

Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ

May 12, 2019

To Adult Teachers:

May 12, we will study Acts 1:6-8. Discussion questions follow.

Warm Up Questions

1. If anyone in the group has ever lived in a different culture (a foreign country, or perhaps even a different region of this country), have them talk about some of the adjustments they had to make in adapting to the new culture.
2. Can you think of a time when Central had more evangelistic zeal than it has at present? If so, what do you think were the major factors that contributed to it?

Scripture Reflection (Read Acts 1:6-8)

1. What kinds of people would be our “Jerusalem,” people that we at Central could most easily connect with and begin spiritual conversations with?
2. What kinds of people would be our “Samaria,” people we could reach, but toward whom we may have some fears or negative feelings?
3. What kinds of people would be our “ends of the earth,” people who may live in the Ada area, but are culturally very different from us?
4. What kinds of church activities do you think are best suited to connecting with each of the above groups? What kinds of activities could we do to better connect with one or more of these groups?

Application

1. In the message this morning, Mark defined a witness as “one who is willing to pay a price to say what he or she knows.” What price are you willing to pay to reach out to people around you who do not yet know Jesus?
2. Name three people you are willing to pray for daily, asking God to open a door to a spiritual conversation with them.

Prayer

The following prayer is from Thom Rainer’s book, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*. Either pray this prayer with your group or use it as a thought starter to pray your own prayer.

Lord, remind me that I am to be a Great Commission Christian in a Great Commission church. Remind me that, in Your strength, I am to do whatever it takes to reach out into my community with the transforming power of the gospel.

Sermon: *You Will Be My Witnesses*

Acts 1:6-8

Jesus gave his disciples a prayer to pray: “Thy kingdom come.” The coming of the kingdom of God is near and dear to the hearts of all true followers of Jesus Christ. Kingdom of God = reign of God. We long for a world in which God reigns with truth, justice, and love. Where his power protects those whose hearts are aligned with his and where his justice thwarts the plans of those who try to take advantage of or abuse others. “Thy kingdom come, Lord!”

1. We understand the anxiousness of the disciples after the resurrection, expressed in Acts 1:6 - “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus replied, “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) In this surprising response, Jesus informs them that he will indeed establish the kingdom, but that he will do it through intermediaries, both divine and human. The divine agent will be the Holy Spirit, and he will empower the human instruments—the disciples themselves, which in today’s context means us.

2. Seen in the context of kingdom building, the concept of “witness” comes into sharper focus. We generally define the word in legal terms. A witness is someone who has personal knowledge of facts that have a bearing on a case before the court. That person is called upon to say what he or she knows so that a just verdict can be rendered. To understand how the witnesses Jesus envisioned differ from our legal paradigm, consider how kingdoms worked in biblical world. We’re used to a stable system where we choose our leaders and changes in administration take place in an orderly manner. In ancient world, strongest guy got to be king, and constant tale of intrigue and treachery behind who was on the throne. Imagine what it would have been like to be a citizen in a place like that. Your way of life, the safety of you and your family, your financial security, even your life was at the mercy of forces completely beyond your control. Rule could change in an instant, and could change with dizzying frequency.
3. Now consider a hypothetical ancient kingdom ruled by a tyrannical despot who has deposed and exiled the rightful king. Then a revolt removes the tyrant from the throne. The legitimate monarch returns to the capital city to reclaim his throne. There is great rejoicing at his coronation, but most of his kingdom is still in the grip of the old system, administered by the tyrant’s corrupt cronies. The new king calls his closest, most trusted comrades and commissions them: “Go into my kingdom as witnesses to my ascent to the throne. Tell the events you have seen to everyone, here in the capital city, in the surrounding regions, and to the farthest reaches of my territory. You are my representatives, acting on my authority. All the power of the throne stands behind you.” You can imagine the reactions such witnesses would encounter. Those who had suffered under the former ruler’s cruelty would greet the news with joy and relief. But his cronies who profited from the despot’s mismanagement— those who had actively participated in and benefited from his corrupt ways—would be threatened and would come out fighting. These witnesses sent forth to proclaim the new king’s rule would no doubt pay a price for saying what they knew.
4. Similarly, a witness to the kingdom of God is not just someone who says what he or she knows; a witness is someone who is willing to pay a price to say what they know. Little wonder that the word in biblical Greek for witness is *martyria*, from which we get our English word martyr. Jesus calls upon us to pay a price for witnessing to his reign. For many, that will be good news, but to some, it’s a threat to the established order.
- 5.

