Some Observations On
The New Testament Concept of “Witness”

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I

“Witness” is a significant New Testament word. Martus occurs thirty-four times; the verb form martureō appears seventy-nine times; the nouns marturia and marturion total fifty-seven uses between them. The concept appears sparingly in the Synoptic Gospels, but is concentrated in the Johannine literature and the Acts of the Apostles. This distribution of its usage suggests that it is a vital aspect of the Church’s growth from a local Jerusalem group to a world-wide movement, and contributed much to the propagation of the belief that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” through which believers found “life in His name” (John 20:21).

Its importance, however, goes beyond statistical considerations. Its importance lies in its meaning, and in its close affinity to the nature of the Christian faith as a historic religion. The Christian faith dawned on the world as a “light shin[ing] in the darkness” of paganism (John 11:5a; see Eph 6:12), with a power that “delivered [them] from the dominion of darkness” (Col 1:13a). It came into a world filled with “many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’” (1 Cor 8:5b)--those of Mt. Olympus and the temples of Rome, and the deities of the mystery religions from Egypt such as Isis and Osiris; and many philosophies--such as Epicureanism and Stoicism which commanded the loyalties of many for whom the ancient gods had died. It confronted all this with a simple account of a man named Jesus in whom, it was claimed, the one, living eternal God had visited the earth.

Here was something new, something different. The home of

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the Olympian gods was “shut from the sight of men on earth by clouds.” No one ever shook hands with Zeus. No one ever had lunch with Jupiter. No one ever rode out a storm in a little boat with Isis or Osiris. Those deities never wore sandals. Their feet never touched the earth; they were never soiled by the dust of the road we walk. But here was a god “who for a little while was made lower than the angels,” who “share[d] in flesh and blood,” who was “made like His brethren in every respect” (Heb 2:9a, 14a, 17a). This was not mythology, but history; not fairy tale, but fact. This was no god “shut from the sight of men by clouds,” but who was born in the animal stall of an overcrowded inn in a little village locatable on a map; who was accessible to both the humble and the great; who was a refugee in Egypt; who lived and taught on the soil of a Roman province; who had identifiable disciples, visited identifiable places, ran into trouble with the law under an identifiable Roman procurator; who was condemned to death, executed and buried by identifiable friends; and appeared alive to some of them following His death and burial.

What is more, this was not an historically isolated phenomenon, appearing out of the blue without background or preparation. It was vitally related to a unique series of historic events which lay behind it. It was a culmination of two thousand years of Jewish history. While other religions were speculating about the doings in “the remote heavenly palaces of the gods,” the Jews had been observing Yahweh at work in history. As a colleague of mine once remarked, “you never get much heresy where the Old Testament is central, because it never allows you to get away from history.” You cannot escape history in the Old Testament because it is the record of a historic people and their experiences on this planet. It has to do with the Pharaohs of Egypt; with Sennacherib, Sargon and Shalmaneser of Assyria; with Nebuchadnezzar of Chaldea; and Cyrus of Persia. It records the doings of the kings of Israel and Judah, the activities of living prophets, the record of whose doings abide until the present. So it is natural that the Christian faith should keep its roots deeply in history and not allow itself to get airborne into gnostic speculations. It is essentially a story of the God who had made himself known to the “fathers by the prophets,” now speaking His full and final word “by a Son” (Heb 1:1, 2). Christianity is basically the story of this Son. As Dr. George Arthur Buttrick once said: “In a sense, you can state the Christian faith in six words: ‘The most wonderful thing has happened.’”

