

## Mission Near and Far

### [Acts 1:6-8](#)

Missio Dei: Messages from the Gospels and Acts on God's Work in the World

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, October 30, 2005

Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Singing fire of life, may you burn your word into our minds and hearts that we may develop a passion for being a witness -- witnesses together of Jesus, the Christ, the power of your Spirit to transform us and this world. As we listen to your word, may you be the fire that stirs within us to move us into your mission. Through Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen. As some of you know, I grew up in a Pentecostal tradition, a faith tradition that accented dispensational theology. Big words. Dispensational theology -- in the time that I was learning about it and growing up in the 'spirit tradition' -- was about being preoccupied with watching for the things that were expected to happen in the world so we could anticipate when Jesus was coming back. There was a lot of focus on the belief of Jesus' imminent return. We were admonished to 'get ready,' because Jesus would take us out of this miserable world. As I grew up, and Jesus did not come, as I became more attuned to the needs of the world, I began to look for a mentor who could open up another possibility of how to look at scripture and faith. I was fortunate to come across a man named Ray Anderson who taught me about a different view of how to be a Christian in the world -- to be less preoccupied with the things that are to come, or the events or the order of things that needed to happen for Jesus to come, but to become focused on Jesus himself in the midst of the world. He was a man who was able to share Jesus with me personally out of a sense of depth of relationship and poetry of life -- a simple farmer from South Dakota who became a tremendous theologian and friend. It wasn't long after I got to know him that I discovered something about his reputation among his neighbors. Living in the farmlands of South Dakota, he would plow his own fields during the day and, if his neighbors were not able to plow because of illness or injury, he would go and plow their fields all night. The man was amazing. He was able to get by with very little sleep. He was a witness of Jesus alive and present here and now. And he invited me to be a witness of Jesus here and now -- to let go of the preoccupation with what's going on in the world that gives us a sign that Jesus is coming back sometime soon. His point was: Jesus is here right now. Be a witness. This passage is around the question that the disciples asked of Jesus, "When will you restore the kingdom? Jesus, you come and you are the Messiah. When are you going to make it all happen? When are you going to set up your kingdom on earth and put us in charge of these things?" We have those kinds of questions today: "Jesus, when are you going to come back and make everything right? Things are a mess. If you would just set things right or put us in charge of setting things right, then we could really straighten it out." The disciples still hadn't gotten it. We still struggle with getting it today. It's not about Jesus coming back to build a kingdom that puts us in charge so we can clean up the town; it is about the fact that Jesus is here. The power of the resurrection is now, and Jesus is saying, "Don't worry about those times. Don't worry about those events. I am here, and you are to be my witnesses of my presence in the world." We have a temptation to want to use God to set up our patterns of control and manipulation and intimidation. We want to have a certainty about how things are going to happen, and in what order. But Jesus says to the disciples: "You will not know that. The only thing you will know for sure is that I am here with you in the power of the Spirit." I have a problem with Christians who want to seize political power because they want the kingdom of God to be exercised through them here and now. It is the same tendency the disciples had when they asked the question. And Jesus ignored the question. Jesus said, "The power that you have is not about politics, or the military, or government; the power you have is about presence. The Holy Spirit is in you. It is a power of who you are, not what position you hold." So Jesus has a definite "No" to what the disciples are asking. The "No" is that the kingdom will not be established on earth so that you can be in charge. No -- you will not know any particular set of events or times, or schedules about when all this will take place. But Jesus gives a very strong "Yes" in the midst of that "No." You will not know how to predict the second coming of Jesus, but you will know that Jesus is here now. It is one of my concerns that our world -- including many Christians -- is preoccupied with the second coming of Jesus (the rapture, the 'Left-behind' series.) There aren't too many times I want to stand in judgment of other Christians' patterns of life, but I am in great fear and concern of that pattern where we are so preoccupied with things to come that we fail to focus on the present. Jesus is here now. The mission is right now. It is what Jesus gives the mission to the disciples -- that they will have power today. That power is not a power of controlling above... a power of manipulation... command and control -- it is a power of within. It is a power to empower us as human beings to be fully in the presence of Jesus and to become witnesses of the things that Jesus is doing in the world and in our lives today. Jesus said, "You will receive power, and you will be my witnesses." You will receive power. It's not the kind of power you hunger for as human beings -- to hold position and authority. It's the kind of power that moves you in your being to be fully human and who God has created you to be, and at liberty to be God's ambassador in the world. You will receive personal power... inner power... spiritual power... power of presence... power to say and be and do the things that God wants you to do. It is relational power. It is the power to love other human beings and to forgive. It is the democratization of power where Jesus wants to give power to every one of us, not so that any one of us can be in control of others, but that all of us can share that power of the Spirit together. People who stay home and protect themselves aren't going to receive this power. People who hide out and don't want to venture into risky situations aren't going to have this power, because the power comes to those who are willing to go and risk. It's a power of presence, of story, of attention, of awareness. One of the great witnesses of who Jesus was in the world, and who Jesus is, was Mahatma Gandhi. Not a Christian -- a Hindu. He continually called attention of people to Jesus; and the reason he did it because he recognized that, in Jesus, was a very unusual pattern of life that was to be respected and emulated. It was in that emulation and calling attention that the civil rights movement had a tremendous sense of being mentored into the practices of who Jesus is, in justice in the world. This week we recognize Rosa Parks and her willingness to be a witness of Jesus Christ in her life by saying "No" to a person who wanted her seat on a bus -- not necessarily because she wanted to make an issue of herself, but because she believed Jesus called her to do that. The power to be a witness is not about me, but I am totally involved in it. Witnessing means that I am willing to testify and give evidence, to report and bear record of what I have experienced and seen in Jesus. It means that I must know Jesus personally. It means that I must know about Jesus. I must have a sense of who Jesus is, and I must be practicing Jesus' pattern of life in my life. The witness is not about other things that I do in my life; it is about who Jesus is in my life and your life. It is to affirm, retell, and remember when we see Jesus show up and when we hear the voice of Jesus. It is a witness -- not to draw attention to my heroic pattern of life, or my company's products, or the U.S.A. and what the U.S.A. is doing in the world, or the heroes that I have in athletics or entertainment.