This leads to a very specific application. Jesus gave what we call the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Does that sound anything like the mandate given by the king in my previous example? Thom Rainer, in *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, says in dying churches, the Great Commission has become the Great Omission. “Thriving churches have the Great Commission as the centerpiece of their vision, while dying churches have forgotten the clear command of Christ. Perhaps I’m being too gentle to say the deceased church “forgot” to act upon the Great Commission. Perhaps it is more accurate to say the church “decided” not to act upon Christ’s command.” “As the members of the dying church recalled their good old days, often decades earlier, they longed for similar results today. They often wondered why they could not replicate those good old days. And it was not unusual for them to blame others for their plight. You see, these members had a convenient omission in their recollections. They wanted the same results as yesteryear, but they weren’t willing to expend the efforts. Members of the dying church weren’t willing to go into the community to reach and minister to people. They weren’t willing to invite their unchurched friends and relatives. They weren’t willing to expend the funds necessary for a vibrant outreach. They just wanted it to happen. Without prayer. Without sacrifice. Without hard work.”

6. There are many ways a congregation needs to make the commitment to pay the price for witness. Budget, personnel, facilities, outreach events. And Central is not “doing nothing” in this category (Compassion Outreach, bus ministry, Restore) But at most basic and personal level, here are some commitments each member can make:
 - a. List three persons you feel called to witness to and pray for opportunities to reach out to them.
 - b. Share something of your faith and initiate a spiritual conversation. This is a key point where the Great Commission has become the Great Omission.
 - (1) Barna research. ¾ of professing Christians have had fewer than 10 spiritual conversations in the past year. Why reluctance to have spiritual conversations? Significant number believe that people are more likely now than in the past to see them as offensive if they share their faith (Millennials twice as likely to say this). Almost half of Christians say they would avoid a spiritual conversation if it meant that their non-Christian friend would reject them. The fear is real, but consider: a full third of US adults say they have made a big change in their lives as the result of a spiritual conversation. Maybe we need to remind ourselves that a witness is someone who is willing to pay a price to say what they know.
 - (2) Of course, there are good ways and bad ways to start a spiritual conversation. But there are more natural ways. Aware of a concern, ask if you can be paying about it, share something you’ve read in the Bible or a spiritual book, share something you learned from a sermon or a Bible class. Talk about some activity you participated in at church or with other Christians.
 - c. Invite them to come with you to church, or (especially) to outreach-oriented events.
7. In doing these simple things, you will be witnessing to your “Jerusalem.” Recall that Jesus told his disciples to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem,” “in Judea and Samaria,” and “to the ends of the earth.” Our “Jerusalem” would be our immediate surroundings. People we already know and have relationships with, people who are a lot like us. And we must certainly reach for this “low-hanging fruit.” But bearing witness to Jerusalem is only the beginning. We have been called to be witnesses to the reign of God in our Judea and “Samaria.” You are of course familiar with the antipathy toward Samaritans reflected in the gospel accounts. The call to witness to Samaria involves going to people who are not like us, and toward whom we may have negative feelings. This could mean reaching out to “those people”: drug addicts, homeless persons, ex-convicts, victims of domestic abuse, or homosexuals.
8. Finally, Jesus calls us to carry our witness to his reign to the ends of the earth. Foreigners. People not like us at all. The Gentile mission—with its accompanying challenges and conflicts—is a central theme in Acts, and indeed in the rest of the New Testament. Crossing cultural barriers with the good news of Jesus is never easy. Ask any missionary. But crossing cultural barriers is not just for foreign

missionaries. Central is significantly different demographically from the general population of Ada. You must seriously grapple with the issue of what it means to communicate the gospel across cultural divides. (Our world has shifted radically. Most of us here live in a foreign culture. One member's "moment of truth": coming out of bookstore and seeing well-dressed gay couple kissing, then group covered in tattoos, then girl in see-through blouse and dreadlocks cycling down street. Her thought: "Wow! Ten years ago, would have been shocked. Now realize that these aren't the marginal weirdos and freaks of this society; these are the mainstream 'normal' people." Receiving people into our fellowship who arrive with vastly different cultural practices and sensibilities is excruciatingly difficult.) Yet, faithfulness as witnesses demands that we reach across these cultural barriers.

9. Why am I making such a point about crossing cultural barriers with the gospel? Because Thom Rainer says a characteristic of dying churches is that they aren't willing to cross those cultural barriers: "Here's the bigger issue. Even if the church began to grow on its own, the members of the dying church would only accept the growth if the new members were like them and if the church would continue to 'do church' the way they wanted it. That reality, when it is all said and done, is likely at the heart of the issue. Members of the dying churches really didn't want growth unless that growth met their preferences and allowed them to remain comfortable."

Central's neighborhood has undergone a huge cultural shift. Will we pay the price necessary to learn how to communicate with people of that culture, and then include them in our fellowship or will we die? I am confident that the spirit of this church is that we will work very hard to be faithful witnesses: in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.