

WHEN THE SPIRIT TESTIFIES

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Did you know that no one can become a Christian just because they choose to? The Church is not an open-membership club.

First of all, it's by invitation only. Jesus said, *"People cannot come to me unless the Father who sent me brings them to me."* (John 6:44)

Second, the membership fee is out of this world and must be paid in-full in advance.

The good news is that the fee has already been paid-in-full for you by Jesus Christ, by His death on the cross. In His final moments, He drew a deep breath and cried out, *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30). He meant that His task on earth was completed. He actually spoke a single Greek word: *tetelestai*. This was a commercial term, used by accountants and usually stamped or written across a final invoice. It's literal meaning was, "The debt has been paid in full." Jesus paid it for you.

And the invitation, once limited to the descendants of Abraham, has been extended to everyone on the planet. *"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"* (Romans 10:13). *"Let those who want the water of life take it as a gift"* (Revelation 22:17).

So, if you have the opportunity to give your life to Jesus Christ in gratitude for what He has done for you—*that* is a moment of absolute grace! A gift from God!

Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,*
⁹ *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Third, although becoming a Christian never happens by accident, or second-hand—it always requires a personal choice—your choice is never enough. Becoming a Christian requires an act of God—an inward miracle. Jesus Himself said, *"Don't be surprised when I tell you, you must be born again"* (John 3:7). Without a new birth, your desire to be a Christian would only be a pipedream, a futile wish.

If you sit here today as a Christian, it is a miracle! *You* are a miracle!

Jesus spoke this truth, when He said, *"The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing."* (John 6:63)

Salt and Light

We, who are Christians, are indebted to God's grace—His amazing grace! We could not earn it; we did not deserve it. But, from those who have received much—as we have—much is expected. All Christians have a responsibility—a stewardship of grace.

Jesus pictured it these ways: *"You are the salt of the earth."* *"You are the light of the world."* We have a responsibility to provide the flavor of God's grace to an otherwise bitter world. We are to provide the brightness of hope to the dreariness of life without the Savior.

And here's the thing: You were designed for this. You were born again for this. And if you don't get this, you'll miss the reason for your life! All the toys, all the technology, all the trips to exotic places cannot make up for this.

In Matthew 25, Jesus told three stories. The first, about five wise young women and five foolish ones, was to call attention to preparedness. The second, about three servants, was to underscore faithfulness. The third, about sheep and goats, was to emphasize compassion as an ultimate value, not just a sympathetic response. Each of these stories also clarifies a spiritual division, made by God, with ultimate and eternal consequence—a Great Divide.

This Great Divide is not just a story for non-believers to incentivize them to consider Christ. It is quite pointedly a story for believers, to heighten their certainty of the intensity of God's purpose to rescue humankind and the cost of failing to partner with Him in this Great Commission.

You see, if you don't do this, other people will perish without a Savior and spend eternity in hell! And you will be bummed. You're a light in the darkness, and you've a story to tell.

Jesus-Centered

Jesus told His disciples (and aren't we His disciples, too?), "*When the Spirit of truth comes... He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me*" (John 16:13-14). Then, He said, "*You will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).

Jesus, and His story, are the new objective of our lives. The world *needs* the message, in human terms and in human form. Jesus came into our story to rescue us, and now He has brought us into His. We have a story to tell—it's His story and it's our story, intertwined. More and more, they are becoming the same story—the story of salvation and a Savior. Jesus is the heart of the story, and you and I are the clothes He wears today. We've a story to tell.

Connections

Do you realize that *all* of your interpersonal connections are, at one level or another, Gospel opportunities (opportunities to express the Good News of Jesus' saving love)? Maybe it's not a verbal opportunity today, but if you redeem the moment, eventually, it will be.

Today, it may be visual, as people observe you from a distance. Next week, it may become visceral, as they feel your compassion toward them. Next month, it may take an intellectual turn, when they ask you a question about God. Eventually, they will want to know your story, which is merely the human wrapping of His story.

Questions like these will begin to pepper your conversations: Why do you follow Him? How did you meet Him?

What has He done for you? What is He like?

Can He do anything for me? Would He? What do I need to do?

How can you prepare for those moments? How can you make the most of such opportunities? If you want to know, listen carefully today...

Learn to Cooperate

Living and showing the Christ-life is a cooperative venture with the Holy Spirit. We've a story to tell, but we never tell it alone.