Here is where “witness” in its primary sense became essential. The story must be told by those who had “witnessed” it. The elemental meaning of martius is a legal one, where someone who
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has observed an event, or heard words spoken, or seen the signing of a deed, appears in court to authenticate such. To witness, therefore, is to rehearse what one has seen or heard, to verify the factuality of something. It was for this reason that the Gospels were written and ultimately selected by the Church as bearing essentially the “witness” of the apostles, who were described by Luke as “eyewitnesses” of the things narrated. The importance of this apostolic “testimony” to what had happened was stressed by the apostles themselves when, in selecting one to take the place of the defected Judas “as a witness to [Jesus’] Resurrection,” they insisted that he must be “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when He was taken up...” (Acts 1:21). The facts about Jesus were not mythological but rather “a narrative [an historic account] of the things [the events] which have been accomplished [happened, taken place] among us, just as they were delivered [handed down] to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses...” (Luke 1:1, 2). The “witness” was not just to the Resurrection, but to the whole story of things that had happened on Palestinian soil in ongoing historic events, to real people. These “witnesses” were identifiable human beings, who toiled and sweated over heavy water-soaked fishing nets, who both collected and paid taxes, who bartered in market-places, some of whom were “dagger men” who sought opportunity to dispatch hated Romans or Jewish collaborators to the other world—all of whom had behind them the two-thousand-year history of a nation struggling against great odds for survival in a hostile world, and were not accustomed to living on mythical imaginings nor hallucinatory visions.

The necessity of the historic witness of the apostles to the events which had produced the Christian Church was effectively illustrated many years ago by Professor H. H. Farmer of Cambridge University. He contrasted Christianity as a historic religion with a nonhistoric religion such as Hinduism:

It is theoretically conceivable that all the sacred books of Hinduism, and every Hindu, might be utterly destroyed, and yet substantially the same religion reappear....Indeed it would fit harmoniously into the Hindu scheme of thought to suppose that if Hinduism vanished today it would reappear tomorrow, fifty years, a thousand years hence. But were all Christian records and all Christians extirpated, Christianity could not recur again. In its occurrence... without a witness, it would flatly contradict all that it had always claimed to be. To put it paradoxically, in
happening again it would show that it had never, according to its own definition of itself, happened at all.\(^6\)

Christianity rests on a story of events. If nobody knew the events, nobody could be a Christian. For this reason, each generation must return to the Scriptures. The Bible will always remain central to the Church's witness, for it contains the story which brought the Church into being and will continue to nourish it to the end. The difference between the apostolic generation and all subsequent generations is that they could speak of that "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1), whereas the others must repeat a story at which they themselves were not present. The Fourth Gospel points the dividing line between those who, like Thomas, had believed because they had "seen" and "those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29).

II

But the apostles "witness" in yet another sense of the word. Strathmann has pointed out that both in classical Greek and in the Septuagint, *martus* and its cognates are frequently used in the secondary sense of attestation of *truth* rather than mere *fact*.\(^7\) The "witness" interprets the hidden meaning of observable realities. The second Isaiah speaks of Israel as a "witness" to "the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears" (43:8). Because Israel knows and believes and understands that "before [Yahweh] no god was formed, nor shall there be any after" Him, they are to "witness" this to those who know it not. They are to interpret to others the meaning of God's action with them.

Events do not always carry their significance in themselves. They must be interpreted. For example, had one, ignorant of baseball, been taken to Forbes Field in Pittsburgh in the Fall of 1960 to see the last game of the World Series, he would have seen men, in batting practice before the game, hitting with a wooden club a small white sphere which occasionally went over the fence. This would have been just an illustration of the mechanical force of propulsion over gravity. When, however, in the last of the ninth inning, with two outs and the Pittsburgh Pirates behind, a little chap named Mazeroski, whose propulsive habits were at best questionable, propelled the little sphere over the fence, the uninitiated onlooker would not have understood why the crowd responded with fits of near insanity. One would have had to interpret the event to him to give it any meaning. The incident ended the game with a sudden, unexpected reversal of the winning side; it installed the Pirates as world champions; it added a fat
paycheck to the yearly earnings of the hitter and his teammates, and by that much reduced the paychecks of their Yankee opponents; it put Pittsburgh on the sports map and caused every sports writer in the world to write about it; and it gave habitual drunkards a better reason for getting drunk than they had had for some time. To understand the significance of an event, it is necessary to set it in a context of meaning.

