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Go into the World

“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)

I grew up in a small church in Massachusetts. On a few occasions we would have a guest missionary come in with his or her slides. I was fascinated to see a part of the world that seemed light-years away. Their stories not only gave witness to a world far away, but in those stories I had the strong sense that these men and women had been with Jesus. Those evenings captured in my heart a desire to one day be a missionary myself. I dreamed of the day that I would travel to far away places and carry the Word of God to people of a different culture and language. I still have that desire—to take the Word of God to those who are lost. But, since that time, the world has changed a lot.

Through the progress of technology, transportation and communications, the world has become much smaller. A couple of years ago, I traveled to Tanzania to teach Christian leaders in the city of Moshi. I had never been that far from home. The fourteen-hour flight was the longest I have ever taken. Home seemed very far away. Yet, I realized in another sense just how much smaller this world has become. My dad served in World War II. He served in North Africa, Italy and France. During that time, he and my mom would write letters to each other. It could take up to one month for some of those letters to arrive at their destination. As I sat in the Internet café of Moshi, sending my emails, I thought to myself, “What must it have been like to live without a sense of immediate access?” It gave me new admiration and respect for my parents’ generation. It also

gave me a new perspective for what it means to be a missionary in today’s world. Immediate access not only makes many things convenient; it opens doors for getting the Word out about Jesus.

When one looks at this world that is getting smaller, a study of its population reveals a snapshot that looks like this:

If the world were a village of 1,000 people, by continents there would be:

- 564 Asians
- 210 Europeans
- 86 Africans
- 80 South Americans
- 60 North Americans

By religions, there would be:

- 329 Christians
- 174 Muslims
- 131 Hindus
- 61 Buddhists
- 52 animists
- 3 Jews
- 34 believers in other sects and religions
- 216 people with no identifiable religious belief

In this village of 1,000:

- 60 people would have half the total income
- 500 people would be hungry
- 600 people would live in shantytowns
- 700 people would be illiterate

What makes this even more interesting is that one does not have to travel the world to see this picture. It is right here in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (1995), Caucasian domination of America will diminish substantially in the years to come, falling from 76 percent of the population in 1990 to just 52 percent by the year 2050. By contrast, the Hispanic population will rise from nine percent to 22 percent, and the Asian population, almost nonexistent a generation ago, will comprise 10 percent of the nation (Hower, pp. 59-60).

The dream I had as a young boy of carrying the Word to people of different cultures and languages is much more within reach right here in America. However, as the world we live in gets smaller, the thinking and vision of the Church needs to expand beyond the walls of the local congregation.

I love the imagery of the church as a ship. The sanctuary at St. Luke, as in many churches, is adorned with a beautiful wooden, tongue and groove ceiling. When you look up, it is like looking at a hull of a boat upside down. It reminds me each time I look at it that we are to be a ship—not a cruise ship, but a rescue ship. On a cruise ship, the goal is the comfort and the pleasure of those who are passengers—all the food you want to eat, games, entertainment and more than one can possibly imagine. The church is not a ship that is built for the comfort of the passengers. Imagine if you will, a cruise ship sailing along with its passengers dancing the night away with fine wine and tables overflowing with food. Meanwhile, in the waters below many people are screaming for help as they flail and drown. I ask myself what kind of ship is our church? What kind of ship do you want to sail on in the name of Christ? Jesus has charted the course for our journey:

“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).

This verse serves as an outline for the Book of Acts. The mission begins in Jerusalem. It then spreads to the surrounding area of Judea. Then it expands to Samaria and finally by the last chapter, Paul ends up in Rome, which for him was the remotest part of the earth. God has a global vision for the early Church. Their thinking went way beyond their walls. Can it be any different for us?

“For God so loved the World, that He gave His one and only Son. . . “ (John 3:16).

He loved the world, and in Acts 1:8, He asks us to do the same.

Acts 1:8 is not only a great outline for the Book of Acts, it is great strategy for the local church. God is calling us to be His witnesses. Let it begin in our Jerusalem (the town in which we live). Let it then expand to the county surrounding us (our Judea). From there, let us not be hesitant to enter into our Samaria. When Jesus asked the early church to go into Samaria, He was asking them to go into a different culture and to people they found difficult to like or trust. Where is your Samaria? Finally, to the ends of the earth. That may mean going as far as your neighbor who just moved in from China. It could also mean volunteering on a mission trip or sending someone to another country. What are some of the ways that you can think of to fulfill this command of Jesus in going to the ends of the earth?

