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# Can I Get a Witness?

SHON SMITH

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So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1.6–8)

I have a good friend named Joey who is a mess. He is one of those guys that lives his life on full-throttle even when all of his meds are working together properly. Joey not only lives his life on full-throttle, he also believes it is his job to motivate others to do so as well, especially the high school students he counsels and little leaguers he coaches. I have yet to meet anyone as good at motivating others as Joey. In fact, he is so good that high school coaches have been known to call on him to fire up their team before a big game. Fire them up he does.

When little Vernon High School was preparing to play the powerhouse Winston County (undefeated and ranked number two in the state), Joey got a call. What happened on that Friday night is the stuff of movies. Just minutes before kickoff Joey stormed into the Vernon locker room unannounced, walked straight up to the biggest player on the team, slapped him in the face, and then asked the head coach if he could say a few words. The locker room fell silent. Joey said, “Boys, my name is Jake McCoy—class of ’82. I am here to remind you that you are not just playing this game for yourself. You are playing this game for your mommas and daddies, brothers, sisters and cousins. You are playing for every former player and every teacher. Boys, you are playing for everyone in this community and every person who bleeds Vernon colors.”

Joey, or Jake, got so emotional during his speech that he started slapping boys for encouragement, kissing them on their big shaved heads and eventually fell to the floor with tears running down his checks. The boys were immediately overcome by emotion. They, too, fell to the floor, covered up Jake McCoy, and started screaming until it was time to run to the field. Just as the team was preparing to run through the big sign on the field Jake turned to the boys and asked if they would allow him to live the dream of leading Vernon onto the field one last time. When the boys from Vernon came through the sign with Jake leading the way, it was obvious to all that they were a team possessed. A team possessed by a mission greater than themselves.

The details of how the game unfolded don’t matter much. Vernon returned the opening kickoff for a touchdown. To start the second half Vernon returned a fumbled kickoff for another touchdown. When time finally expired, the scoreboard read: Vernon 37 vs. Winston County 0. Isn’t it amazing what a small, ragtag, inferior group of athletes can accomplish when they have been convinced to the core of what they are playing for!

Do you know what is even more amazing? What is more amazing is what a small, ragtag, inferior group of people can accomplish when they have been convinced to the core of what they are living for.

I have to believe that is why Jesus hung out for forty days with the eleven following his resurrection. These men needed a clear picture of what they were to be about. For a few days life was really confusing, but now they were as certain as they had ever been that they were going to rule with Jesus in the restored kingdom of Israel. Since they were anxious to get started they posed the all-important to Jesus, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1.6). What they really wanted to know is if the overthrow of Rome was about to begin, because they were ready. They wanted to know if it was “go-time.”

Jesus responded, “Yes! Yes, it is go-time!” But then he made it clear that he was not sending them to overthrow an earthly kingdom, but rather he was sending them to make known to the entire world the ongoing restoration of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That is what their life was to be about from that moment forward. That is what they were to live for! They were to be his witnesses!

That is what we are to live for! Periodically, I need to be reminded of this great calling because too often I get caught up in the desire for life to be about the restoration of my kingdoms as I envision they should be. There are moments when I am prone to ask the question, “When, Lord, are you going to restore my neighborhood, job site, school system, church, nation as I believe they should be?” Thinking life is about my kingdoms is a dangerous place to be. It inevitably manifests a desire to see those who are messing up my kingdoms conquered, even destroyed.

However, Christ never said, “You will be my conquerors.” He said, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8). Christ sends us, just as he did the eleven, to bear witness that he has conquered sin and death so that all might enjoy freedom and life. He sends us to bear witness he has risen and is reigning over the greatest nation of heaven and earth, which is the kingdom of God. He sends us to bear witness to the way of his kingdom—love, not hate; peace, not war; righteousness, not hedonism; hope, not cynicism; freedom, not bondage; generosity, not greed; justice, not inequality; forgiveness, not revenge; inclusion, not exclusion; grace, not judgment; self-denial, not self-indulgence. He sends us to bear witness that he will return to bring to completion the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth. That is what life is to be about from here on out!

Our reason for existence is to be his witness! We are to be a people who share all we have seen, heard and experienced in Christ. What a great time to be a witness. We live in a culture that is intrigued, even captivated, by stories that contain an element of the supernatural when they are told well. Hence the success of television shows such as *Lost* or *Heroes*. People will listen to the story of what our God has done and is doing in our life and the lives of those we know if we learn to tell the story in a compelling manner.

How do we tell the story well? In Luke’s account one can clearly see that the best way to tell the story is to live the story. People are much more willing to give ear to the supernatural power of God when they see his power at work in our lives. When we go from being a people who are focused on getting our fair share to sharing all we can; when we leave our circles of comfort to embrace those the world dismisses; when we let go of our biases, hates and hurts to extend grace to those who have mistreated us; when we leave the familiar to serve those in unfamiliar places, people will be anxious to know what, or who, has taken possession of us.

Luke wants us to understand that we witness to Christ when we share who he is and what he did, but Luke also wants us to see clearly that we witness to him when we do what Jesus did. When we help the poor, feed the widows, raise the fallen, comfort the sick, embrace the unwanted and touch the unclean, we witness to Christ. I realize it has been deeply ingrained in some of us that doing good deeds is nice, but it is not witnessing unless it is accompanied by a verbal presentation of the gospel. However, Luke shows us in Acts 14 that taking care of those who cannot provide for themselves is one of the very ways that God testifies about himself: “In the past, he let nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without



testimony; He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14.16–17). When we do what Jesus did we are not doing “good deeds,” but “God deeds.” We are not doing “social justice,” but “God’s justice” that bears witness to his glory and goodness.

