

“The Call to Witness”
Acts 1:1-26
Carol Martin

I love to get personal letters. How about you? There’s something great about a letter instead of a ringing phone. You can put it in your pocket or purse and it waits until you have time to read it. It’s there for rereading. If it’s handwritten, you can visualize your friend because you know the handwriting. I have to admit I get very few personal letters these days; however, I’m blessed to receive cards frequently with short greetings of encouragement, but a long, handwritten letter – hardly ever. Once in a while I get one from an aunt who lives out of state. But what is more embarrassing to admit is that I seldom **write** any personal letters anymore. In this day of e-mail and computers, it’s so handy to just whip out correspondence fast and easy . . . or easier yet to pick up the phone. Aren’t we glad Luke didn’t have those modern conveniences when he wrote to Theophilus?! We can read and reread the treasures from Luke’s heart in both his gospel account of Jesus’ life and his documentation of the birth of the church.

Who was Theophilus? A number of theories abound as to the identity of this man, but we simply do not know for certain. Whoever he was, Luke had enough regard for him and his spiritual welfare to write two lengthy letters to him. You don’t get copies of the lectures that are prepared each week (although they are on our People of the Word website), but do you realize that in essence each speaker has invested considerable time in concern for your spiritual welfare? They write in preparation for speaking with deep concern that you might find real application to your life from the living Scriptures. Each one wants you to grow in knowledge and grace and be equipped to live the Christian life abundantly. Each of you means as much to us as Theophilus did to Luke.

According to verse 3, “After His suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared (in the Greek it means he ate with them) to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”

Jesus spent time during His resurrection appearances teaching the disciples about the future of His Kingdom. His resurrection proved that the disciples had a future hope in the Kingdom of God. His resurrection proved that He had conquered the power of sin and death. His resurrection proved that He was who He claimed to be. Therefore, His commission to the church – that we find in verse 8 – is based on His resurrection. Without the resurrection, there would be no great commission for the church to fulfill. We would be simply passing on the ideology of a dead teacher, rather than the personal message of grace and love and forgiveness from the living Lord of the universe.

When we think about the Kingdom of God, we had you look at the passage in Luke 17 where Jesus told the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God is within you. It is a spiritual kingdom that the heart takes hold of at salvation. It was not the legalistic system of good works that the Pharisees kept expecting that somehow it earned them the kingdom.

Jesus then went on in that passage and addressed His disciples and told them about His Second Coming . . . a literal kingdom on earth. We had you look at the Zechariah 14 passage that describes His coming with His holy ones and confirming that "the Lord will be king over the whole earth."

The literal kingdom was what the disciples understood most. Not unlike us, we want the familiar that we can see, touch, smell, or hear. Vs. 6 "So when they met together, they asked Him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?'" And what did He tell them? He didn't say, "Wait, you've got it all wrong. I'm never coming back to earth again physically; this is just a spiritual kingdom." No – He said "It's not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." When is not the priority – there's work to do and a lot of it! Go to Jerusalem and wait for the gift My Father has promised . . . "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."

This commission to be witnesses was not the only commission Jesus gave His disciples. There was one recorded in each of the four gospels.

Matthew 28:19-20 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Mark 16:15 "Go into the world and preach the good news to all creation."

Luke 24:47-49 "...repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are my witnesses to these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

John 20:21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

But before being sent they must wait. Waiting is hard to do, isn't it, especially in our "now" generation of wanting instant gratification? But for those of us who were taught to save the money before you bought something, or wait for marriage, we've experienced the sweetness of reward for the discipline of delay. Jesus reminded the

apostles that John baptized with water, an outward sign of consecration – the experience of cleansing. Now there was to be a new kind of baptism symbolic of cleansing – the Holy Spirit baptism was to be immersion in the very life-giving spiritual power of God. The apostles were to be indwelt, empowered, engrossed, and enlightened by the living God!

Talk about expanding your horizons! It must have been mind-boggling . . . these were just a group of ordinary men, imperfect like us, . . . yet they had an extraordinary Savior. And to top it off . . . He ascended bodily into heaven. They SAW that! Do you think their jaws were hanging open? Do you think they blinked twice or maybe even jumped a little when two men dressed in white tapped them on the shoulder and said, “Why are you looking into the sky?” But those angels brought comfort and reassurance. “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go.” He IS coming again!

So, the disciples left the Mount of Olives and returned to Jerusalem to wait. And what did they do while they waited? They prayed, and prayed, and prayed some more. Vs. 14 says they were constantly in prayer. Someone once noted that “the early church fasted and prayed. The modern church prays fast.” Unfortunately, there’s a solid element of truth in that observation.