Years ago, the slide shows I saw as a young boy told me of the wide gap between those in foreign lands and my small church in Massachusetts. That gap has closed a lot because of travel and communication advancements. In another way, however, the gap is widening between the Church and the culture of the world.

Compare the world with the Christ we preach. The gap is huge between His call to selflessness and the world’s self-obsession. Jesus declares that He is the truth and the way and the life. This does not match well with a world that rejects any absolute truth. More and more people no longer see Christians

or the faith they profess as an influence in society. Six out of ten Americans believe the church is irrelevant. Here in America there are 170 million non-Christians (making us the third largest mission field in the world) who view what the church offers as useless (Lewis, R., p. 23).

How are we to close that gap? First, recognize that this view of the world is not much different from the world into which Jesus said to the disciples “. . . *you will be my witnesses. . . .*” There is no need to become pessimistic or anxious. The world is ripe unto the harvest. It is a wonderful time to be in the Church and in the world as His witnesses. He has created and called us for a time such as this.

Secondly, one of the best ways to close a gap is to build a bridge. Saxonburg, Pennsylvania was the home of John Roebling, a famous bridge designer and the inventor of wire rope. His wire rope design was used in the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in the 1860's. A bridge is a good visual for the church of the twenty-first century. Years ago, back in that small church where I grew up, it was enough to build a bridge between the church and culture on truth alone. “God says” was usually enough to get people to listen with respect and openness. Today, the bridge we seek to build, both in our churches and in our personal lives with the world around us, needs to be designed differently. As I contemplate how to fulfill God's mission in Acts 1:8, I have found the following words helpful:

“We need bridges that balance public proclamation with congregational incarnation. Bridges that are suspended by the steel cables of the Great Commandment as well as the Great Commission. In the twenty-first century, the church must understand, as never before, that faith—without works—is dead. So will be our influence. As a result, the chasm between the church and the world only grows wider and more disingenuous. Says George Barna,

‘Americans are not going to patronize an institution which appears incapable of living what it preaches’” (Lewis, R., p.40).

Jesus has given to us the mission of being His witnesses. We are not called to be promoters of a program or even of a church, but first and foremost, a witness to Him. Read the book of Acts and you will see that they do just that. They talk about Him and the difference He has made in their lives. The world is both listening and watching. The world is hungry for things spiritual. In “The Present Future,” Reggie McNeal writes:

“People may be turned off to the church, but they are not turned off to Jesus. Jesus is popular. He still makes the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* every year (generally around Easter). As I write these lines he's just come out on the cover of a prominent scientific journal. Church people sometimes get excited by this but fail to understand that people in the nonchurch culture don't associate Jesus with the church. In their mind, the church is a club for religious people where club members can celebrate their traditions and hang out with others who share common thinking and lifestyles. They do not automatically think of the church as championing the cause of poor people or healing the sick or serving people. These are things they associate with Jesus” (p. 12).

Our call is to stand firm in the truth of His Word while at the same time presenting our lives as living proof of a heart devoted to loving Him first and our neighbor as our own self.

The third way in which that gap will be closed is by relying on His power, not our own. “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. . . .*” (Acts 1:8). Jesus did not expect them to do this on their own. Nor does He expect that with us. I find it amazing that when Jesus left, the disciples did just what He said. They waited. They waited for ten days until the Spirit came upon

them. After all, they had been with Him for three years. They knew what the message was that they would speak. Yet, they waited. They depended on His power, not their own. We need to do the same, for it is only in His Spirit that any of us will have the boldness that is needed.

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4: 31).

When I consider those believers of the early Christian Church, I see ordinary folks. What made them different was not their education or their background. What made them different was this one truth:

“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” (Acts 4:13).

“These men had been with Jesus.”

That simple phrase is what I want others to say about my life and me. “He’s been with Jesus.” I want my witness of Jesus to be marked with words and actions that will be a bridge by which the world I live in gets a little smaller and a little closer.

Prayer: Father as you have loved the world, so let your love fill my heart. May my life and the ministry of my church be motivated out of love for those your Son died for on the Cross. Help us to build those bridges that will enable the lost to be connected with you. **Amen.**

Challenge: How can your church take on a more global emphasis? Where would you say is your Jerusalem? Judea? Samaria? Outer most parts of the Earth? What can your church do to build bridges in these places?

Scripture Reading: Acts 1-2

From the Book of Concord: “All people, whatever their calling, should seek perfection, that is, growth in the fear of God, in faith, in the love for their neighbor, and in similar spiritual virtues” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVII: Monastic Vows, p. 283:37).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Go and/or a thought you would like to explore further.