

Act Normal

3. Witness

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My name is Ryan, and I am one of the ministers on staff here at Crossroads. Today, we are continuing our series “Act Normal,” where we are searching the scriptures of the book of Acts, examining it against our lives, and seeing which areas in our lives that may have “drifted” over time. We want to go back to “Acting Normal” as the earlier believers did.

Sometimes this sense of drift happens by distractions, both good and bad. We can become distracted by our jobs, by the business of life, by trying to achieve more and more, and even our sin that distracts us from God.

Sometimes this drift can even come from a sense of fear or lack of confidence. How are we supposed to make all of these life changing decisions and sacrifices to follow the Way of Jesus when we feel like we can barely keep our life together as it is?

With all of this, how do we get back Jesus’s final call to action, to be a witness, to be a fisher of men, to share the gospel with everyone you meet?
Have we lost our witness?

I feel like many of us here might agree that evangelism either feels too hard, or it’s something that we just aren’t fired up for.

When I was a kid, there were so many, at least what I would call “Cheesy,” tactics to get people into church. In youth group, we were often told to do things like “Hold your bible on the outside of your books at school,” or “do a 15 second kneel down of prayer at your locker” in order to stand up for your faith.

Now, I don’t think any of those things are bad, but they never did anything other than get me thinking, “look at me, I’m such a good Christian,” while not sharing the gospel or talking about what I’m doing to anyone.

Or this tactic of evangelism that we all have seen. Imagine this, my 7-year-old self, walking through the aisles of Walmart, begging my mom for that video game, candy, or toy. Then out of nowhere, my entire day is made. Just lying there on the floor is this perfectly crisp dollar bill, all alone. I pick it up and I see “\$1,000,000” printed on the bill. I can’t believe it, I’m rich! I found a million dollars, only to turn it over and see Tract text printed on the back. My little 7-year-old heart sank.

I don't mean to knock tracts, as I really do believe they were effective for a time and a place, but I wonder if some of this left a bad taste in our mouths for evangelism. Maybe this is the only kind of evangelism you've experienced other than hearing angry preachers on the street corners.

I believe that scripture models for us a far better standard for evangelism. Jesus calls them his "witnesses," or those who have seen his miracles and share the truth to others. But sharing the gospel in our cultural climate doesn't always feel easy. Some may be mocked, and in other parts of the world, persecuted for it.

In the books of Acts, we see the apostles finally start to take up this mantle of sharing the gospel wherever they go. In **Acts, Chapters 4-5**, we see a pattern start to happen to the apostles. They begin to gather crowds, preach the Gospel of the resurrected Jesus, usually heal many of ailments and disease, and then get arrested.

Acts 4:1-4,7-15 NLT *While Peter and John were speaking to the people, they were confronted by the priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees. ² These leaders were very disturbed that Peter and John were teaching the people that through Jesus there is a resurrection of the dead. ³ They arrested them and, since it was already evening, put them in jail until morning. ⁴ But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so the number of men who believed now totaled about 5,000.*

⁷ They brought in the two disciples and demanded, "By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?"

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of our people, ⁹ are we being questioned today because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? ¹⁰ Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, "The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. ¹² There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

¹³ The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing right

there among them, there was nothing the council could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered Peter and John out of the council chamber and conferred among themselves.

The apostles are later released but threatened to stop sharing this “Gospel of Jesus.” These disciples immediately gather other believers together to pray for courage to keep going.

***Acts 4:31** After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preach the word of God with boldness.*

The cycle continues from here until the persecution of followers of Jesus starts by the death of Stephen at the hands of Saul.

***Acts 8:1-4** A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. ² (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) ³ But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison. ⁴ But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went.*

Let me pose the question, that maybe this was Jesus’s intention all along? To not just remain in Jerusalem, the city they knew well and were comfortable in. But Jesus’ call was to scatter and take the Gospel into every corner of the Earth.

***Acts 1:8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* The apostles were currently just adding to their numbers, but by going OUT, they began to multiply. In doing so, they became God’s “witnesses.”

