

**Can I Get a Witness?
In Judea and Samaria**
Mark Potter
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Good morning, church! For those of you who weren't here last week, we launched into a three-week mini-series on Acts 1:8 titled, "Can I Get a Witness?" and I argued that our primary mental image of a witness shouldn't be associated with a popular song title or a famous movie trial or a man dressed in a suit and tie who rings our doorbell. Instead, our primary picture of a witness should be Jesus hanging on the cross.

Being a witness, after all, is about living out the sacrificial love of Jesus and being prepared to lay down your life for the sake of the gospel.

The apostle John, you may recall, referred to Jesus as the Faithful Witness in the book of Revelation because Jesus accomplished what the Nation of Israel had failed to: He remained one hundred percent faithful in bearing witness to Yahweh as the one true God while embodying Israel's role as a holy light to the nations.

In Isaiah 49:6b, The Lord said this to Israel: "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy through His actions and with His words, including the words He spoke to His disciples in Acts 1:8 right before His ascension.

Let's stand together and read Acts 1:8:

"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)

Thank you, please be seated. Let's pray.

My sermon today is titled, "Can I Get a Witness in Judea and Samaria" and it falls under three subheadings:

- I. The Scattering of the Church
- II. Loving Our Enemies
- III. Reaching Our Judea and Samaria

Let's begin with:

- I. The Scattering of the Church

As you'll recall, after Jesus' resurrection, He instructed the disciples to remain in Jerusalem because He would soon send the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, where tens of thousands of Jews had gathered to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. In fact, the first seven chapters of Acts detail how the

gospel was proclaimed first to the Jews in the city of Jerusalem through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Speaking of the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus intentionally used the word “power” in response to the disciples’ question about the kingdom of Israel being restored once and for all. Their hope was that the resurrected Jesus would assert his divine power to re-establish Israel’s monarchy, finally freeing them from the oppressive Roman government. Jesus, however, had something else in mind. The power Jesus spoke of was not that of political power or military power; He was referring to a different kind of power – a spiritual power that would come from the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to this quote from New Testament scholar John Stott:

“Their minds were on regaining socio-political control. For the exercise of power is inherent in the concept of a kingdom. But power in God’s kingdom is different from power in human kingdoms... The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witnesses, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence. At the same time, we must be aware of the opposite extreme of super-spiritualizing it, as if God’s rule operates only in heaven and not on earth. The fact is that, although it must not be identified with any political ideology or program, it has radical political and social implications. Kingdom values come into collision with secular values. And the citizens of God’s kingdom steadfastly deny to Caesar the supreme loyalty for which he hungers, but which they insist on giving to Jesus alone.”

-John Stott, *The Message of Acts*

Can you hear the tension in Stott’s voice? The power available to us through the Holy Spirit is spiritual, but it operates in the earthly realm. This power is not political or social per se, but it has political and social implications in how it informs our political beliefs and social values. In other words, our heavenly King’s kingdom values inform how we interact with the secular values of our earthly kingdoms.

See, the power of earthly kingdoms is the power of self-promotion and military conquest. It’s a mentality of war -- kill-or-be-killed, win-at-all-costs, and survival of the fittest. The power of the Holy Spirit, though, is the power of courage and victory, yes; but it also includes the power of peace, humility, obedience, forgiveness, and sacrificial love. The Spirit’s power is the power of Christ crucified and resurrected.

Referring back to Acts 2, we learn that tens of thousands of Jews had gathered in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven for the Pentecost Feast. The Bible says that they were all together in one place when suddenly a sound like a mighty rushing wind filled the place where they were. Divided tongues of fire appeared to them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other tongues, which caused the multitude to become bewildered because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. The Scripture says that all were amazed and perplexed and asked one another, “What does this mean?”

As all this was happening, Peter stood up and addressed the crowd by preaching the gospel, and as a result three thousand Jews were cut to the heart and baptized. The Holy Spirit not only gave Peter the courage to be Christ's witness, but this same power also opened the hearts of the Jews to believe Peter's testimony and repent of their sins.

Initially, the Lord continued to add to their number daily those who were being saved, but before long, many Jews grew hostile to the message of the gospel. This hostility culminated in Acts 7 with the stoning of the first Christian martyr named Stephen. Remember, the word 'martyr' in English is derived from the Greek word, '*mártus*,' which means 'witness.'