The necessity of this in the realm of faith may be seen in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah as his chariot carried him home from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. “Do you understand what you are reading?” asked Philip. “How can I,” he replied, “unless some one guides [explains, teaches] me?” Then we are told, “Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus” (Acts 8:30ff). The story of Jesus must be interpreted. It could be just a story of a starry-eyed young Jewish man who fell afool of the authorities in a good cause and found what many reformers have found, that it doesn't pay to stick one's neck out too far. Or, it could be the story of the coming of the eternal God in a unique, decisive incursion into human history, to redeem the world from its thralldom to evil. The event itself must be understood in its context of meaning. The facts themselves are not enough.

A recent British writer has fulminated against Edward Gibbon as a “pseudo-historian.” Of him the writer says:

Accurate in every statement of his work, there has lived no individual writer responsible for a greater volume of inferential falsehood...Following his method, there might be compiled with equal regard for fact and disdain of the truth, a chronicle of the American continent from the sexual shortcomings of transatlantic presidents, fortified by an implicit belief in the veracity of the Hearst press.  

In order to avoid “inferential falsehood,” with a high “regard for fact” but a “disdain of the truth,” the Church set up the canon of the Scriptures as the authoritative guide to all future developing tradition. In so doing, it did not impart any authority to the Scriptures--it merely recognized the innate apostolic authority of the interpretation of the sacred events contained therein, by which it had been brought into being and under which its subsequently developing tradition was to be controlled. Those in the apostolic generation, therefore, were the indispensable and decisive “witnesses” both to the facts which underlie our faith and to the meaning of those facts for faith.
III

But the “witness” did not stop with that generation. There is a broader sense in which all Christians are “witnesses.” They “echo” the original witness of the apostles by rehearsing the facts they recounted and by reiterating the apostolic interpretation of those facts. Timothy, for example, was a non-Palestinian Greek who never knew Jesus in the Flesh, but Paul counseled him, “Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord” (2 Tim 1:8a). He was obviously free, in his testifying, to go beyond mere catechetical repetition of apostolic teaching, but in using his own words he was to follow “the pattern of the sound words” which he had heard from Paul and to “guard the truth” which had been entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit who dwelt within him (2 Tim 1:13f). He was not to create new truth, but to rehearse truth which had been entrusted to him by Paul and others. Even Paul, although he was a direct witness to the Resurrection by having been granted a post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus (Acts 22:6f; 26:12ff; Gal 1:15f; 1 Cor 9:1, 15:8), was dependent on the “witness” of the other apostles as to the historic facts of our Lord’s earthly life. When he described the Lord’s Supper, he could only pass on the tradition he had “received.” He speaks of receiving it “from the Lord,” but the entire passage suggests that he does not mean that it had been divinely revealed to him, but had come to him through a tradition at the beginning of which stands the historical Jesus.10 So the entire Christian community is engaged in “witness” as the tradition is received and passed on from generation to generation.

As a guide to the content of what that witness should be, it is instructive to examine the New Testament descriptions of the apostolic witness. To what, or to whom, were they witnessing? What was the content of their testimony? As we have seen, their central and unique attestation can be made by subsequent generations only in a secondary sense—by rehearsing their primary witness to the Resurrection of Jesus. In Peter’s sermon to Cornelius, he affirmed that “God raised [Jesus] on the third day and made Him manifest, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses...” (Acts 10:40a; italics mine). Paul confirms the uniqueness of the apostolic witness to the Resurrection when, in listing the series of post-Resurrection appearances, he lists the appearance to him as “last of all” (1 Cor 15:8a); that is, the last in a series after which there are to be no more. No emotional experiences, or alleged appearances of the risen Christ to sub-apostolic people, therefore, are to be credited as genuine post-Resurrection appearances commensurate with what happened to those “who were chosen by God as witnesses” to the
Resurrection. We must depend on the apostolic “witness” at this point; not subsequent occult experiences. When, therefore, we hear of experiences such as that of the late Bishop Pike, who apparently having reservations about the apostolic testimony to the Resurrection, wanted us to believe in the life beyond because of certain occult communications he had with his deceased son, we cannot incorporate such experiences into the tradition of genuine Christian testimony. They are alien to normative Christianity. At this point the apostolic “witness” is final. We are driven back on it—or nothing. Subsequent generations can only recapitulate their testimony.

