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“CHRIST’S WITNESSES”

Acts 1:1-11

If I were to ask you, which person wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, who would you say? The correct answer is “Luke” – the author of the gospel by that name as well as his second volume which we call “the Acts of the Apostles.” The Book of Acts is very important because it’s the only account we have of the Jesus movement following his resurrection up until Paul’s arrival in Rome, between approximately A.D. 33 and 60. Luke not only tells us how the Spirit gave birth to the church, but also how Saul of Tarsus became the Apostle Paul and how the Holy Spirit used the apostles to help grow the early church.

The Book of the Acts is addressed to a man named “Theophilus” whose Greek name means “loved by or dear to God.” It’s likely Theophilus was Luke’s benefactor who helped underwrite his literary efforts. From the preface to Luke’s Gospel (1:1-4), Luke says that he is writing so that Theophilus “may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been

instructed.” So Theophilus had previously received instruction in the Christian faith. Luke intended to strengthen and broaden his understanding of the story of Jesus and the early Jesus movement. (read Acts 1:1-14, p.118 NT in pew Bibles)

Luke says that in his good news document, he wrote about “all that Jesus began to do and to teach” (ESV, NIV, RSV, contra NRSV and NEB) implying that Jesus’ ministry continued even after his death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father, though now through the Holy Spirit and the early church. For approximately forty days the Risen Christ “presented himself himself alive” to his followers and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, God’s reign or rule.

Then Luke records Jesus’ last resurrection appearance and his ascension. On that occasion the disciples asked, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Until recently I thought that was a really foolish question, illustrating how dense the disciples had been and how they had misunderstood the central thrust of Jesus’ teaching ministry, which had focused on God’s reign as king. However, now

following Jesus' resurrection the disciples are probably thinking that the age of salvation had begun, so that the time until the final consummation of God's reign as king was near. That makes sense. However, it sounds as if they are asking about the restoration of the nation-state of Israel and their self-rule over the promised land. So their understanding of the spiritual nature of God's kingdom needs strengthening.

Jesus' response redirects the disciples' question about the future to their present task of worldwide mission and evangelization. "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." Notice that the Risen Christ gives the apostles a worldwide witness-bearing mission that starts close to home in Jerusalem and Judea, and then spreads outward to Samaria, and finally extends "to the ends of the earth!" That single sentence is likely the key to understanding this entire document!

Near the end of Luke's Gospel Jesus summarized the teaching of Scripture concerning himself and the message his followers were to deliver and then said, "You are witnesses of these things." The theme of Jesus' followers "bearing witness" to Christ and the gospel is an important theme in the Book of Acts! The Greek word "witness", *martus* in Greek is used eleven times by Luke in this document to describe followers of Jesus and twice as a verb to describe Christian ministry.

What does this final command from Jesus mean for us today? Trying to apply Jesus' words, I think we need to say our witness, to be able to briefly summarize our faith in Jesus Christ when the opportunity arises, to do our witness so that our behavior is congruent or consistent with the gospel and the teaching of Jesus, and we need to be witnesses day to day, so that others might see Christ in us.

When I was a student UC Santa Cruz in the early 70s, a faculty member who bore a powerful witness to Christ was a Professor of Religious Studies and History, Dr. Noel Q. King. A few years after I graduated, Bill Cameron also studied with Dr.

King. Noel was born in Rawalpindi, in 1922, an Anglo-Indian, raised by British parents in India. Growing up he became bilingual in English and Hindustani. He was educated in Simla, India, and later in England at Oxford and Nottingham. Noel served as a Second Lt. in the British Army during WWII and was posted in India, Burma, and Europe. He became a world expert in African traditional religions and Sikhism especially, but could read all the scriptures of the world's key religions in their original languages. Noel was himself a Christian in the Anglican tradition and an ordained priest in the Church of England. His appearance was unique – like a modern-day St. Nicholas with a long white beard down to his waist, long white hair, a large round belly, and a sweet face. Though happily married, Noel seemed to be a monk-like figure, ill at ease in the modern world, more suited to a monastery in the Middle Ages. Noel taught classes in all the major world religions and was one of the most popular professors on campus! He was a saintly, quiet man who never criticized other religions, but was clearly known as a Christian. I remember his leading a Bible study for Christian students in his

