



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

SHARK TANK CHRISTIANITY

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Celebrating Our Heritage

We all come from somewhere. We all trace our roots back to one or more other countries, and to one or more nationalities, races, cultures, and traditions. “Ancestry” websites and genealogy services are making record profits by helping people who feel detached from their heritage and their roots in the modern world trace their own genetic pathways backwards. Some of us have discovered that we have quite complicated and interwoven family trees, as we follow marriages and births back into the past.

Not only are we the recipients of DNA from our physical ancestors, but we also inherit cultural and spiritual genes from the past. None of us invented our faith, our moral values, and the principles we hold dear. Americans—whether we are the first or 15th generation to live on these shores—need to know the values that were baked into our founding when America was put into the oven of its fight for independence; that’s why we need children to be taught our history well, to know our Declaration, our Constitution and our Bill of Rights.

We Christians also have ancestors in our faith. The supreme spiritual homeland for all of us is Israel (aka Palestine, Judea, the Holy Land). On that narrow spit of land less than the size of Ohio the greatest acts of God’s redemption of mankind played out. All who place their faith in Christ have been adopted into the family of Abraham and Moses and David. That’s why there is no rationale whatsoever for anti-Semitism; where would we be without the Jews? And that’s why so many of us have found a voice whispering within us that we need to see that sacred land for ourselves sometime before we die.

For American Presbyterians there is a second spiritual homeland that calls to us. That is the land of Scotland, the northernmost part of the British Isles. On this one weekend each year we pause to remember that heritage which has been given to us, and to reaffirm our understanding and commitment to it. It doesn't matter if your blood ancestors trace a path back to Asia or Africa or continental Europe. In some significant ways you owe a debt of gratitude to the Scottish believers upon whose shoulders we stand today, even if the DNA test were to show that you have zero percent Scottish blood. What we received from those brave Scots who established the Reformed or Presbyterian church, and then crossed dangerous seas to bring it to the New World, include:

- ♦ a passionate love of freedom;
- ♦ a democratic representative government, lodging the power in the people, not the ruling class;
- ♦ the equality of all men and women before God and before the law;
- ♦ the supremacy of the written Word of God as our authoritative standard for what we believe and how we live;
- ♦ a high commitment to education, in order that we might know God and understand the world He has given to us;
- ♦ a strong work ethic and a corresponding commitment to moral living.

Take those principles and values away, and you literally cannot imagine America, nor would this church exist as it is.

We return to those values to re-confirm them, on this our annual Heritage Weekend, because we believe they are so essential. Our celebration today may involve certain musical instruments and certain types of clothing or decoration and certain customs, but those are just incidental—they happen to be part of the cultural trappings of Scotland. But the values we have learned from them and adopted as our own are what really matter—not whether we play bagpipes real loud or men wear skirts to church.

An Unbroken Chain

The Scots did not invent any of their Christian values and beliefs out of nothing. Their ideas weren't original to them. They received them from the Bible, directly from the missionaries who first brought the Truth to them from another land. Historically, we can trace the arrival of the Christian gospel in Scotland to some courageous Irish believers, led by a man named Columba. Those missionaries in turn owed their faith to the great St. Patrick a century before, who was an Englishman and took the faith across the Irish Sea to the Emerald Isle. And before Patrick, the English were first introduced to Christ by Roman missionaries who accompanied the conquering legions and brought not only civilization to the wild Anglo-Saxons but also reading and writing and the Bible. And the Roman church was founded by Peter and Paul and the other Jewish apostles who had been first commissioned and sent out by Christ Himself.

It is the unbroken chain of mission work that has made Christianity the only true worldwide faith, and that continues to inspire and send forth believers today to reach those who have not yet heard the life-changing message of God's love. Our biblical text for today tells the story of the sending of the very first Christian missionaries nearly 2,000 years ago. After we read this we will spend a few minutes trying to understand its relevance to us today.

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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.”

⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

Acts 1:1-9

Successful Entrepreneurship

The Emmy-winning reality show *Shark Tank* was developed and produced by Mark Burnett and is in its 8th successful season on ABC (with re-runs on CNBC). It features a panel of multi-millionaire investors who witness and critique presentations from aspiring entrepreneurs, who are hoping that their idea will catch the favorable eye of the panel and produce some venture capital to become successes. Through this show—which has featured some brilliant ideas and concepts, and some klunkers worthy only of a painful cringe—the genius of free-market enterprise has been on display. People who dream of doing something new love to watch it and study it—learning from both the hits and the misses, from the winners and the losers, and maybe even dreaming of trying out for the show themselves some day.

What can be learned from watching *Shark Tank* is what all of you who have ever been part of a successful start-up business or enterprise have learned. To make it, a new venture needs these three components:

- ◆ A Great Product
- ◆ A Business or Marketing Plan
- ◆ Adequate Capital

First, you need something that people will want, something that will meet a need or a desire, a product or service that is worth pro-

ducing and buying. If nobody is driving a horse and buggy any more, even the greatest buggy whip ever made will be a dud. Second, you need to get the word out to potential customers, preferably with convincing testimonials from already-satisfied users, so that people will be aware of the product and be motivated to try it. Third, you need to have the strength (the financial capital, and also the human capital of energy and skill) to sustain the venture (because success doesn't happen overnight).

