

Southport Presbyterian Church
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The Holy Spirit's Power to Be a Witness
Acts 2:1-8, 14

“¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

“⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?’ ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?

“¹⁴Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.’ (Acts 2:1-8, 14, NIV)

Today is Pentecost — the day the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 2. It is also considered the birthday of the Christian church.

Acts 2 is a fulfillment of what Jesus said before He ascended to Heaven in **Acts 1**. **Acts 1:8** reads, **“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.”**

Though widely known as one of the Great Commission passages, these last recorded words of Jesus to His disciples before His return to heaven also talk about the power of the Holy Spirit in connection with being a witness for Jesus. This power of the Holy Spirit to be a witness for Jesus is not just for the disciples, it is for all Christians, of all times. For when we ask Jesus into our life, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our life and the power He gave the disciples to be Christ's witnesses is available to us.

So what is this power of the Holy Spirit to be a witness for Jesus Christ mean? By looking at Pentecost itself and the other events that follow in the Book of Acts, we see the following:

First, the Holy Spirit gives us the power to be a witness. What is a witness? William Barclay says, “... a witness is a man who says ‘I know this is true’ ...a witness does not say, ‘I think so,’ he says ‘I know.’ (William Barclay, The Acts of the Apostles, revised edition, page 2)

The disciples became witnesses. They could not help but tell people of what they had experienced during their time with Jesus — from the day He called them to the day of His crucifixion, His resurrection and His ascension. The Holy Spirit gave these uneducated fishermen the ability to tell people about Jesus.

What is especially dramatic in all this is to see Peter on Pentecost. In less than two months before that day, he had denied Jesus three times in one evening. He certainly was anything but a witness.

But here, about 53 days later, he is the one speaking to the crowd on Pentecost. Hear some of what he says: “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to... you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him... Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2:22-24, 36 NTV)

Those bold, direct words certainly do not sound like they would come from the mouth of a coward or one who had denied this same person a few weeks ago.

What was the difference in Peter? It was two things. It was that Peter had seen and been with the resurrected Jesus for about 40 days. He had personally seen, heard, and touched the Risen Lord. He knew Jesus was alive!

But the other part is that the Holy Spirit gave him the power to tell about this Risen Jesus. He gave Peter the ability to get up before this large crowd and be a witness for Jesus Christ. Jesus had told His disciples in **John 16:26**, which we cited last week on why Jesus ascended to Heaven that the Holy Spirit would come: **“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 16:26, NIV)**

Many times Christians will say they are not good speakers or don’t know what to say in a situation in order to be a witness for Jesus Christ. But the Holy Spirit will take care of that as Jesus promised in this passage. He’ll give us the right words at the right time in order for us to be a witness for our Lord. He’ll give us what to say and how to say it in truth and love.

Being a witness for our Lord involves both what we say and our conduct. We can be a witness in word and in deed. Even where we may not be allowed to openly speak about our faith we can still be a witness by our conduct. In the last century “When [newspaper reporter] Stanley had discovered [missionary] Livingstone in Central Africa and had spent some time with him he said, ‘If I had been with him any longer I would have been compelled to be a Christian and he never spoke to me about it at all.’ The witness of [Livingstone’s] life was irresistible.” (Barclay, The Acts of the Apostles, rev. ed. p.12, 13)

Secondly, the Holy Spirit gives us not only the ability to be a witness but the boldness and courage so often needed to be a witness in difficult or dangerous situations. Jesus said in **Luke 21:12-15**, which we cited last week concerning why Jesus ascended to Heaven, **“But..., they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.”**

It took courage for Peter to get up on Pentecost and address the crowd gathered there in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. He was not intimidated by the size of the crowd that

day — which was well over 3000 since 3000 became Christians that day. (**Acts 2:41**) Nor was he intimidated by those who “made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine’ (Acts 2:13). None of this stopped Peter. None of it caused him to hesitate. He got up and boldly addressed the crowd.

We see this courage and boldness in the disciples throughout the Book of Acts. We see it in Acts 4 where John and Peter are brought before the Sanhedrin, who we read in **Acts 4:18**, **“...commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”**

Here is the response from Peter and John to this command. Listen to their boldness and courage, (**Acts 19-20**) **“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”**

Indeed it is interesting to note the following observation of these two disciples by the Sanhedrin a few verses earlier (**Acts 13**). **“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”**

Note that the courage and boldness is not disrespect or an “in your face” approach. But rather it is a firm, determined courage, boldness arising from a love and commitment to Jesus Christ, that doesn’t run people over but rather seeks to persuade them or lovingly confront them.

God’s Holy Spirit will give us the courage and the boldness we need when the time comes, when it is needed. Not before. Not after.

Remember in **Luke 21** which we cited, Jesus tells us not to worry beforehand how to defend ourselves. He will give us the words and wisdom we need.

Here’s an example I read recently of the courage the Holy Spirit gave to one American Missionary in Lebanon, Ted Dekker, when he met with someone to witness to him about Jesus: “My two Lebanese Muslim friends and I waited in the hallway of the dark building for about five minutes before someone walked through the door and said “Follow me.” We did, and found ourselves in a room adorned with yellow-and-black Hezbollah flags and big, soft armchairs. And we waited.

“... We were surrounded by men with AK-47 machine guns, in an unfamiliar city, in an unknown building, meeting a man I’d never seen, who didn’t know why I was there...