It is not about football teams or great preachers; it is only about Jesus. Jesus said: "You will be my witnesses in the world." It is Jesus in us and between us. The martyr is the one who is willing to step forward; the word "witness" is the Greek word *martus*, which leads to the word "martyr." Risk your life to talk about Jesus. Risk your life to do what Jesus does in the world. Jesus was a witness of what God wanted. John the Baptist was a witness to what Jesus wanted to do in the world. Stephen, in the book of Acts, was a witness to what Jesus had accomplished in the power of the resurrection. All were willing to die, and so the word "witness" became the word "martyr." Finally, to be a witness is to possess a conviction that one is so passionate about, one is willing to die for it. The key question for us today in mission is: What are we willing to lay down our lives to do? If it isn't worth dying for, then why do it? We don't consider that very often in our lives, because we want to preserve life as long as possible. But things are still that way today. In what ways are we willing to die, to put our life on the line, to resist people who would declare something that is true to be false, or something that is false to be true – to stand up to them and say: "No, that's not right." In the name of Jesus, I will not tell the untruth and be deceptive. Two marks of a witness are that personal face-to-face encounter of the relationship or the event. And the second is the willingness to take the risk under fire, under threat, to tell the truth. I think one of the reasons why the "Law and Order" series is so popular on television is that we see, week after week, people who are being called upon to be a witness in the face of fire. Are you willing to die for the fact that you were there and saw the crime take place? The question Jesus asks us is: Whether we are willing to die for the fact that we have experienced Jesus in the midst of the world, and we have seen what Jesus can do to change people's lives? Our church has a statement that says we are passionate about Christ's mission in the world. The core of passion is really at the heart of what are we willing to die for. That proves the passion. It is important that we not only have the immediate opportunity to share, but that we can share that witness wherever we go, near and far. We live in a highly mobilized culture today. Today we have opportunities, not only to be in Washington, DC and surrounding Beltway neighborhoods, but we have a chance to fly around the country and around the world. The question is: When we go, whom do we talk about? Do we talk about ourselves, our companies, and our family? Or, when we have an opportunity, do we talk about Jesus? Do we do what Jesus does? Are we a witness of Jesus? Jesus is the one who carries the disciples into Jerusalem to tell their story...into Judea to tell their story...to Samaria, the neighboring country, to tell their story...into the rest of the world to tell their story – the story of how they lived and walked and experienced Jesus. Today we have the opportunity to tell our stories in Washington, DC, to tell our stories in some of the safe neighborhoods of Maryland and Virginia where families are generally successful and upper middle-class life is the pattern. We have the opportunity to tell the story there. We have an opportunity to tell the story among those in Samaria – the ones who are of less esteem, who live in poverty, and are not the kinds of people with whom we usually associate. Jesus said to go and tell the story to them. We also have an opportunity to tell the story in foreign nations – in Africa and Asia. Jesus said to go to the ends of the earth to tell the story. Be a witness of him. When you take trips to all those foreign places, are you willing, when the opportunity arises, to tell the story of you and Jesus? Do you have a story to tell? I was fascinated with the recent Rolling Stone interview with Bono. You may think, "Well, Bono, a rock star. What does Bono have to say about being a witness to Jesus?" In fact, he has some very powerful things to say in Rolling Stone magazine. When asked about his faith, he mentioned his song, "Wake Up, Dead Man," and said, "I'm praying: Jesus, help me. And I'm alone in the world. Wake up dead man." He committed himself to Bible study in a small group and personal study of the Bible and meditation on a daily basis. When asked, "What do you really believe," Bono said this about Jesus: "I believe in the poetic genius of a creator who would choose to express such unfathomable power as a child born in straw poverty. The story of Christ makes sense to me. As an artist, I see the poetry of it. It's so brilliant that the scale of creation and the unfathomable universe should describe itself in such vulnerability as a child. It's mind-blowing to me." He gets it. He knows Jesus. He's a rock star. I know some people would say, "That's impossible." He goes on to talk about the scriptures in his life. When asked about the Bible, he replies: "I want to be around an immovable object; I want to build my house on a rock. I want to let it speak to me, and I want it to be called *rhema* or the 'breath of God' in my life. I want to breathe the scriptures. It's a plumb line for me. It's a place that describes itself as a clear pool of water in which I can see who I really am as a reflection." And as he is wrapping up the end of his life, Bono says, "I am more content now to be discontent. I do feel that I'm getting closer to the song that I hear in my mind. On every level, I wasn't looking for grace, but luckily grace was looking for me." A witness. And this is the same man who calls our attention to create a safe place for victims of AIDS; to care for victims of AIDS, and to go to people in high places and say; "See how Jesus treated lepers? That's how Christians ought to treat people with AIDS." A witness who acts. Are you a witness today? Are you willing to put your life on the line? Do you know Jesus well enough to have a passion to tell the story wherever you go? Are you interested in gaining power and position because you are a Christian, or are you willing to be empowered to be a human being among other human beings? These are the great questions that we all must answer if we are going to be martyrs in the name of Jesus. Let us pray. O Lord Jesus Christ, bring us close to you, that we may know you so deeply and with such passion, that we are willing to venture out into threatening places and talk about you. Give us this courage... the power of your presence... the fire of your Holy Spirit... the authority of your word.