But in echoing the apostolic testimony to Jesus’ Resurrection, the re-presentation of succeeding generations must include the context in which that testimony was made. Granted the fact of the Resurrection witnessed solely by the apostles, subsequent generations must present along with it the accompanying apostolic train of thought. They can, for example, follow Paul in testifying to the consequences of failing to believe that Christ has been raised; to the significance of Christ’s Resurrection as “first fruits” of the hope of our own resurrection as His final triumph over death; and to the nature of the mystery involved in the “spiritual body” which Paul contrasts with the “physical body” we now possess (see 1 Cor 15:12f). A part of the apostolic “witness” in which subsequent generations may share, too, is found in the Lukan setting where the witness to the Resurrection is related to its background in the Old Testament Scriptures, with the Suffering Servant as the key to understanding the preparation for the event, and the consequent implication “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations” (Luke 24:26f, 44ff). Guidance is found also in Peter’s word to Cornelius when he insisted that the apostles were commissioned not only to “witness” to “all that He did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem,” and to His “death by hanging...on a tree,” and to the fact that “God raised Him on the third day,” but also “to testify that He is the one ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead” because “all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name” (Acts 10:39ff). This is all part of the apostolic “witness” which all subsequent generations must re-present till “the last syllable of recorded time.”

But note that this “witness” is always focused on Jesus and what God has accomplished through him, not on subjective “experience” as an outcome of believing this. Their “experience” never became their “gospel.” As Paul said, “what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord...” (2 Cor 4:5a). Paul
rehearsed his experience with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus in Acts 22 and 26 in testifying to the fact that Christ was alive, in establishing his commission to "be a witness for Him to all men" of what he had "seen and heard" (22:15b, 26:16b), and in insisting on his status as an apostle (Gal 1:11-2:10); but the normal focus of his evangelistic witnessing was not on his own experience but on the death and Resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophetic message of the Old Testament.

Paul's first recorded sermon in the synagogue at Antioch was not a description of his conversion, nor a word about his own inner spiritual life. It was a rehearsal of Jewish history from the Exodus, through David, to John the Baptist; an affirmation "that what God promised to the fathers, this He has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus"; and the conclusion that "every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" through the "forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:16ff). In his defense before Agrippa, Paul describes his ministry as "testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, He would proclaim light both to the people [the Jews] and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:22f). Paul also counseled Timothy: "Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord...who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Tim 1:5a, 10b). Timothy was not urged to share with his hearers the latest state of his religious emotions, nor the content of some spiritual vision he had recently had, nor his own ideas about God, nor some alleged word spoken to him by God during his morning devotions, but to affirm that God in Christ had destroyed man's last enemy--death, and that because of that we may be "more than conquerors through Him who loved us," from whose love nothing "in all creation can separate us" (Rom 8:37ff). As Eugene H. Peterson has aptly stated: "When we witness we do not unpack the contents of our own emotional suitcases for the titillation of voyeurs, we point to what God has revealed."

Many who follow the "experience-centered" method of Christian witness by continually relating their own experiences of grace, claim John Wesley as their mentor. I am wondering how correct they are. Although I am not an expert on Wesley, I have read rather widely in his writings, and do not recall one single reference to his "Aldersgate" experience save the one description of it in his Journal. It did not seem to become his "gospel." And when, in many other passages in his Journal, he relates some remarkable instance of providence in preserving him from harm.
on his countless journeys to preach, there is no evidence that these experiences were recounted in his sermons, or used as evangelistic tools. It has been said of his sermons that one could develop a good systematic theology from them, because they are directed to an exposition of the faith rather than rehearsals of his experience of the faith.