During an intimate conversation with His twelve disciples, Jesus pointed them to the future—when they would be on their own (but not alone)—*“I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me. (John 15:26).*

The Holy Spirit is the Source of all of our true knowledge of Jesus. You can learn something of His history from reading the Bible as you would read any other book. But you can only understand His purpose—what motivated Him and why, the reason for His actions and His teachings—as the Holy Spirit becomes your Teacher.

As I told you at the beginning of this month, the Spirit will use the Scriptures—in your heart, in your mind, and in the mouths of other people—to enlighten you, to instruct you, and to guide you, so that your day-to-day life becomes what God made you for: a unique expression of His grace.

Once again, hear what Jesus told His disciples: *“I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me. And you must also testify about me because you have been with me from the beginning of my ministry” (John 15:26-27).*

The Spirit testifies about Jesus to you, and you testify about Him to other people. That's the wonderful, prophetic adventure of the Christian life! That's how we get our story.

No one knows how to honor Jesus Christ like the Spirit of God. No one knows how to explain Jesus Christ like the Holy Spirit. The more time you spend with the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, in worship, in prayer, and in discussion with other Christians—the more your heart and mind and lips will bring honor to Jesus Christ. It's a cooperative adventure!

Church In Decline?

Some protest that the Church is dead and Christianity is on the decline. Here are a sampling of actual (not anecdotal) statistics:

- In 1430, one in 99 of the world's population were Christians.
- In 1790, one in 49.
- In 1940, one in 32.
- In 1970, one in 19.
- In 1980, one in 16.
- In 1983, one in 13.
- In 1986, one in 11.
- In 1994, one in 10.

Overall, that represents a change from only 1% of the world's population to over 11% (at an average rate of increase of 7% per year).

In the period from 1934 to 1994, the number of Christians in the world increased by 1300 percent (from 40 million to 540 million in just 60 years), while the world's population grew only 400 percent (The Lausanne Statistics Task Force). Today, Christians number over 680 million.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, which probably uses a more generous definition of who is truly Christian, the picture is quite different than presented by our media and our educational system:

- 33.0% of people in the world are Christian.
- 19.3% are Muslim.
- 15.3% are atheists or non-religious.
- 13.4% are Hindu.
- 6.4% follow traditional Chinese religions.
- 6.0% are Buddhist.
- 3.8% follow tribal or indigenous religions.
- 1.7% belong to religions created since 1800.
- 0.4 % are Sikhs.
- 0.2% are Jews.

Worldwide, authentic conversions to genuine Christianity (as contrasted with nominal Christianity) are snowballing.

In the last century, Communism pronounced the death sentence upon Christianity. Yet, in so many parts of eastern Europe where the atheistic experiment was relentlessly and violently enforced, Communism is in deep trouble, while Christianity is thriving.

In Communist China, the home of yin and yang and other non-Christian concepts and practices admired by New Agers, in the face of sometimes terrifying Government opposition, people are committing themselves to a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ at a rate averaging about 28,000 new converts each day. In that nation, steeped for thousands of years in non-Christian religion, then mercilessly indoctrinated into atheism, so many millions of Chinese have turned their back on their traditions and become born again Christians that the total is now thought to be a staggering 80 to 100 million Chinese.

In Africa, the number who follow Christ has risen from 3% in 1900 to a present figure of nearly 50%.

Over the last six decades, since the Korean war, South Koreans have been flocking to Jesus by the millions. In response, the UN has officially reclassified as a "Christian nation" that one-time Buddhist stronghold.

Worldwide, people are surrendering their lives to Jesus at an astounding average of nearly a million converts per week.

It is estimated that of every genuine Christian since the first century, 70% came to Christ after 1900. Of these, 70% had their life-transforming encounter with Jesus since World War II. And of them, 70% became Christians in just the last two decades. The tide is swelling.

After surveying the entire world in 1988, Ralph Winter identified 18,000 people groups that did not have sufficient numbers of committed Christians to remain strong and convert other members of their people group without foreign assistance (that's the call to foreign missions!). In 1998, this figure had shrunk to a mere 10% (1,736) of what it had been just ten years earlier (that's the power of foreign missions!).

One in 12 believers in the world today are members of the worldwide Assemblies of God, growing at the rate of 1 every 14 seconds. How have we done this, in less than 100 years?

God's Dynamite

The answer is, by the power of the *Holy Spirit*. Jesus told His followers, *"Now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven"* (Luke 24:49). Then He added, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere"* (Acts 1:8).

