy Spirit's baptism. Being baptized in and with the Holy Spirit is Jesus' promise to everyone who puts their faith in Him. It's God doing something in us to drench us and baptize us with His life, His love, His light, His energy. And we will be His evidence.

That is such a relief for us when we feel inadequate for this work. Or if we feel guilty thinking we're not doing enough. It is God's promise to give us all the power we need to do and be and say the evidence. To be His witnesses is a matter of promise. Do not carry home a burden today. Lean into the heart of God and you will be a good witness. I can recommend one of Wayne Jacobsen's books on loan in the narthex for help us draw closer to the heart of God. *He Loves Me* or *In Season* are very encouraging books. Great as audiobooks too.

In closing, I like the example of Peter, one of Jesus' most unlikely disciples. In Acts 2 and 4 we see Him witness powerfully to who Jesus is: the saving Lord of life, the One who empowers His Church to be His witnesses.

The challenge for us is not to do witnessing, but to open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit in our neighborhoods, in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our homes. The challenge is to let the Spirit of God fill us with His power and use us everyday everywhere we go.

Would you pray with me?

*From Psalm 27:13-14*

*Dear God,*

***I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.***

***Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.***

*From Ephesians 3:15-21*

***I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.***

*Yes, God. We agree with these prayers. We agree with Psalm 27. We will take heart and we will look to You. Come for us dear Jesus, come*

*for Your Body. Come for this broken world. Come Jesus, we pray for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God into the people of God and into the world. The revelation of Your heart, Your heart God, and how much our hearts matter to You.*

***Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.***