Let's apply this simple but time-tested formula for success to the Christian message, which was introduced to the world for the first time here in the Book of Acts. The **Product** Jesus "invented" and offered to all mankind was nothing less than the "Gospel," the Good News, the greatest and most life-transforming power ever seen. This Gospel is what Christ accomplished for us by dying on the cross and then by rising from the dead (as was witnessed and documented beyond any doubt). The features of the Gospel product are:

- ♦ the possibility of having all the guilt of our sins (past, present and future) wiped away, forgiven completely by the Judge of the Universe and declared acquitted in His eternal court;
- ♦ the possibility of having a personal relationship with God as our daily Guide, Comforter, and Friend;
- ♦ the assurance that after this life ends we will be with Him forever;
- ♦ the privilege of being part of God's family, connected with one another as brothers and sisters.

That's what we have that no one else can offer. Where else but in Jesus could you find such an amazing product?

Next, we find that our Lord provided a brilliant **Business Plan**. And although the people He chose to be His "marketing department"—namely, the twelve disciples (minus the traitor)—were completely inexperienced and ill-equipped for the job, that apparently didn't matter to Jesus. Acts 1:8 lays out their orders: they are to start being "witnesses" where they are (in Jerusalem), and then they are

to go to the suburbs and surrounding area (Judea), then to the next country (Samaria), and then they are to keep on going till they reach everyone with the great news (the ends of the earth). We will return in a moment to examine in more detail the Business Plan—because it is the part that involves us—but first let’s add the third element for successful entrepreneurship.

The **Capital** that will sustain the new Jesus venture and make it successful for the long haul is described in verses 4 and 5. It is the Holy Spirit, that unquenchable power of God Himself that comes to reside inside us, to inspire and motivate and strengthen us to carry out His plan. The simple historical fact that the largest and most influential religion/philosophy/worldview/value system in the world, which has most impacted and shaped individual lives and nations, was founded by a penniless Carpenter from Nazareth and his 11 blue-collar staff is astounding. How could anything so great come from something so insignificant? Only the power of God could accomplish it. Only the Holy Spirit can explain the survival and the spread of the Christian Church.

The Most Effective Witness

Let’s return to the Business Plan found in verse 8 and notice a couple things about it before we close. “You will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The job of the vast majority of Jesus’ followers is simply to be “witnesses.” In a courtroom, there are attorneys and there are witnesses. They have very different jobs, expectations and requirements. Attorneys need to be highly-trained, thoroughly-briefed on every detail of the case, and eloquent in presenting oral arguments, refuting opponents and cross-examining. Very few have the abilities and the time to do that; and relatively few attorneys are needed in a court.

Most of the people who speak in a courtroom will be witnesses. The simple job of a witness is just to honestly relate what they saw, heard and experienced. They don’t need to be slick debaters; in fact, the more polished and practiced they appear, the less credible they seem. Look carefully at what Jesus said, and notice the distinction.

He does not give a command to all of us to be attorneys. We simply have to be witnesses. There are a few individuals in each generation who have been uniquely equipped and called by Jesus to take the role of His attorneys, persuasively arguing His case. You'll find a number of books by gifted modern defenders of the faith in our BookCenter. But most of us don't need to try to do that. We are simply called to be honest witnesses, sharing genuinely and naturally with our family and friends and colleagues and neighbors what we have personally experienced of the love of God.

When the witnesses of Jesus carry out the Business Plan, some of them will cross geographical distances: to "Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." But it's not just geography that separates the human race. We are experts at building cultural walls to divide us—strong barriers not only of tradition and practice, but of language and race and nationality and age and political opinion and personal preferences. The sad landscape of humanity is that we tend to divide and separate. We are all intensely conscious that there are "our kind of people" on this side of the wall, and those "other" people who are different from us on the other side.

If the Gospel, the message of the love of Christ, was ever going to break out of its narrow enclosure within first century Jews, some courageous witnesses would have to climb over those cultural walls to tell people who were different. We can call them other-culture missionaries. When a Jewish Christian told a Samaritan or a Greek or an Egyptian or a Roman about Jesus, that was other-culture mission. But the ultimate goal is always to raise up believers within that other culture, so that they can share most effectively with their own people. How thankful we are that God has raised up Peters and Pauls and Patricks and Columbas and the contemporary missionaries our church supports. Without them, many of us wouldn't know the Lord. But that is not the task placed before the majority of us.

Most Christians, in each generation, are called by our Master to be same-culture missionaries. And that is usually the kind of witnessing that produces the greatest results. If an advertiser wants to

sell Budweiser beer to Americans during the Super Bowl, they will show people who are like their target market enjoying their product; they will not picture a Masai herdsman from Kenya chugging a Bud while herding his goats, because the TV audience would conclude that the product must not be for their kind of people.

If a cosmetics company wants to market its facial care products to American women, it will not run a testimonial of an Iranian woman clad head to toe in a burqa testifying to how great it is; viewers would conclude that the product wasn't meant for them. The best advertising uses testimonials of people who are like us in order to reach us. That's how the Gospel spreads. You are uniquely equipped and positioned to share what God means to you, and how important He is in your life, with someone you know or someone with whom you have much in common.

I encourage you to ask Jesus every day to put in your mind some person He wants you to care about—and maybe even say a positive word to. And when opportunities come—perhaps to ask someone how you can pray for them, or to speak a word of honest witness to them of how God helps you—don't be afraid. All you need to do is “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” And the Holy Spirit is inside of you! ■