When the church is convinced to the core that it is living to be a witness to the greatness of Christ and the kingdom of God, the improbable often becomes the norm. One cannot miss this in the book of Acts. Because a small, ragtag, inferior group of people were convinced to the core that their life was to be about advancing God’s kingdom on earth, people who crucified Christ gave their lives to Christ; people who despised each other learned to fellowship each other; people who worshipped many gods turned to the one true, living God; people who at one time lived for themselves sold everything to support those in need; and the message of life in Christ soon filled households, cities, nations and the entire known world.

If the book of Acts was a television show, today’s critics would accuse the writer Luke of “jumping the shark” by episode four. What he describes seems utterly ridiculous—way more ridiculous than Jack Bauer saving the world in twenty-four hours. No way, no how does a quirky group of uneducated nobodies from the sticks pull off what Luke describes. But, they did! Luke is not an action-fiction writer. He is a historian. Luke is writing of events that really did happen and he wants us to know why and how they happened.

Luke wants us to know that these events happened because our God is a promise-keeper. What did God promise? We turn back to volume one of Luke’s two-volume historical work to hear the old priest Simeon reveal the answer: “Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Lord required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel’” (Luke 2.27–32).

The events of Acts are the unfolding of God’s promise to open wide the doors of his kingdom to people from every tribe, race, nation and language through Christ. It started in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost with Peter preaching the message of God fulfilling his promise through Christ to people from nations far and wide, and ends with Luke writing these words of Paul, who was under house arrest in Rome: “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28.31).

How did the events recorded in Acts happen? The improbable became the norm, because the God who sent his church on mission went with his church on mission. Throughout his account Luke opens our eyes to the unseen reality that God is leading, directing and empowering the church’s witness. There are so many moments when Luke directs our attention to the involvement of God. In Acts 5 the apostles are arrested when the Sadducees realize people are coming from all over in hopes of being healed by them. However, the apostles didn’t have to do hard time for long. In the middle of the night the Lord shows up, opens the doors of the jail, and says, “Go, stand in the temple courts and tell people the full message of this new life.” In Acts 8 Philip is instructed by an angel of the Lord to go to the south road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, because a divine appointment had been made for him with an important official of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. Once Philip taught and baptized the man he was whisked away to another city to preach the gospel. Peter went to the house of a Gentile with great reluctance in Acts 10, but Cornelius quickly explained that God wanted him in his home to make known all that God had revealed to him. In Acts 16 we find Paul in Troas because God would not let him go to Bithynia. While in Troas Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia begging for his help. Most people would have chalked that off to a random dream or bad reaction to Mexican food, but Paul knew this was a clear call from God to go preach the gospel to the Macedonians. On another occasion the Jewish people of Corinth became very antagonistic and abusive toward Paul for preaching Christ, but before he could find the next donkey ride out of town God assured Paul he was right where he was needed.



It seems that more than anything else Luke wants history to show and the church to know that “God is the hero of the story!” This hero did not retire at the end of Acts. This story is still being written. Do you realize what this means? It means that what happened then can happen again! The improbable can once again become the norm! That is, if—and this is a very big if—the church relies on the power of the Holy Spirit.

What is the key to the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth? Power!—but not political power. That is what the apostles were looking for, but that is not what they received. They received a much greater power in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1–4). Do we desire for our nation to be a Christian nation? Yes! Do we want people of faith to occupy seats of power in government? Of course! But there is no reason to panic if they don’t, because our God has given us all the power we need to advance his kingdom to the ends of the earth. No government, regardless of how powerful, stands a chance against the power of God. You cannot read the book of Acts nor see what is happening today in countries like China and not be convinced that the power of the Spirit is more than enough.

For the past decade experts have tried to explain why the American church is dying, why people are leaving the church in record numbers. I am no expert, but could it be that this is what happens when the church treats the Spirit like he died off with the apostles? The Spirit is not dead! The Spirit is alive today as the risen Jesus!

The promise of Acts 1.8 is not limited to the apostles any more than the commission of Acts 1.8. We, too, have been given the Holy Spirit to lead, direct and power our witness. Do you know what this means? This means you may not be the most eloquent, intellectual, or talented person at the table, but your gospel words can change the heart of an unbeliever because the Spirit is at work. It means that you can tutor kids at an inner-city school with three other people who are atheists, but your impact is going to be greater because the Spirit is present in you. We can no longer overlook this great spiritual reality—the Holy Spirit empowers us for the same ministry impact as the ministry of the one we witness to.

The question is, “Why do we insist on trying to go it alone?” As much as I hate to admit it, I sense it is because we are scared to death of the Spirit. We are afraid of how the Spirit might mess up our life. Let’s be honest—if you start relying on the Spirit, your life is going to get messed up. I know this to be true, because I have read the book of Acts, but I am also seeing the Spirit mess up more and more people I know. I see people transitioning out of one career path to work with orphans in third-world nations. I see people who finally saved enough money to buy their dream house staying put so they can give more to support missions. I see people moving out of their dream house into a section of town they were at one time scared to drive through. I see people rearranging their vacation plans to help people in countries ravaged by natural disasters. I see people who had their family plan mapped out now adopting. I see people who had their social circle firmly established now inviting strangers into their life. All of these people are making these decisions for the same reason—as hard as they try, they cannot shake loose the undeniable leading of the Holy Spirit in their life.

To be honest, I am not sure I want my life messed up. How about you? That is why I am hesitant to pray, listen, even wait on the Spirit. But I must! You must! Because life isn’t about our kingdoms! It is about his kingdom! It is about us playing our role in God’s story that began in the Garden of Eden and will end in the restored Garden of Eden where people from every nation, tribe and language will join together to praise the one true God—our Hero.

The Holy Spirit is ready to lead you back onto the field! The question is, “Are you ready to be His witness?”

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