

Being a Witness

I. Introduction

- A. In Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8, Jesus calls upon his disciples to be witnesses of his life and Gospel. This calling is extended to later disciples in the book of Acts like Stephen and Paul (see Acts 26).
- B. The New Testament is not the origin of the call of God's people to be witnesses. Isaiah in the Old Testament also has similar language in Isaiah 43:10 and 44:8.
- C. Likewise, all who follow Christ are now called his witnesses. To understand this concept, we must not only consider the act of witnessing but also the identity of a witness. We need to understand not just what a witness does but also what it means to BE a witness.

II. The Greek Words

- A. The noun "witness" comes from the Greek word μαρτυς. The verb "to witness" comes from the Greek word μαρτυρεω.
- B. Both words come from Greek legal vocabulary. Kittel reports that these words are associated with "one who can and does speak from personal experience about the actions in which he took part and which happened to him, or about persons and relations known to him."
- C. However, there was also a less formal use of the word in Greek communities. Kittel also reports that these words sometimes do not refer "to the establishment of events of actual relations or facts of experience on the basis of direct personal knowledge. It signifies also the proclamation of views or truths of which the speaker is convinced. It thus relates to things which by their very nature cannot be submitted to empirical investigation."
- D. Thus, the two types of witnesses in Greek literature can be described as:
 - i. A factual witness (one who declares facts obtained from first-hand knowledge or experience.)
 - ii. A confessional witness (one who declares what he or she believe based on facts or truths.)

III. The Biblical Concept

- A. Indeed, there are places in the New Testament where the formal, legal meaning of witness is intended – the factual witness. However, there are also numerous places where the word witness is used to describe people (and their testimony) who are not called upon to give eye-witness testimony but rather called upon to proclaim the truth about which they are entirely convinced. These are the confessional witnesses.
- B. In any testimony, facts are often indisputable but exactly what those facts mean can be disputed. That's why judges and juries are called upon to hear the facts of witnesses and testimony and then discern a verdict or meaning from the facts. Luke sometimes seems to be writing as if Christianity is on trial (and it was in several cases in Acts). Luke provides the testimony of first-hand witnesses to help established the credibility of Jesus and the Gospel.
- C. However, not all Christians in the early church were first-hand witnesses to the events of the Gospels but they were still called witnesses of the Gospel. These witnesses are not merely repeating facts or reporting events. They declare the facts in both word and deed as people convinced of their truthfulness. They do not need a judge or jury to deliver a verdict for they are already certain. Thus, they live out what they believe because they are already entirely convinced.

- D. Spicq writes that a confessional witness will “express their personal conviction and identify with the cause that they defend. . . It is not simply a matter of reporting facts – which need to be interpreted – but of speaking and vindicating the truth, or somehow doing it justice.”
- E. Thus, the Biblical picture of a witness is not one who persuades but one who is wholly persuaded. The goal is not to prove anything but that the witness totally believes his or her testimony – to convey belief in the hopes of fostering belief. This witness emphatically demonstrates their belief through word and deed so that what is presented is not mere facts but a life changed by the facts confessed.
 - i. Such a witness does not testify merely in words.
 - ii. Such a witness is not concerned about checking off “witnesses” from his or her daily to-do list. Such a witness is always BEING a witness.

IV. Being a Witness in the Modern Context

- A. Leslie Newbigin gives a summary of a Biblical witness as one who “bears witness” in these five areas:
 - i. **Self** – You are wholly convinced of the truth of the Gospel and your actions and decisions are consistently influenced by your faith. Romans 12:1-2
 - ii. **Secular Community** – Your steadfast belief in the Gospel changes you by the power of the Holy Spirit so that you are noticeably, positively different from the surrounding culture. You are not just occasionally mentioning the gospel, you are consistently living a Godly lifestyle which others can see even if you are not aware. 1 Peter 2:12
 - iii. **Good Deeds** – Not only does the community see your Godly lifestyle, they are blessed by your presence in both tangible and intangible ways. Your service is not for praise but for the glory of God and the love of people. Matthew 5:14-16; Matthew 6:1-4
 - iv. **Local Evangelism** – Your life lived in the community and your good deeds done for the community (which flow from a genuine faith in Christ and belief in the Gospel) will naturally lead others to Christ. The lifestyle of being a witness fosters opportunities for you to share your testimony in a more evangelistic way. Acts 16:30
 - v. **Global Missions** – The heart of one wholly convinced of the Gospel will not be closed to or unaware of the people and needs that exist beyond the local community. Such a person naturally participates in the greater mission of the God they love and trust. Acts 1:8
- B. These five develop in sequence but the call to be a witness includes bearing witness in each area.
 - i. A sprout is not expected to immediately bear fruit nor is it expected to remain a sprout.
 - ii. One should not consider jumping straight into global missions in an attempt to be a better witness. Cross-cultural missions is not the ultimate form of witnessing. Participating in God’s global mission is not like a pilgrimage we embark on to make us holy. Missions is the fruit of faithfulness, not a fertilizer or catalyst for faithfulness.
 - iii. Missions is also not the pinnacle of Christian activity. A faithful witness is always bearing witness in each area.

1. Missions is not the final work in a long succession of tasks. Missions may be a secondary or occasional work of some faithful witnesses. Yet it is part of their greater vision for witnesses.
2. Mission is not the great promotion in a spiritual hierarchy. In reality, the more you grow up in Christ, you more you bow down in humility. To see missions as anything other than the result of humble obedience is to offer a skewed testimony.