

Can I Get a Witness?

In Jerusalem

Mark Potter

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Good morning, Colonial! For those of you whom I haven't had a chance to meet, my name is Mark Potter and I'm the campus pastor here at our Overland Park campus. I also want to take a moment to welcome our online audience worshipping with us (10:30).

How many of you participated or helped in any capacity with Summer Blast this past week? Can we pause and thank everyone who made Summer Blast possible? Unfortunately, we were out of town until yesterday afternoon so my family wasn't able to go this year, but by all accounts, it was a great week and Jesus was most certainly honored. Also, before I go further, I want to acknowledge Michael Otto for leading youth Sunday last Sunday. Being a former youth director, it hurt me to miss it but I was able to go back and listen online and I'm super grateful for a week of being able to highlight our Children's and Student Ministries as we continue to live into our core value of being "Student Strong."

For the next three weeks starting today, Pastor Greg and I will be preaching a site specific three-week mini-series called, "Can I Get a Witness?" based on Acts 1:8. Given the fact that Pastor Jim took several years to preach through a single gospel, we felt like we had permission to spend three full weeks on one verse. You're welcome.

This week, we're going to spend most of our time on what it means to be His witnesses in our Jerusalem, and then next week we'll focus on what it means to be His witnesses in our Judea and Samaria, and then the final week we'll spend time unpacking what it means to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. And as part of that process, I'll be revealing campus-specific vision and strategies relating to what this may look like in the Twenty First Century in Johnson County, KS.

You'll recall that the context of Acts 1:8 is just moments before Jesus' ascension. The disciples had journeyed with their rabbi for three full years only to see Him be crucified, buried, and resurrected on the third day. After rising from the dead, Jesus had surprised them with His presence by encountering them in bodily form; He talked with them, dined with them, traveled to nearby places, and continued to teach about the kingdom of God. After raising, Jesus had personally interacted with more than 500 people over the span of 40 days.

Among other things, He instructed them to remain in Jerusalem for a few days for they would soon be baptized with the Spirit. They asked Him, "Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He responded by saying, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."

And then He said this. Let's stand and read it together:

“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.” (Acts 1:8 ESV)

Please be seated, let’s pray.

My sermon is called “Can I Get a Witness in Jerusalem?” And it falls under two subheadings:

- I. The Faithful Witness
- II. Reaching Our Jerusalem

Let’s begin with:

- I. The Faithful Witness

When we were deciding on the title of this sermon series, I was informed that there is a famous single by Marvin Gaye called “Can I Get a Witness” that was then covered by the Rolling Stones. Raise your hand if you’re familiar with this song? After reading the lyrics to the song, I can say with certainty that Marvin was NOT talking about the Biblical definition of witness.

Now, I don’t know what comes to your mind when you hear the word, “witness.” Maybe it *is* this guy (show Marvin Gaye image).

Or maybe you think of this guy (show Harrison Ford image).

Or this guy (Jack Nicholson).

Or these guys (Johnny Depp and Amber Heard).

Many of you might picture this guy (OJ Simpson).

Or, what about this guy (LeBron James)?

Or perhaps this guy (Jehovah’s witness image).

While none of these images are necessarily inaccurate from a cultural perspective, they are mostly unhelpful from a biblical perspective. When it comes to the word ‘witness,’ if I could replace any of these cultural images with a more Biblical New Testament image, I would replace them with this one (Jesus on the cross image).

Our primary picture of a witness should not be Marvin Gaye, or OJ Simpson, or Jack Nicholson, or even the guy in a suit and tie that rings your doorbell... but Jesus on the cross!

But before we unpack what this word “witness” means for us, we should go back and look at what it meant to Jesus’ First Century Jewish audience.

In Hebrew, the word for a witness is an “eid.” Everyone say, “eid.”

In the Old Testament, an “eid” was a person who would testify about something they had seen, heard, or experienced firsthand. An eid’s testimony provided the proper evidence necessary to prove or disprove legal allegations or disputes. And it was almost always done in groups. Why? So the original testimony could be verified, or validated.

For example, in the story of Ruth, when Boaz bought land from Naomi’s family, he called together witnesses to see the transaction occur so that, in the event of a future dispute about the land, they could bear witness to its validity.

Also, as you may know, it was a major deal for a witness to lie about their testimony. Such a major deal that God included it in the Ten Commandments.

Commandment #9: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” -Ex 20:16

A few chapters later, in Exodus 23:1, God reiterated to the Israelites that, “You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.”

In an honor/shame culture, if you were accused of doing something unlawful there were often severe consequences. You could lose your job, your marriage, your reputation, your freedom, or even your very life if two or more witnesses bore testimony against you. On the other hand, if someone was caught bearing false witness, the penalties were equally harsh.