P. T. Forsyth made a distinction between “the experience...of redemption” and “the experience of a redeemer. Because it is not the sense of the experience that is the main matter, but the source of the experience, and its content. It is not our experience we are conscious of—that would be self-conscious piety—but it is Christ. It is not our experience we preach, but the Christ who comes in our experience.” 12 One of the rarest and most treasured graces possible in Christian experience is genuine humility. The humblest man I ever knew would have been surprised if one had asked him how he became humble. He would probably have answered that he had never thought of himself as humble. It was his experience of Christ that made him humble, not his experience of humility. And what made him humble was that he was so obsessed with Christ, and service to him, that it never occurred to him to analyze his own experience, or talk of it. He could not have written the bestseller I once heard of, entitled Humility and How I Attained It! On the other hand, I think that perhaps the proudest man I ever saw was one who argued that God never asks anything of us that we are unable to attain. If asked whether he really, at all times without exception, kept the second great commandment, “Thou shalt love thy love thy neighbor as thyself,” he likely would have answered “Yes!”

I once heard Professor Eduard Schweizer, of Zurich, illustrate in a lecture the difference between the objective and the subjective quality of human experience. He said: “I ask you, ‘What happened at the theater last Friday evening?’ If you should reply, ‘Oh, it was wonderful! I was deeply moved! Chills went up and down my spine, my eyes were filled with tears; I have never experienced such an exalted mood before in my whole life!’ I should have to reply, ‘But you haven’t answered my question. I did not ask what happened to you, but what happened at the theater?’” If what happened there could produce such a marked response, testimony to the response might indeed encourage the hearer to go the play to find out for himself, but it would be the play itself and not someone else’s experience of the play which would be crucial. Aware of this, when William Carey was visited on his deathbed by his younger colleague, Alexander Duff, and Duff recounted the many contributions Carey had made to India through his life, Carey replied: “Mr Duff,...when I am gone say
nothing about Dr. Carey--speak about Dr. Carey's Saviour."  
This has two important concomitants. First, if one rests one's faith on experience rather than the source of his experience, it is difficult to know whose experience should be normative. On a visit to the Mormon Tabernacle a few years ago, I picked up a tract written by a female deep sea diver, accompanied by a very enticing photograph. It was her testimony. She had been taking instruction in the Mormon faith for some months when suddenly, in a deep dive many feet below the surface of the water, the truth of the Mormon persuasion was clearly revealed to her and she experienced the meaning of life through that revelation in a way that solved all her problems and made her a radiant and triumphant believer. If one rests one's case on experience, why is not her experience as valid as anyone else's? And most certainly, the Christian Science appeal rests quite solidly on Mrs. Eddy's testimony to her "healing" and on that of subsequent followers. If the retelling of religious experiences is the best method of propagating religious faith, then it would seem that those approached would be in the position of consumers influenced by advertising who are left to pick and choose that which is most appealing. On the other hand, to present the proposal of Jesus alongside others, to examine carefully the long history leading up to Him in the old Testament, to expose one's self to the appeal of His character, claims and teachings in the light of the character, claims and teachings of others, along with the apostolic testimony to His death and Resurrection (which involve truths claimed for no other religious leader), furnishes a more solid basis for belief than the states of feelings or the religious experiences claimed by His followers. The ultimate question for faith must be: Is He trustworthy? Conceivably, under the influence of drugs one could have a feeling of emotional euphoria while drowning. On the other hand, a young man might experience all the normal emotional terror of drowning until he was unconscious, yet be saved by a strong swimmer who rescues him, pumps the water out of his lungs, and restores him to wholeness. The issue in a drowning crisis is not how does one feel, but what is the capability of the rescuer? Luther wrote to one in this vein when, eschewing all supports from experience, he rested his hope fully on the adequacy of Christ.