So, **what does it mean to be a witness?** Normally I wouldn’t share the original Greek language with you, but I think here it is important to understanding what it means to be a witness. A witness is often used just as we would know in the legal system. Someone who has seen something happen and can be used as evidence for something. The word witness used here in the book of Acts is “**Martus**” (pronounced **mar’-toos**), which is where we get the modern day word martyr. After Jesus’ death, he sends people out to “bear witness” or **martyreō** (pronounced **mar-too-reh’-o**). Bearing witness literally means **to affirm that one has seen or heard or experienced something.**

So, when Jesus says, “**You will be my witnesses**” in **Acts 1:8**, he is saying “You will be my martyrs.” Jesus is saying a martyr is someone who Christ

transforms into a witness. That transformation is Christ's work, not the martyr's. Martyrdom is not an achievement of the martyr. Martyrs are dying for "their" faith. But it is not the Lord's test of the martyr's faith.

Jesus is revealing to the martyrs and the world the strength of God, which is made perfect in human weakness. This is a parallel to what Jesus says in **Matthew 16:24** *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* All this to say, **Jesus is calling us to be his witness.**

A Witness is one who has seen for themselves the love and power of the resurrected Jesus and is now choosing to die to themselves and follow Jesus. A witness is someone who daily chooses to live like Jesus and make him known.

In that definition, there is a 2 pronged approach to being Christ's witness. It is both Inward and Outward. **First, being an Inward Witness is part of Our Spiritual Formation.** This is the part where we would say something like "Be a witness with your life." **If you want to experience the life of Jesus, you must adopt the lifestyle of Jesus.**

Following Jesus is a call to die to ourselves, to grow into maturity (even the deep parts) and become a disciple who looks like Jesus. Let me give you a **brief history lesson** on who a follower of Jesus or a "disciple" was. Interestingly, Jesus wasn't the person who invented "discipleship." There were hundreds of rabbis with thousands of disciples at the time of Jesus. Here is what it took to be a disciple.

In ancient Israel, being a disciple was the top of the Jewish education system. Instead of going to elementary school, as we know it, you would go to something called "Beit Sefer" (pronounced "*bait cefer*"), or "House of the Book." You would learn to read, write, do basic math and commit to memory the Torah, or the first 5 books of the Bible by the time you were 12. Most would stop school then; men would go into the family business and women would find husbands.

The best of the best would move on to "Beit Talmud", or "House of learning." You would learn under basically a professor to study and memorize almost all of the Old Testament. At that point, almost all of the students were done.

The third level was the best of the best of the best. You would apply to become a “Talmidim” (pronounced *Tail-mu-deem*) or a “disciple.” This application process would have made getting into Harvard look easy. You would go for an interview with a great rabbi, and just get grilled in an interview about the entire Old Testament, plus obscure theology and more. If somehow you got accepted, the rabbi would look at you and say something like “Come and follow me.”

Being a disciple was a 24/7 job. You would follow your rabbi all day, every day. Good disciples would try to emulate the way their rabbi understood scripture, be able to teach his sermons, and even would try to sound like him.

There was a well-known blessing in that time where people would say “May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.” This meaning, you followed your rabbi so closely wherever he went, that the dust from his feet was on our clothes.

Let’s look back at our scripture in **Acts 4:13** *The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.*

Remember these were just ordinary fishermen who followed Jesus’ footsteps. This is why following Jesus was so radical. These men didn’t go through this whole process of schooling. They were not the best and the brightest. But they were called by God, just like you and me. Jesus said to them in their ordinary lives, “Come and follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” All these people had to follow Jesus with was their obedience, and the Holy Spirit power inside of them.

Dallas Willard, who is a renowned Christian writer and philosopher writes this in his book *Spirit of the Disciplines*, “Following ‘in His steps’ cannot be equated with behaving as He did when He was “on the spot.” To live as Christ lives is to live as He did *all* his life. Our mistake is to think that following Jesus only consists in loving our enemies, going the ‘second mile,’ turning the other cheek, suffering patiently and hopefully, while living the rest of our lives just as everyone around us does.”

Being a witness of Jesus is to have every area of our life **transformed into the Ways of Jesus**. The way we spend our money should look countercultural, the way we spend our time, the way we view success, and especially the way we

face adversity, all of it should look vastly different than our cultures. It should look like we walked so closely behind Jesus, that his dust is on our clothes.

We cannot be a good witness if our lives are not a representation of Jesus. This, unfortunately, is where I believe much of the Church in America has misstepped in the last few decades. We have become known for “what we are against” much more than “what we are for.”

In the standards of secular culture, it is the Christians who now seem to be labeled as intolerant, unloving, and disengaged with people outside of their Christian bubble. We must begin to regain our witness in our inner life. To have the world look at you and see Jesus in you.

