

THE ONLY REASON
Acts 1:8

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Amarillo, Texas
August 8, 2021

The English playwright, Alan Bennett, wrote a famous play about the equally famous madness of a well-known king. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, England has four kings in succession all called “George,” and the third of them – George III – suffered for a fair amount of his reign from some kind of mental illness, probably porphyria. So Bennett called his play *The Madness of George III*.

But when they came to make a movie of the play, the movie makers faced a problem. Moviegoers were used to sequels: Spiderman II, Superman III, and so on. A title like that meant that there had been a earlier film of the same name. So they were worried that if people saw a title like *The Madness of George III* they would assume they had missed the first two films in the sequence – and perhaps they wouldn’t go to see what they took to be the third. So the filmmakers just called the movie *The Madness of King George*.

The opening paragraph of Acts declares that, unlike Bennett’s play and film, it is indeed a sequel. There has been a previous book, and this one continues the story. In fact, it even suggests a kind of title: *The Deeds and Teaching of King Jesus II* – not *Jesus the Second*, of course, because there is only one King Jesus, but the second book about which the one and only Jesus did and taught. (N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, Pt. 1)

The disciples were gathered around their risen Lord. So what? Jesus has overcome the grave. Their Messiah is alive. Now what does this all mean?

They asked the question, “Lord, are you going, at this time, to restore the kingdom of Israel?” It was a question they asked repeatedly, and it was a natural one for a Jew to ask the Messiah, especially having witnessed resurrection power. Central to the Old Testament faith was a conviction that God would, in the age to come, fully restore His people to their inheritance in the land, and they would live securely without foreign interference. This call sounds forth from the books of Jeremiah, Hosea and Joel.

The disciples always wanted to know the time of the ushering in of God’s perfect reign. Jesus tells them not to worry about the epochs, the times or dates. Rather, instead of worrying about when God was going to usher in His perfect reign – a new creation where heaven completely invades earth, when what was started in the resurrection leads to renewal of all creation – He gave them a task to do in the meantime.

I. The first thing I want us to notice in this text – this commission – is that the church has a clear call and clear purpose.

The story circulates that Oliver Wendell Holmes found himself on a train when the conductor announced that he would be coming through to collect tickets from the passengers. Holmes reached into his pocket only to discover that the ticket was not there. He began patting himself down just as the conductor arrived. After Holmes explained his situation, the conductor told him not to worry about it. Holmes kept apologizing as he frantically searched.

The conductor tried to reassure him, “Please do not worry. It’s okay.” Holmes desperately reached into his satchel, searching for the ticket. The conductor tried to reassure him one final time. “Mr. Holmes, please do not worry about finding your ticket. We trust you. We know who you are.” Holmes replied, “Young man, it’s not a matter of trust, but direction. I do not know where I am going.”

No church needs to ponder, to wonder why it exists. Jesus has already given us our mission statement: Go and be witnesses to the whole world with the good news of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Matthew puts it this way: “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”

It’s clear enough. Our purpose, our commission, is to change lives, to build His Kingdom both bigger and stronger. We build it bigger by evangelism and stronger by discipleship. We baptize disciples, and then we teach them the things that Jesus has taught.

But you know congregation, a mission is a fragile thing. Without continual reminding and continual attention, it is easy to get off track, to miss the mark. It’s easy for the mission statement to become blurred and obscure.

A man in Atlanta saw an advertisement for the “Church of God Grill.” He called the number listed to find out what it was. He told the person who answered the phone that this was an unusual name for a restaurant. She explained, “We had a mission down here and started selling chicken dinners after church on Sunday to help pay the bills. The people liked the chicken and we did such a booming business that we cut back on the church services to sell more chicken. Eventually we just closed down the church altogether and made it a restaurant. We kept the name ‘Church of God’ and added ‘Grill’ to it.” The chicken remained; the church died. Somewhere along the line this church lost sight of its priorities. (Don M. Aycock, *Eight Days that Changed the World*, Nashville: Broadman, 1990, 69-70)

Congregation, we would never be so bold as to cancel the services in order to peddle chicken dinners out the side door. Perhaps, however, in more subtle ways, if we’re not careful, we can lose our focus, our purpose. We are the only people, the church, to make known the meaning of the cross and the power of the resurrection.

In reality, when you ponder all the programming that goes on here at First Baptist Church.... Our programming has included everything from driver's education to Internet surfing to fly fishing. We have basketball leagues and a soccer team. We have classes that teach English to people from many different countries. We watch children so mothers can have a day out, and watch children again so parents can have a date out. We have summer fun days for kids and weight training programming for adults. We have a fine arts program that features some of the very best musical talent in our city, yes, in our state. We have ladies who sew and men who provide mobile shower facilities for those in need. We are a very busy people. We give away food, clothes, cars, bikes, and computers. We have had support groups for people caring for their aging parents and people going through divorce. You name it, and it's been done around here.