As Stephen was in custody and being questioned by the high priest in Acts 7, he did not mince his words. In fact, he spoke the truth boldly, so boldly that it offended the Jewish authorities. Stephen called them "stiff-necked" and "uncircumcised in heart and ears" along with accusing them of being criminals, persecutors, betrayers, and murderers. News flash: offending the authorities is probably not the best strategy if you want to live.

In response to Stephen's proclamation of the gospel, the Scripture says that the Jewish authorities were enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. From the sound of it, they all needed bite guards from Dr. Rob Johns. Anyway, Stephen, filled with the Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the Father's right hand. But the authorities were so angry that they all cried out and rushed him out of the city to stone him.

How did Stephen respond? Listen to these incredible words from Acts 7:59-60:

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Can you imagine being martyred, and as you are being beaten and bludgeoned with rocks, you're crying out for God to have mercy on your enemies? This is what Stephen did. And this is what thousands upon thousands of other Christian martyrs have done throughout church history. In fact, as counterintuitive as it may seem, this is exactly how the church has spread.

According church historian Michael Green:

"The capacity of Christians to face criticism, hatred, persecution and death not just with equanimity but with joy must have had a tremendous impact. We know it did. You could mow these Christians down, you could throw them to the lions, but you could not make them deny their Lord or hate their persecutors. We have seen something of the same courage among Christians in Eastern Europe under Communism, or in Africa under the Mau Mau rising, or in Sudan, Nigeria and Indonesia under contemporary Muslim persecution. A resolute courage which can endure 'as seeing him who is invisible', confident of life after death, has an uncanny effect. It disarms the violence of the tormentors. They can kill the Christians, but they cannot break them." -Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*

Soon after Stephen was martyred, the new Christians realized that it was becoming too dangerous to stay in Jerusalem. The Scripture says in the beginning of Acts 8 that after Stephen was buried, Saul led a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Saul went house to house to find the Christians and when he found them, he had them thrown into prison. But the gospel continued to spread. These believers, empowered by the Holy Spirit and eager to share the gospel, began to scatter to other parts of Palestine including into enemy territory.

This leads me to my second subheading:

II. Loving Our Enemies

The opposition that the Christians had experienced in Jerusalem caused them to expand the gospel to other regions. According to Bible scholar William Wiersbe:

“For the church in Jerusalem, the death of Stephen meant liberation. They had been witnessing ‘to the Jew first’ ever since Pentecost, but now they would be directed to take the message out of Jerusalem to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and even to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19-26). The opposition of the enemy helped prevent the church from becoming a Jewish ‘sect’ and encouraged them to fulfill the commission of Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:18-20.” -William Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*

Acts 8 describes how the gospel spread to Judea and Samaria. After Stephen’s death, Philip, Peter, and John traveled to Samaria to proclaim the gospel and perform miracles. As the story goes, when the crowds saw the miracles that Philip performed and listened to his proclamation of the gospel message, many men and women believed in Jesus and were baptized (Acts 8:12). This was quite remarkable when considering the history of animosity between the Jews and Samaritans.

Samaria formed when the big bad Assyrians captured the ten northern tribes of Israel in 732 B.C. Among other things, this led to many Israelites being displaced from their homes in exchange for pagan foreigners who then intermarried with the Jews who were left behind. Simply put, the Samaritans were people of mixed race and religious persuasion.

Over time, the Samaritans built their own temple and formed their own priesthood at Mount Gerizim as a rival temple to the Jews while intentionally disassociating themselves from their southern enemies (John 4:9). From the Jews perspective, Samaritans were nothing more than impure, hostile, half-breed idol worshippers. For these reasons, when Jews would travel back and forth from Galilee to Jerusalem, they would routinely travel around Samaria. (show map)

Here you can see the region of Judea in the South and Galilee in the north with Samaria sandwiched in between. Judea and Samaria encompassed the area west of the River Jordan and the Dead Sea over to the Mediterranean Sea. The whole area of Judea and Samaria was a

combined 2,270 square miles, which is approximately equivalent to the area of Jackson, Clay, Platt, Wyandotte, and Johnson counties combined.