The world should be able to look at you and think “I’m not sure what is different about him/her, but whatever it is, I want what he/she has. I want the peace he/she has, the joy he/she has.

A call to deepening your inner witness is a call to repentance, and a call to deeper relationship with the God. We must make sure that as carriers of the gospel, that our charisma and skill does not outweigh our character. If we want to experience the life of Jesus, we must adopt the lifestyle of Jesus.

Secondly, being an Outward Witness is part of Our Evangelical Call.

So, we see ordinary men with hardly any schooling, who have had their lives radically changed to look more like Jesus. They are passionate disciples of God.

Back to our verses in **Acts 4:31** *After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preach the word of God with boldness.* When these people came together to pray, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Their inward witness was strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit, and now they had this new boldness to **go out** and share about the God who is changing their lives from the inside.

But how many of us still struggle with going out to our neighborhoods to share the gospel or to ministering to a friend or co-worker? A lot of us would say something like “I don’t know what to say, I’m not good enough, etc.”

Sometimes sharing the gospel can feel like a bait and switch sales pitch; like it’s a referral program or something such as, “Join our religion and then everything will be great, then you will get people to join too!” That sounds a bit like a pyramid scheme.

Most Americans, in general, really dislike the idea of sales. Whether it's cold calling, going door to door, fundraising, etc. We find it really hard to sell some things. However, I would argue that all of us are incredible salespeople. The problem is, we aren't always selling something we truly love.

If you asked me to go door to door selling floor cleaner, I'd be the worst employee in the world. Dirty floors needing floor cleaner doesn't keep me up at night. However, if you get me in a conversation talking about a movie I like, or the sports team I root for, by the end of the hour conversation you'd be already watching that show, or buying merch from that brand, and you're all in. When we are passionate about things, it is so easy for us to share about our passions to others.

Sharing the gospel is the same thing. It can be hard for some of us to go out into the world to share until we have found that passion for God, which is why we need the Holy Spirit in us. Evangelism, going out and sharing the gospel, isn't optional, it's one of the main calls of a follower of Jesus.

Our small groups should be not just a thing we do at church, but one of the main expressions of church. The prayer meeting we see in **Acts 4** is essentially their home church. Inviting people to church to hear your pastor is great, but inviting them into community and relationship with you and your friends can be some of the most life giving spiritual growth they may ever see.

Our groups are not just to grow yourself deeper, but to be missional. To serve your community. To multiply into more groups that serve more communities. If your group isn't multiplying, you're missing the evangelical call.

We are to go OUT! Like in **Acts 1:8**, we are to go out from our comfortable areas to begin to see life change in all our surrounding communities. Imagine what Pittsburgh would look like if all our groups cared for the sick, blessed the poor, and spent time with the spiritually broken in your immediate neighborhood.

Imagine if we took our B.L.E.S.S rhythms of praying together, listening to God, eating together with people, serving others and sharing our stories, and did that wherever we went. Imagine if we made that lifestyle of Jesus our lifestyle, not just our format or order of our small groups. Just like it did for us, the gospel changes everyone's life.

Thirdly, take Action - Personal Revival leads to Corporate Revival. When we look at what God did through the Asbury Awakening, we see something very different happening there. There was no one celebrity, or influential speaker, or highly skilled worship leader that it was centered around. It was centered

around students who were hungry to see God revive their souls. They wanted to see God revive in themselves. When that happened, just like we see in this story, the Holy Spirit fills both His people and his places.

Like Pastor Steve said last week, we must be positioned to be like the sails of a sailboat. Positioned so that when the spirit blows in like the wind, it gets caught in our sails. Our lives should be positioned in such a way that **we are covered in the dust of our God.**

So, when Gods people, as **2 Chronicles 7:14** says, *who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.*

Don't you want to see Pittsburgh restored back to God? With the Holy Spirit inside of us, we are called to leave our spots that we feel comfortable in, and go, making disciples wherever we go - bearing witness of the gospel of Jesus. Being a martyr as the Bible defines it, someone who dies to themselves daily in order to see the gospel change lives all throughout our region. We are all witnesses of the greatest revival ever seen, the resurrected Jesus.

Let us begin to **“Act Normal”** again, as we pick up the call to strengthen our inner witness, but also, with the power of the Holy Spirit, **go out** and share the gospel with boldness!

Right now, let us pray, invite the Holy Spirit into our lives, and ask God to reveal someone in our hearts that He is calling us to share the gospel with.