But somehow, in all the busyness, we have to be reminded that we're not here primarily to sell chicken dinners or to teach people how to paint. We're here to win people to Jesus Christ and to disciple them to follow in His footsteps. Everything that we do ought to be focused around this ultimate goal. Everyone who steps on this property – for whatever program, for whatever cause – ought to, at some point, be confronted with the gospel of Christ Jesus. They ought to be invited to come and follow Him, to experience resurrection power.

This morning, we learn that the church is really here for just one reason.

Calvin Miller, in his book *A View from the Fields*, tells of a little old lady who, during a tour of the Westminster Abbey, ignored the famous tombs, the spectacular architecture, and the lovely flowers to demand of the guide, "Has anybody been saved around here lately?" Her question was generally considered in poor taste, possibly because the answer was no.

His command is to go. Most of the sharing of Christ that ever occurs in our church doesn't happen during a worship service. We come here to experience worship and become part of God's greatest good – a people going out to proclaim resurrection power.

On May 16, 1998, Christopher Sercye died, and his death left many people shaking their fists in angry frustration. In the early evening of that Saturday, Chris was playing basketball with some friends. Their game was tragically terminated when gang members jumped out of a car and fired two shots into the 15-year-old boy's chest. His friends quickly carried him about 100 yards toward Chicago's Ravenswood Hospital. They set him down in the alley about 35 feet from the emergency room and dashed inside for help.

To their unbelievable surprise, the hospital personnel said it was against policy to leave their duties to treat people outside. Friends, neighbors, and police officers pleaded with the ER staff to come outside and treat the dying teenager. Some of the staff were outside smoking just 35 feet from Sercye but they said it was against hospital policy for them to get involved until the boy was inside the building. Although police officer James Maurer had been trained not to move a seriously wounded person, he commandeered a wheelchair and brought the boy inside after an ambulance failed to arrive within twenty minutes of being called by those trying to help. Christopher died about an hour later from the bullet wound that had perforated his aorta. John Blair, president and CEO of Ravenswood, initially stood by the actions of his employees but later had the policy rescinded because of Sercye's death. Such

scenarios are not limited to bureaucratic hospital policies. Many churches are surrounded by those mortally wounded from the smoking barrels of our adversary, yet there seems to be an unwritten policy that says we cannot leave the building to help. (*World*, 5/30/98, p. 8; *Houston Chronicle*, 5/19/98, p. 7A, IOW)

Congregation, we are to go and make disciples. We have a commission. We have a purpose. There is no doubt about it. Most people are won to the Lord by going – not by sitting and asking them to come to us.

II. Not only do we have a purpose and a commission, but we are also to do it with a passion.

Acts 4:1-4

As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

Acts 4:21

When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened.

Acts 4:29-31

“And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

What a change for Peter who, earlier, had denied his Master three times. “I don’t even know the man,” he said, in a cursing tirade. But now he was willing, having seen His resurrection, having received His commission, to share the gospel with a passion.

I want to ask you a honest question. How many of you, if I passed out a blank sheet of paper to the congregation today and asked you take the pencil in the pew rack before you and I asked you to write down the specific names of those who do not have a relationship with God for whom you are praying to find the love of God through Christ Jesus – how many of you could write down a half dozen names? How many of you could honestly say, “Pastor, I’ve got a burden for the lost and I’ve been praying consistently for these people, that God would open up doors and allow me to share with them. I’ve developed a relationship with them in order to lead them to Christ Jesus.” How many of you would have some names to write down? And how many of you would have to stare at a blank page of your unconcern for people who are dying and lost and going to spend an eternity separated from God?

How can we not have a passion for the lost?

Yes, we see in the Book of Acts, not only do we have a purpose, but we also have a passion. You either have passion or you are passive.

On May 27, 1998, Michael Fortier was sentenced to 12 years in prison for being passive. Fortier was the key witness whose testimony helped convict Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols in the Oklahoma City bombing. Fortier knew about the extensive plans of his two former Army buddies but failed to warn the authorities. In a courtroom adjacent to where the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building once stood, Fortier begged for the forgiveness of those who had lost loved ones in the worst episode of American terrorism. 168 people lost their lives, including 19 children, and 500 others were injured on that morning of April 19, 1995. Upon reflection, Fortier said, “I thought McVeigh’s plan would never bear fruit. I was terribly wrong.” He went on to describe his desire for things to be different: “I sometimes daydream that I told the police and became a hero. But in reality I’m not.” The courtroom’s judgment upon Fortier’s passivity should speak to our tendencies toward spiritual passivity. Jesus condemned the servant who passively buried his talent. Spiritual passivity denies the importance and urgency of man’s greatest need – salvation through Christ Jesus. Michael Fortier failed to speak up and hundreds of lives were shattered. If we remain silent far greater destruction will occur, and our passivity will not go unpunished. (*Houston Chronicle*, 5/28/98, p. 1A, IOW)

Will we be silent? Have we lost our passion?