According to New Testament scholar NT Wright:

“The hatred between Jews and Samaritans had gone on for hundreds of years—and is still reflected, tragically, in the smoldering tension between Israel and Palestine today. Both sides claimed to be the true inheritors of the promises to Abraham and Moses; both sides, in consequence, regarded themselves as the rightful possessors of the land. Few Israelis today will travel from Galilee to Jerusalem by the direct route, because it will take them through the West Bank and risk violence. In exactly the same way, most first-century pilgrims making the same journey would prefer, as Jesus himself did, to travel down the Jordan valley to Jericho and then turn west up the hill to Jerusalem. It was much safer.” -NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone*

Now, of course, Jesus had already attempted to break their Samaritan stereotypes with His teachings on the matter including His teaching on the Sermon on the Mount when He said things like, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” And then again in Luke 10 when He delivered the famous Parable of the Good Samaritan, which to His Jewish audience would have come across as a complete oxymoron if not downright offensive. How can a Samaritan be good? Well, he was ‘good’ because he chose love over law, compassion over convenience, and empathy over apathy – all good reminders for us as well.

Wright suggests that the true scandal of the parable is this: If you can’t recognize the hated Samaritan as your neighbor and love him with Christ’s love, then you, too, may be left for dead.

Wright goes on to say: “What is at stake, then and now, is the question of whether we will use the God-given revelation of love and grace as a way of boosting our own sense of isolated security and purity, or whether we will see it as a call and challenge to extend that love and grace to the whole world. No church, no Christian, can remain content with easy definitions which allow us to watch most of the world lying half-dead in the road.” -NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone*

This leads me to my final subheading:

III. Reaching Our Judea and Samaria

Let’s get practical. What does it mean for us at Colonial to love our neighbors with the same level of compassion, courage, and sacrifice that the Good Samaritan demonstrated to the hurting man he encountered on the road?

If you were with us in worship last Sunday, I shared our OP Campus Vision with you along with two of our six strategies that focused primarily on reaching our Jerusalem. Today, you’ll hear two more strategies, and then next week you’ll hear the final two when we’ll discuss being Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth. By way of recap, and I won’t ask for a drum roll this time, here is the 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.

This vision not only aligns with your elders' strategic priority in attempting to reach our 2-5 mile radius, but it also aligns with our denomination's EPC Rev 7:9 initiative. And most importantly, it aligns with the heart and teachings of Jesus including His commissioning found in Acts 1:8.

In terms of strategies, I mentioned last week that the first strategy in reaching our Jerusalem is to...

1. Build meaningful friendships with multiethnic churches and people of color in our 5-mile radius.
 - According to our recent *Know Your Community* demographic assessment, our community is 70 percent Caucasian and 30 percent people of color in our 5-mile radius and 35.5 percent POC in the city of Olathe.
 - There are 82 different languages spoken in the home among Olathe Public Schools families.
 - Our Kingdom Oneness team is working diligently on a couple of exciting initiatives including hosting a Multiethnic Conversations Class in the fall and hosting a multiethnic praise concert on Sept 17th in our sanctuary.

I then shared that our second campus strategy in reaching our Jerusalem is to...

2. Elevate local school prayer/partnership.
 - Last week we hosted Heather Schoonover from Olathe Public Schools to come share about Impact Olathe and the various ways we, as a church, can engage.
 - We also highlighted Moms in Prayer and the Father's Club, as well as a student-led initiative called Claim Your Campus. If you'd like any further information about any of these initiatives, you can email me at mpotter@colonialkc.org and I'll connect you to the right person.
 - Bottom line: after 17 years of investing in school partnerships, I'm convinced that there is no better way to be Christ's witnesses in the 21st Century than by earning trust and building credibility in our local schools.

But what about a couple of strategies for reaching our Judea and Samaria? Our third campus strategy is to...

3. Continue to develop & promote a hope and healing pathway of support groups and resources that we can offer to our congregation, church partners, school partners, and ministry partners.