home, encouraging us in our faith. His kindness and warmth and the interest he took in his students were a stark contrast with many of our distant and arrogant professors, who never bothered to learn any of our names. Decades after I graduated and was working on doctoral studies involving world religions, Noel kindly read my dissertation! In retirement Noel continued writing and traveled internationally engaging in inter-religious dialogue, especially seeking as he laughingly commented to keep peace between Sikhs and Jains. His reconciling efforts were on display then as they had been years earlier on the UCSC campus as he tried to keep peace when tensions rose between different religious groups in his classes. It's safe to say that through his teaching all over the world including Punjabi University Patiala, Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, University of Ghana, University of Nottingham, Oxford University, Makerere University in Uganda, and the University of California at Santa Cruz where Noel taught for 24 years, many students saw Christ in the words, behavior, and life of Noel Q. King!

The word “witness” as I mentioned is the Greek word “*martus*”. It’s the root from which we get our English word “martyr” – which means bearing witness not only with words and actions, but with our lives! Most of us were horrified a couple months back to see photos of ISIS soldiers leading a group of 21 Egyptian, Coptic Christians along a Libyan beach on the shore of the Mediterranean, where they savagely beheaded those Christians. Dr. Rex Rogers is President of “Satellite 7”, a Christian television satellite that broadcasts to the Arab world. In a recent letter he wrote, “None of us can forget the 21 Egyptian, Coptic Christians who were savagely beheaded by ISIS only a few weeks ago along a Libyan beach. Not one of the men renounced Christ. Among the 21 Christian martyrs were two brothers. As their executioners demanded they deny Jesus, they instead cried out that they would never renounce their risen Lord and Savior.” And the audio was not cut from the ISIS broadcast over the internet! These 21 men bore witness to Christ. Rogers’ letter continues, “As you know the ISIS video was spread over the internet. During a live Sat-7 program, a man called in about

the video – whose 2 brothers were beheaded. Here’s a translation of the conversation as broadcast to the entire Middle East, North Africa, and Europe:

Caller: “It’s not only one brother (I lost) . . . I had two! Bishoy 25, and Samuel, 23. I am proud of them. They are a pride to Christianity . . . They made me walk, my head high.”

The Host said: “Great is your faith.”

Caller: “ISIS gave us more than we asked when they didn’t edit out the part where they declared their faith and called (out) to Jesus Christ. I thank ISIS . . . ISIS helped us strengthen our faith. Yes . . . believe me! This only helps us to endure such crises because the Bible tells us to love our enemies and bless those who curse us.”

That third brother, whose name is Beshir, then told the Sat-7 host of talking to their mother, asking what she would do if she saw one of the killers on the street. To everyone’s amazement she said, “I would invite him home because he helped my sons enter the kingdom of heaven. I would ask God to open his eyes.” Beshir then prayed, on air, asking God to indeed open the eyes of

the ISIS killers; that they might turn from lies to the Truth.

Everyone in the studio was moved, and so were tens of thousands of others who were watching this program throughout the Middle East.”

**How are you bearing witness to Christ and the gospel?
How are you saying your witness by articulating your faith in Christ? How are you doing your witness with your actions? And how are you being Christ’s witness with your life? That was the central task the Risen Christ gave his first followers. It’s the same task he gives each of us today!**

Let us pray: Triune God, grant each of us the power and the courage to bear glad and enthusiastic witness to Jesus Christ by what we say, what we do, and in who we are. May Your Spirit empower us to live out our faith in such a way that others may see Jesus Christ in us. In Your Holy Name. Amen.