I think about Matthew, when he is invited to Jesus. You remember what he does? He invites his friends to a party at his house for dinner. He must have said to those who were despised by society, those tax gatherers, his IRS buddies, “I’ve met the Savior, and I want you to meet Him, too. He loves me and has accepted me and has forgiven me.”

It’s got to be the passion of our message, too. Our message is not, “Come to my church and hear my preacher” or “You need to straighten up your life morally.” Our message is “Jesus Christ has changed me, and He can change you, too.”

Do we have a passion for the lost? I think about Jesus in Luke 19:41. As he comes close to the city of Jerusalem, He begins to weep over it – one of the three times Jesus weeps. He weeps at the death of Lazarus. He weeps in the Garden of Gethsemane as He agonizes over the cross. And now He weeps for the city of Jerusalem. He did not weep for Himself. He wept for the city. They were not the tears of a failed conqueror, not the tears of a defeated leader. They were the tears of a loving Savior. He wept with sympathy for what He saw. The cup of Israel’s iniquity was now full; the mercy of God was exhausted. He wept for their lostness. He wept for the darkness of sin and the unbelief that pervaded the city.

The word “lost” may be the saddest word in the English language. Many things can be lost: a child can be lost, your health can be lost, your reputation can be lost, your fortune can be lost. But the greatest of all losses is to lose your soul. Jesus asked, “What is a man to profit if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” What can a man give in exchange for his own soul?

We have to be a people of passion.

III. The third thing I want us to see is that God sends the Holy Spirit to empower us.

Look again at Acts 1:8. We have the essential resource of the Holy Spirit. One of the tasks of the Spirit of God — the Holy Spirit — is to convict men of their sins, to prepare their hearts to receive the seed of the gospel. The Holy Spirit was going to come upon them at Pentecost, and because of this Spirit they had received the ability to work miracles and preach effectively. Their witness will be bold. It's the story of the Book of Acts. The Spirit empowers, and they proclaim.

Our efforts and labors mean nothing without the work of the Spirit of God. We cannot manufacture that moment of decision of lordship in someone's life.

You remember what it said in Acts 4 about Peter — when he was bold and stated his case with a passion. It said the Spirit came upon him. Acts 4:8 - "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...."

God's Spirit does the work. Whoever plants the seed and whoever waters — Scripture tell us it is always God who gives the increase. We're not responsible. I have released myself of the responsibility of the results of my sharing of the gospel by preaching or my sharing of the gospel one on one. It is simply our duty to give the message. How men and women respond is totally up to the work of the Spirit. Our responsibility is not results. Our responsibility is faithfulness.

IV. There is a final thing I want us to notice. That is the parameters (scope) of our field.

Look at this text. We're to begin in Jerusalem — that is Amarillo. And then Judea — that is the Panhandle. And then Samaria — that is the state of Texas. And then to the whole world. Our responsibility is to go and make disciples of all people everywhere. That is why this church has a passion for foreign missions. That's why we support thousands of missionaries in more than a hundred countries through our missionary efforts. We want to tell the whole world the story of Jesus.

Yes, notice our scope. Start at home — sharing your own faith here in Amarillo. And then be busy with your tithes and offerings, supporting the missionaries through our church budget, through our special missions offerings.

And go.

An executive hirer, a "head-hunter" who goes out and hires corporation executives for other firms, once shared that when he got an executive he was trying to hire for someone else, he tried to disarm that executive. "I offer him a drink, take my coat off, then my vest, undo my tie, throw up my feet and talk about baseball, football, family, whatever, until he's all relaxed. Then, when I think I've got him relaxed, I lean over, look him square in the eye and say, 'What's your purpose in life?' It's amazing how top executives fall apart at that question.

“Well, I was interviewing this fellow the other day, had him all disarmed, with my feet up on his desk, talking about football. Then I leaned up and said, ‘What’s your purpose in life, Bob?’ And he said, without blinking an eye, ‘To go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can.’” The head-hunter said, for the first time in his career he was speechless at the answer to his question. (Josh McDowell, “Head Hunter,” *Stories for the Heart*, compiled by Alice Gray, p. 112)

Church member, if you’ve lost your passion for sharing the good news of God’s love through Christ Jesus, I invite you to find your way back home this morning. It’s the only reason we are the church.