We've a story to tell, and the Holy Spirit has come to us to help us make it emphatically effective. As a result, Paul wrote, *"I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes"* (Romans 1:16).

"Fill you with power..." "Receive power..." "The power of God at work..."

This is the promise, and the historical record, of the Holy Spirit in the Church. It is also the promise of the Spirit for your life. You're the candle; He's the flame. A question for you to consider today is, Is it also the historical record of your life? Remember, you've a story to tell.

Counting on You

God is counting on *you* to get the job done! Much has already been accomplished. Only 10% of the people groups in the world have still to be reached. Can't the 90% reach the remaining 10%? Can't you reach your friends and family? Won't the Holy Spirit help you?

We all have similar struggles with this—doubts and fears—but God has the answer! We doubt our adequacy for the task. With Paul, we ask, *"Who is adequate for such a task as this?"* (2 Corinthians 2:16). In the next chapter, he answered his own question, and it's an answer that fits us, too: *"Now we have such confidence in God through Christ. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as if it were coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who made us adequate to be servants of a new covenant"* (2 Corinthians 3:4-6; NET).

We feel inadequate within ourselves, and we fear rejection and failure. Here again, the Lord is our hope. First of all, Jesus is the Savior (of the whole world); presented faithfully, He is most attractive. If my heart is compassionate and my words are truthful and loving, it is not me they would reject, but the message and the One who gave it. Consider the lengths to which Jesus exposed Himself to ridicule and slander and rejection—and He did it for us. Would you do less for Him? *"When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me"* (Matthew 25:40).

As You Go

You can become effective in sharing your faith. That's why the Holy Spirit has come to you. He will show you how. But, just as I said last week concerning prayer, in order for Him to show you, *you* must get started. You cannot turn a parked car.

If I tell you that the Gospel is a going concern, I may mean something different than what you first understand.

Many people assume that the Great Commission is: "Go into all the world..." Something like this was spoken by Jesus in each of the four Gospels and the Book of Acts. However, in the original language, the verb *go* is not the imperative; it is a participle. This means that going is *not* the focus of the command, it is the background. Our going is *assumed*; the command concerns what we are to do *while* we are going—proclaim and make disciples.

So, trust the Lord's promise, pray for power, and get going! And the Spirit will be with you to guide you. We've a story to tell. Can you imagine the impact, the changes, if we told it faithfully?

So You Grow

As you go, pay attention to the Spirit's promptings. They are usually gentle, so turn up your hearing aid and listen closely. Jesus advised, *"When you are arrested and stand trial, don't worry in advance about what to say. Just say what God tells you at that time, for it is not you who will be speaking, but the Holy Spirit"* (Mark 13:11). The Holy Spirit will be prompting you, and the more often you follow His lead, the clearer His prompting will become.

When you encounter real need and your heart is moved by compassion, don't ignore it as mere heightened sympathy; follow the lead of love. You can't reach everyone, but you can reach someone. You can't meet their every need, but you can do something to help. I mention this first, because it is the door that most commonly opens. Practice being a servant in Jesus' name.

When you encounter genuine humility, know that God has already been at work; no one is born that way. If the soil of a heart has been so softened by the Spirit, perhaps there is a way for you to sow a seed of gracious truth or water a seed already planted with faith and kindness.

When you encounter a questioning heart, listen attentively. You don't need to have all the answers or be a theologian, but if the questions are sincere, offer sincere answers to the best of your ability. As Peter wisely put it, *"if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way"* (1 Peter 3:15-16).

If the questions are not sincere, but are aimed to distract or express anger, listen even more attentively to see if the Spirit will show you the cause behind the display. If so, ignore the display and address the cause, with humble sympathy. At such a time, *"a gentle answer deflects anger"* (Proverbs 15:1).

Wherever you can, relate personally to what the other person is feeling, experiencing, or describing—not insincerely, or to patronize, but to genuinely identify and build bridges of trust. Remember, the core of Christian witness is Jesus' story, wrapped within yours. We've a story to tell, and it's important.

Our task is to move people toward Jesus. We can't save them, only nudge them; there is only one Savior of the world. So, any forward movement is a success. Celebrate each success, as you pray for more. Don't aim to convince or convert; aim to tell of your hope in Christ.

This week, I want you to ask the Holy Spirit to prompt you; then be prepared to listen and look at your surroundings.

In order for us to fulfill God's purpose for Trinity Community Church to reach the county of Marin, we must faithfully, compassionately, and boldly tell the story of Jesus, by the power and prompting of the Holy Spirit. It's our story to tell.