In Deuteronomy 19, it says this:

“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. 16 If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, 17 then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. 18 The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, 19 then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil[c] from your midst. 20 And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. 21 Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” (Deut 19:15-21)

As you can see, bearing false witness was a massive deal and carried severe consequences.

Why? Because God had set apart the Nation of Israel to be a holy light unto the nations.

Recall with me back to Gen 12, when God initiated the Abrahamic covenant, saying:

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:2-3).

What do we learn from this? God chose to raise up a particular people group to bear witness to Yahweh as the one true God for the purpose of blessing only the KU basketball fans? Republicans? US Citizens? No. They were to be a witness to bless all nations.

How'd that go? Not good. God delivered them from slavery, but then they grumbled, and complained, and engaged in sinful behaviors, and made idols, and worshiped other gods. And so, God allowed them to be overtaken by pagan empires and exiled, and so they grumbled, and complained, and engaged in sinful behaviors, and made idols, and worshiped other gods.

Then God had mercy on them, and He allowed them to return from exile. And all the while, God chose to raise up prophets to remind Israel of their role as His witnesses while simultaneously pointing them to a future Faithful Witness that would bear testimony to Yahweh and embody His power, justice, grace, and love to all nations.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God said this to the Nation of Israel:

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and I am God.” -Isaiah 43:10-12 ESV

What we learn as we keep reading through the book of Isaiah is that God was about to send a Messiah, a Suffering Servant, as His Faithful Witness that would bring salvation to the ends of the earth, which is exactly what the Nation of Israel had failed to do. Skipping forward to the end of the Bible, in his greeting to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, John refers to Jesus as this “faithful witness.” (Rev 1:5)

Jesus was the one the Father sent to open the eyes of the blind, liberate the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. It was Jesus who said, “I am the Light of the World” and in me you can experience eternal life.

But this Faithful Witness wouldn't come about through an earthly king's conquest or by force. Rather, it will come about through a Suffering Servant's sacrificial love and faithful obedience.

This Faithful Witness was the one who was falsely accused and put on trial not for His sin, but for yours and mine. And it didn't simply cost Him His job, or His reputation. It cost Him His very life and the lives of all His closest friends.

For when we were rightly accused, Jesus was falsely accused.

When we were unfaithful, Jesus was faithful.

When we were disobedient, Jesus was obedient.

When we were selfish, Jesus was selfless.

It was the Faithful Witness' witness about Himself claiming to be the Son of God that got Him crucified. You see, the irony is that by his friends witnessing Jesus' death and resurrection, they finally become the witnesses that God always intended for the Nation of Israel to be.

The word witness in the New Testament refers simply to those who saw, heard about, or encountered the resurrected Jesus. The Greek word for witness is *mártus* which is where we get the English word, "martyr."

Biblically, a witness is someone who believes so much in what they have seen, heard, or experienced that they are compelled to share it and even willing to die for it.

A number of years ago, Jimmy Dodd shared something with the Summer Staff that stuck with me. He said that there are certain things pertaining to our beliefs that we are willing to dismiss as unimportant, other things we will discuss as important but not worth getting worked up about, others that we'll debate due to our strong conviction, still others that we'll defend because we are so convinced they are true, and finally, there are a handful of core beliefs that we'll even die for because they are so incredibly ingrained in who we are and what we believe.

A *mártus* - or witness - holds such strong conviction in what they believe that they are willing to risk their life to defend its integrity and champion its cause.

Unfortunately, too many churches and denominations have leaders who waste too much time and energy disagreeing, debating, defending, and becoming distracted by the non-essentials while dismissing the most essential matters of the faith.

During Covid, we chose to stop serving coffee on Sundays for a short season and guess what? Some of you threatened to put us in a headlock! Maybe that was just at our other campus.

We can discuss a lot of things about our faith including gender roles in ministry, predestination/free will, appropriate dress on Sunday mornings, placement of the American flag, worship styles, the end times, etc.

BTW, if you ask me if I'm pre-, post-, or amillennial... The answer is, I'm not any of them. I'm a pan-millennial. Because I believe that if you place your faith in Jesus, it will all pan out in the end.

Well for the Early Church, they weren't so much concerned with coffee flavors or worship styles or where to place the American flag in their house churches as they were about sharing the truth that Jesus had raised from the dead! They believed so deeply in what they had seen, heard, and experienced that they were compelled to share this gospel, this good news, with others... and even die for it. And to be perfectly honest with you, without getting too fatalistic, we should have such strong conviction that we, too, should be prepared to die for what we believe to be true about Jesus.

It's at this time I want to welcome our guests to Colonial... where our motto is "prepare to die"... New member registrations are now open now.