“But as soon as our host walked in, I remembered why I was there. He broke into a huge smile as he clasped my hand with both of his and said, “Ahlan WaSahlan” (Welcome). “I’ve heard so much about you,” he continued. Hmmm? “Heard what, exactly?” I wondered.

“... So here I was, on a quest to follow Christ. It wasn’t about doing something with or to Muslims. It was about following Jesus.

“That day a friendship began. It was a cautious friendship – on both sides. We were equally skeptical of the other’s agenda. But over the years we have become friends. He’s still a Muslim, still the leader of the Hezbollah in all of south Lebanon, still at war with Israel. But he has now received prayer a thousand times, often by the laying on of hands by my Christian pastor friends I take to see him. He has now read the New Testament. We talk often and deeply about the gospel, about big international issues, about the small hidden things of our hearts...” (*Loving Bin Laden* by Ted Dekker and Carl Medearis, Mission Frontiers, March-April 2010)

What courage the Holy Spirit gave Ted Dekker to meet with the leader of Hezbollah to witness to him about Jesus. God will give us the courage when we need it.

Finally, the Holy Spirit gives power to be a witness regardless of the cost. As William Barclay writes, "... in Greek the word for witness and the word for martyr is the same (martus). A witness has to be ready to become a martyr. To be a witness means to be loyal no matter the cost." (Barclay, p13)

All the disciples were loyal to Jesus from Pentecost on. According to tradition, all but one died a martyr's death. In fact, in the Book of Acts we can read about the first Christian who died for his faith in Jesus, Stephen. Hear why he was arrested and brought to the Sanhedrin because of his witness: "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)... These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke..."

"So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, **"This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."** (Acts 7:51-53)

It was after Stephen's powerful speech to the Sanhedrin shortly after his arrest in which he showed how the Sanhedrin were, like their ancestors, always resisting the Holy Spirit and persecuting those God had sent, including the Messiah that these religious leaders killed Stephen.

Stephen did not retract anything he said. He was willing to be loyal to Jesus regardless of the cost.

This willingness to risk all — to be loyal to Jesus regardless of the cost can be seen in an event that occurred several years ago to a pastor in a communist country in Southeast Asia who was kidnapped by communist party police. He was not seen or heard of for quite a period of time until one day a box was delivered to his home. When his wife opened the box, she found the body of her husband all cut up into pieces.

Now one would think that having experienced that, this woman would live in fear. But instead she took over the role of being pastor to the church her husband left behind. This is her picture. Her name in code is Sweetly Broken. And not only has she taken this responsibility on, but she has witnessed to the very people who probably killed her husband. Her boldness and courage are a powerful example of the Holy Spirit's work in helping her to have the power to be a witness for Jesus regardless of the cost.

Jesus warned us of the risks of being His witnesses when He said, **"You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life."** (Luke 21:16-19, NIV)

Some time ago "a Christian prisoner in Cuba was asked to sign a statement containing charges against fellow Christians that would lead to their arrest. He said: 'The chain keeps me from signing this.' The Communist officer protested, 'But you are not in chains!' 'I am,' said the Christian. 'I am bound by the chain of witnesses who throughout the centuries gave their lives for Jesus Christ. I am a link in this chain. I will not break it.'" (Jesus Freaks, p. 49)

The Holy Spirit will give us the power to be a witness, the power to be a bold and courageous witness that will risk everything, including life, to be loyal to our Lord, Jesus.

We may find ourselves increasingly being called upon to be such witnesses in the age and culture in which we live. Unquestionably, there will be challenges to being a Christian witness in our culture as we move into the future. Pressures will come from all directions spiritually, economically, socially, politically and in other ways for Christians to be quiet about Jesus.

There is a court case going to the U. S. Supreme Court involving the witness of Christians. "... Hastings College of the Law (part of the University of California)... [has an anti-discrimination rule which means] that the Christian Legal Society's (CLS) on-campus chapter cannot make its leaders sign a statement of faith and abstain from "unrepentant participation in or advocacy of a sexually immoral lifestyle." The school said student group leadership positions must be open to all students—even to those who would seek such positions precisely in order to destroy the purpose of the group." (The End of Religious Freedom?, Christianity Today, May 2010, p. 49)

This case is going to the Supreme Court.

"If CLS loses the case, in time it would mean that "religious and other groups that adhere to traditional moral views could be driven from the public square in the name of enforcing nondiscrimination," CLS told the court." (The End of Religious Freedom?, Christianity Today, May 2010, p. 49)

You can read details of this case in the May 2010 issue of Christianity Today.

We cannot be quiet about the One whose love for us we have experienced and the One we are to love, follow and serve faithfully and loyally.

May the Holy Spirit give us the power to be bold, courageous witnesses regardless of the cost, to a culture and people that need to be transformed and made new by God's grace. May we remember these words from Pope Paul the VI in his message, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, Issued December 8, 1975: "We must be possessed of the same... spirit that inspired John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, the other apostles and all the multitude of admirable evangelizers [evangelists] down through the ages—a spirit which neither men nor circumstances can ever extinguish. ... And may the world of our time which is searching, ... receive the gospel... from those who, having received the joy of Christ into their own hearts, are ready to risk their lives so that the Kingdom [of God] may be proclaimed and the church established throughout the world." (EN, no, 80) (John Michael Talbot, Regathering Power, pp 112-113)

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses."

Amen.