Listen, the hurt and pain in our community may not seem as obvious as seeing a half-dead man lying in the middle of the road, but there is no doubt that people are hurting right here in Johnson County as well as right here in our own congregation. People are experiencing major

health challenges, or they are addicted to prescription meds, or they are depressed, or their marriages are falling apart, or they are addicted to online shopping, or they are lonely and attempting to find their identity in social media, or they are being abused or neglected, or they're addicted to pornography, or sports betting, and the list goes on.

When we surveyed you last October, we found through a representative sample that the greatest felt needs in our community are related to loneliness, anxiety, depression, and mental health, followed closely by struggling marriages and materialism. Bottom line: people are hurting, and if we can address a felt need or offer tangible hope in the name of Jesus, our neighbors may be more open to responding to the gospel.

For example, did you know that we have a counseling referral page of vetted counselors along with a scholarship fund available to help subsidize the cost for people who can't afford it? It's called Therapist Assist and there are currently 18 counselors on our list who your pastors refer to on a semi-regular basis. These counselors specialize in everything from marital conflict to anxiety and depression to eating disorders to shame to trauma to grief and loss and everything in between.

I was recently in Colorado hanging out with my best friend from childhood. Unfortunately, his marriage fell apart and so he decided to start dating another woman. What's more concerning is that about 10-12 years ago, he completely walked away from his faith. There were a lot of factors for his decision – church hurt, family dynamics, etc. But for me, it was so sad to see my best friend's marriage fall apart after rejecting the faith of his childhood. He and his wife were married for 16 years, and they have two grade-school age children who are obviously hurting and struggling to adjust to the new norm.

As we sat in his car in a Denver hotel parking lot, he unloaded on me about everything he had been through. And even though he has told me that he doesn't consider himself a Christian anymore, he asked me point blank to put on my pastor hat and give him some counsel on how he can get his life back on track. As part of that conversation, the topic of counseling came up. And since he had recently lost his job, he couldn't afford to pay for counseling. So, I told him about what our church does in offering scholarship funds for people in our church who would benefit from seeing a licensed professional. And he just thought that was the best idea ever! In fact, if a church in Denver offered to pay for his family's counseling sessions, I wouldn't be shocked to see them all back in church one day.

Imagine the impact we could have on our Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria if we offered to help subsidize the cost of counseling not only for our church members, but also for our ethnic church partners, school partners, and ministry partners. What an incredible witness that would be to our neighbors, coworkers, and friends that we care so much about someone else's mental health that we are committed to helping them get healed!

In addition to Therapist Assist, our church offers a number of groups and classes that are open to you as well as your neighbors, coworkers, and friends. I personally don't think we've begun to

tap the potential of these groups in terms of community engagement. Here are a few of the “Hope and Healing” type groups we offer:

- Spiritual Parenting class (fall semester)
- Reengage (spring semester)
- Flying Solo (widows)
- Soul Healing events and prayer sessions
- Caregiver support
- Alzheimer's/ Dementia support
- Walking Through Grief support
- Faith and health support
- Parents of LGBTQIA+ teens group
- Conquer pornography recovery

If you're interested in any of these groups or you know someone who would benefit from any them, please refer them to our groups page at colonialkc.org/groups. Or, if you have any specific questions, you could contact our Groups Pastor, Pastor Tami: tlundgren@colonialkc.org or our Care Director, Betsy Vicknair: bvicknair@colonialkc.org for more information.

Our final campus strategy that I want to highlight this morning is to....

4. Deepen our involvement with Mission Southside.
 - I've been aware of MSS since its inception and I recently asked the elders to join me in taking a tour of their facilities. I had high expectations to begin with, but they exceeded them in terms of the amount of programs and activities they offer.
 - Invite Craig Howard & Ernest Acheamong forward to share about Mission Southside including their mission statement, a God story, and how we can get more involved.
 - Promote MSS serve day on Aug 13 from 2-5pm and ask what we'll be doing there. Be sure to register today because registration closes tomorrow.

As you can see, God is on the move. People are hurting, and it's amazing that we get to partner with organizations like Mission Southside who truly live out their mission of putting God's love into action by extending help through hope.

Also, I want to remind you that next week will be the final week of the sermon series, and I'll be rolling out the final two strategies that correspond with our campus vision. And who knows? I may invite up another special guest... but you'll have to come to see who it is.

Ask Ernest to pray to close. Let's pray.