The point, though, is that Jesus fulfilled His mission as the Faithful Witness. And as His followers, we, too, must be sacrificial in our efforts to bless the nations with the hope of the gospel.

This leads me to my second and final subheading:

II. Reaching our Jerusalem

Referring back to Acts 1:8, Jesus said that His disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and that they would be His witnesses first of all in Jerusalem. This, after all, was where thousands of Jews had gathered for the annual Pentecost Feast, or the Feast of Weeks, which was a Jewish festival that occurred 50 days after Passover. It was estimated that there were up to 250,000 Jews that had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem from "every nation under heaven" including Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Cyrene, and Rome.

Now we could spend weeks on the significance of the city of Jerusalem alone, but what I want you to know for today is that God's strategy was for the gospel to be proclaimed first to a specific people gathered in a specific place and proximity where the Holy Spirit was about to show up.

The first people to hear the gospel were the Jews, and the first place they heard it was in Jerusalem. The first seven chapters of Acts give a historical account of the gospel beginning to be shared among to the Jews, which garnered much success at first before ultimately becoming largely oppositional.

So, what does all this mean for our church in our context in the here and now? In other words, how do we reach our Jerusalem?

First of all, I want to reiterate that proclaiming the gospel with your words is important. The truth is, we can be part of an evangelical denomination, and write the name "evangelical" on our signs and on our letterhead, but if we cease to tell people about Jesus then I've got news for you: we are NOT an evangelical church. That's not to guilt trip anyone. It's just the truth.

Telling people about Jesus is as important now as it has ever been. Now, I'm not saying you should be rude or offensive about it. But we should also not shy away when given an opportunity to do so.

As you may know, our primary strategy for evangelism here at Colonial is a nonthreatening, relational model called BLESS: Begin in Prayer, Listen and Engage, Eat, Serve, and Share your story (show BLESS slide). And we do this in the places where we live, learn, work, and play. But BLESS is far from the only evangelistic tool. There are many, many other helpful tools out there.

If you want to learn about one, you can go to the EPC website and click on the Evangelism tab. It will give you an overview of something called The Three Circles ([show image](#)). The three circles is a picture of... three circles. And it's a simple diagram that helps people explain and understand the gospel.

Another thing you could do is go back and listen to Dr. Kent Mathews sermon series on Evangelism 101 from last summer. There's some really great stuff there. The bottom line is that I never want to undersell the importance of verbally proclaiming the gospel, and there are some great resources available to us in how to do so.

But in terms of the specific people and places that your campus elders have prayerfully sensed God leading us to serve, and bless, I want to share the following Overland Park Campus Vision and a couple of our strategies with you. There are six total strategies related to reaching out, and I'm going to share the first two of them with you today because these two are primarily focused on reaching our "Jerusalem." And the other four will be revealed over the next two Sundays because they focus more on reaching our Judea, Samaria, and ends of the earth. This campus vision, by the way, is something you may want to take a picture of or write down.

OP Campus Vision:

To live into Jesus' prayer for Kingdom Oneness and live out the Greatest Commandment and Great Commission in our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Obviously, this is a lot to unpack and would take way more than however much time I have remaining. But what I love about it is that it's all based on Scripture. It's really a combination of Acts 1:8, Mark 12, Matthew 28, and John 17.

Many of you may recall Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17. He began by praying for Himself, and then for the twelve, and then for the future of the church. And He prayed that his future disciples may be one just as He and the Father are one so that the world might believe that the Father had sent Him (John 17:20-22). In other words, Jesus prayed that their witness would be in their oneness!

Speaking of Kingdom Oneness and reaching our Jerusalem, our first campus strategy is...

1. Build meaning friendships with ethnic churches and people of color in our 5-mile radius.
 - We don't need to go far to bless the nations; the nations are in our own backyard! They are in our garden and on our basketball court; they are our neighbors, co-workers, and our classmates.
 - Our 5-mile radius is 70 percent Caucasian and 30 percent people of color; the statistics are 64.5 percent Caucasian and 35.5 percent POC in the city of Olathe.
 - There are 82 different home languages spoken among Olathe Public Schools families.
 - If you're interested in what the Bible has to say about Kingdom Oneness and how it applies to our church moving forward, I want to invite you to join our

Multiethnic Conversations class on Sunday mornings in the fall led by Nirmal Samuel and Dave Ellis. The group registration is live on our website.

- Also – I want to invite you to save the date for a multiethnic praise concert & fellowship time on Sept. 17th at 6pm in our OP sanctuary. More details to come as the date approaches.

Our second campus strategy for reaching our Jerusalem is to...