Many of us learn to pray in the highchair. My friend, Sandy, was teaching her granddaughter to pray before meals. Little Alexis puts her hands over her face, but peeked through her fingers to see if it’s over yet. I learned a lot of rote prayers, the rosary, acts of contrition in the Catholic Church. But I really learned to pray in this Bible study. Like many of you I was fearful of praying out loud before others. This Bible study taught me that I wasn’t praying for the benefit of others, I was talking to my Father directly from my heart. I listened to godly women pray; I read *What Happens When Women Pray* by Evelyn Christianson; and more than anything, I began to take prayer seriously. I kept a prayer journal. If you haven’t ever tried that, there is nothing like putting a date beside an answered prayer request to see how consistent and faithful God is in response to prayer.

Corrie ten Boom once asked an interesting question, “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?” One young believer gave sound advice to us Christians when he confessed, “I believe in prayer, but my mother once heard me praying and said: ‘Son, don’t bother to give God instructions; just report for duty.’” Prayer is a beautiful privilege for every Christian and even more fulfilling when you know God Himself is listening to every word. Just waiting for you to ask, seek and knock.

There were about 120 people gathered for prayer. Some of them are named for us in the Scriptures: the disciples, Mary the mother of Jesus, other women and the brothers of Jesus. And while they waited for the coming Holy Spirit, Peter was prompted to recognize that the death of Judas had left them one short of the twelve

apostles. Earlier Jesus had made a significant promise to the disciples in Matthew 19:28:

"I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Peter recalled Psalm 109:8 "May another take his place of leadership." So, Peter announced that it was necessary to choose someone who had been with us the whole time that Jesus went in and out among us from John's baptism to the ascension. In other words, someone who was an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ.

Parenthetically Peter mentions the death of Judas. Some people have a problem with the difference in the way the death of Judas is described in Matthew 27:3-10 and the way Peter describes it. Quite simply, these two passages simply offer two different ways of looking at the same event.

Matthew 27:3-10 is an accurate, historical account of what literally occurred. The key events to notice are:

1. Judas returned his bribe to the priests.
2. Judas took his own life.
3. The priests used his money to purchase a potter's field. Since it was purchased with "blood money," (the money Judas got for betraying Jesus) it was called "The field of blood."

In Acts Peter tells us:

1. Judas bought a field – called the field of blood – with the money he received. Though the chief priests actually made the purchase (according to Matthew), Judas "bought" it because it was purchased with his money. Matthew's goal was to provide an accurate chronological account of the event; Peter's goal was to remind the disciples of Judas' evil actions and the consequences of his act of betrayal.
2. Matthew says Judas hanged himself. Peter embellishes the cruel fate of the betrayer with some specific detail.

Back to the selection of the twelfth apostle. Some have felt that selecting another apostle at this point was a mistake. Clearly God intended it to be Paul who would later have such an impact on world evangelism. But Paul, as we'll see, was divinely selected by Jesus for a different purpose: as the apostle to the Gentiles. He was not numbered among The Twelve.

Peter declared the qualifications needed and the names of two men were put forth: Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. Not yet having the personal indwelling guidance of the Holy Spirit, they prayed and then utilized

the Old Testament method of determining God's will – casting lots. Charles Ryrie explains how this was done.

"They prayed not for the Lord to choose, but for the choice which the Lord had already made to be made known to them. The two names were put on lots, (dice if you will) placed in an urn, and then the one which first fell from the urn was taken to be the Lord's choice."

According to Proverbs 16:33, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." So, for them, casting lots was a reliable way to determine God's choice. But what about us today? To find out God's will should we draw straws or flip coins or throw darts?

No, we don't need to employ such decision-making methods because we have the Holy Spirit's voice within us and the Holy Scriptures to guide us. In fact, this was the last time God directed His people through this method. And as a result, the twelfth apostle was chosen, Matthias.

Some have raised the question, "What happened to Matthias? If selecting him as a replacement was so important, why do we not read about his accomplishments in Acts?"

The answer is simple when we understand the scope and intent of the book. Luke never intended to detail the adventures of each and every apostle. His intent is to show how the church advanced from Jerusalem to Rome. Apart from Peter and Paul, we hear little of any of the other apostles and some are not mentioned at all. So, Matthias is not alone in being an obscure figure in this book.

We must remember that Matthias' success or failure as an apostle has nothing to do with what is recorded in Scripture; it has to do with his faithfulness to the tasks that God set before him. Fame and notoriety are tools that society used to evaluate success; God evaluates us based on our faithfulness. And some of the most obscure people within His church are, in fact, the most faithful.

Well, Luke could write Christ's story and the story of the church with a pen and scroll, but he would have the readers of his two volumes etch that love story of what "Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1) deep into their hearts to be reflected in their acts and deeds. The only Bible many of our neighbors and friends may ever read is the life of the churchgoer Monday through Saturday.

It's time to sing again:
Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see

Christ only, always, living in me.

Will Durant, the philosopher and historian, made an accurate observation when he wrote, "If Christianity would go back to its origins, cleanse itself resolutely from the silt of time, and take its stand with fresh sincerity from the personality and ideals of its founder, who could resist it?"

The church was forming in the womb almost ready to come to full church birth. An exciting time! Perhaps you're in a place where you're waiting and praying. Remember the passion of the early church: "Dream great dreams . . . pray great prayers . . . then expect God to do great things."