2. Elevate our commitment to local school prayer/partnership.

- I am convinced that there is no better way to be a witness of Jesus in our culture than by earning trust and building credibility in our local schools. At the other campus, I spent the better part of 16 years investing in relationships with superintendents, administrators, school counselors, social workers, teachers, parents, and students. And guess what? When a school's power went out unexpectedly at 6am, they would call us, Colonial, to brainstorm options. When a well-known social worker tragically passed away and they needed a venue for her funeral, they called us, Colonial, to host and officiate the service. And then the mother of that social worker began attending our church. When a homeless family was looking for a warm meal and resources, they would call us at Colonial. We hosted, and continue to host, parenting classes on Wednesday nights for district parents while also providing food, hygiene products, and Happy Bottoms diapers for their kids.
- As far as investing in the next generation, I mentored all ages of students for 14 of my 16 years there, except for the two years when I was battling cancer and the District was on Covid lockdown. This is a picture of my student and me from last semester. One of the high school kids I mentored I let drive my car while we were going to get his driver's license. I'll never do that again. No, it was ok until he started to speed on our way home after passing the driving exam. Thank goodness we survived. Barely. Believe it or not, the oldest high school student I mentored is now 33 years old, and he's been in the Air Force for the past 10.5 years. Before he went into the Air Force, he did Summer Staff here at Colonial for three Summers. Then, just last week, he came back into town and surprised me by walking into my office after I hadn't seen him for three full years (show pic of Tim and me). These things happen when the Holy Spirit is guiding us to engage in our schools. But as always, we must Pray First!
- Speaking of prayer, I want to highlight a ministry called Moms in Prayer. Momsinprayer.org homepage. We have a couple of representatives here this morning, Susanne Knight (Olathe) and Carrie Muncsh (Blue Valley), who have a table in the Fellowship Hall. Their mission statement is "Moms Praying Worldwide Impacting Children and Schools for Christ." They pray for elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, administrators, teachers, and students. There are also several local MIP groups that pray for college and career young

adults. And it's not just for public schools. HCA and Maranatha both have groups, in addition to homeschool prayer groups and moms praying for special needs children. There are lots of opportunities for moms and grandmas to pray for local schools. Go check it out in the Fellowship Hall!

- I don't want to leave the dads out! So, I also want to highlight Fathers Club – show the fathersclub.org homepage. Father's Club is a dad-led grassroots effort creating simple ways for dads to be intentional with their kids, with other dads, and within their community. They have a strong focus on mental health awareness and suicide prevention. It's available for dads and even grandpas. They teach students, even fatherless students, how to change oil, tie ties, interview for jobs, and manage their finances. And a side benefit is that the dads grow closer together as well. The Father's Club is present in high schools throughout the KC metro including Olathe, Blue Valley, Shawnee Mission, and Lee's Summit along with private schools such as Heritage Christian. They have also started chapters in four Olathe Middle Schools. Tyler Cook (OE) is our primary contact here this morning. He'll be in the Fellowship Hall at a table if you'd like more information on how to get involved.
- But what about the students? Well, I recently learned about an app called Claim Your Campus (show the claimyourcampus.com image) which students can download and hear testimonials from students from all across the country committing to pray for their school. They have a prayer guide, testimonials, and a calendar of prayer gatherings happening for middle school and high school students throughout the KC metro. The other day I checked to see if the middle school where my kids will attend was on there, and sure enough! There is a prayer gathering happening every Monday morning at their school. If your school doesn't have one, your student can initiate one. It's that simple. Olivia from Claim Your Campus is here this morning and she'll be available in the Fellowship Hall, as well as popping in over to the Lighthouse to tell students more about it.
- Last but not least, I want to invite up Heather Schoonover who is the Community Development Community Liaison for Olathe Public Schools. Heather and I met four or five years ago when our South KC Campus was launching something called Impact Center Schools. At that time, I took a visit out to see Heather so I could learn more about what she was doing with Impact Olathe. I'm grateful that Impact Olathe and Impact Center Schools are still going strong, and that lives are being transformed! The other thing I love about Heather and OPS is that they are super open to faith partners like Colonial. Heather, please tell us a brief impact story and how our congregation can get more involved as a faith partner.
- Thank you, Heather! Heather, like the others, will be stationed in the Fellowship Hall to answer questions you may have after service.

At this point, many of you may be feeling excited while others are feeling a bit overwhelmed. And that's normal. The main thing is that we continue put ourselves in position to be His witnesses and pray about where we can serve sacrificially in our community. The opportunities are endless, but these are a few of the ways God is leading us to engage as a congregation. And there will be a few more opportunities that I'll share over the next two weeks... but you'll have to come back to hear more about them.

As we close, I want to encourage you by saying that someone can't do everything, but everyone can do something. And together in Christ, we can do even greater things (John 14:12).

Let's pray.