And I, my loving Brentius...do use to think in this manner, namely, as if in my heart were no quality or virtue at all which is called faith or love, but I set all on Christ, and say, my formalis justitia, that is, my sure, my constant and complete righteousness, in which there is no want or
failing, but is as before God it ought to be, is Christ my Lord and Savior.¹⁴

Second, Dora Greenwell, in a classic devotional book, The Patience of Hope, written over a century and a quarter ago, raised the issue of the spiritual uncertainty of a faith which rests on subjective experience rather than on Him who is the source of that experience. If faith rests on experience, then that faith is shaky when the experience cools, and thus one's confidence is put at the mercy of one's changing emotional states, or subjected to the functioning of the liver or endocrine glands. Greenwell wrote:

Certain systems lay a pressure upon the subjective side greater than the spirit of man is at all times able to bear; working out all things from the depths of individual consciousness, as if truth were not there at all until they are (manifestly) there for us.

She gently chided Wesley, who though he laudably "felt and preached Christ both freely and fully," yet by giving "central importance...to conscious spiritual work in men" tended, in some degree, "to withdraw the soul's eye from Christ, to fix it upon what is going on within itself."¹⁵

This criticism was based on Wesley's early views, expressed frequently but especially clearly in a letter in which he says that he insists "in all my writings, and in all my preaching" on a subjective assurance, a "perceptible inspiration," of one's standing with Christ.

We mean that inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, whereby He fills us with righteousness, peace, and joy, with love to Him and all mankind. And we believe it cannot be, in the nature of things, that a man should be filled with this...without perceiving it as clearly as he does the light of the sun.¹⁶

Although, as we have seen, Wesley did not use Christian experience as the basis of faith, it is clear from these and other statements that he used it as evidence of the reality of one's faith. If one were not subjectively assured of one's saving relation to Christ, it was doubtful whether he or she had such a relationship. The evidence for faith that one is reconciled to God does not then rest ultimately on what Christ has done, but on one's "perceiving...as clearly as he does the light of the sun" that he is filled with "righteousness, peace, and joy" and with "love to
[God] and all mankind."

Dora Greenwell apparently did not know, nor do a good many followers of Wesley, that in later years he seemed to recant this stern insistence on a subjective assurance. On March 28, 1768, when Wesley was sixty-five years of age, he wrote to Thomas Rutherforth, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University:

I believe a consciousness of being in...favour...is the common privilege of Christians fearing God and working righteousness. Yet I do not affirm there are no exceptions to this general rule. Possibly some may be in the favour of God, and yet go mourning all the day long. But I believe this is usually owing either to disorder of body or ignorance of gospel promises.

Therefore I have not for many years thought a consciousness of acceptance to be essential to justifying faith. 17

On March 9, 1782, when Wesley was seventy-nine years of age, he wrote to Ann Loxdale, who was having difficulty with her Christian experience, complaining “But I am not increasing in the divine life”:

That is your mistake. Perhaps you are now increasing therein faster than ever you did since you were justified. It is true that the usual method of our Lord is to purify us by joy in the Holy Ghost and a full consciousness of His love. But I have known several exempt cases, and I am clearly satisfied yours is one.... 18

But even more startling is Wesley’s confession to his brother, Charles, when he was sixty-three years of age:

And yet this is the mystery, I do not love God. I never did. Therefore I never believed in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen, a proselyte of the Temple, one of the phoboumenoi ton theon....I have no direct witness, I do not say that I am a child of God.... 19

Able interpreters of Wesley have attributed this strange statement to Wesley’s physical condition at the time it was made, brought on by overwork and strain. 20 To the extent that such an interpretation is valid, it would seem to confirm the fact that to
the degree that one’s confidence of acceptance with God rests on subjective experience, to that degree one is put at the mercy of his or her physical makeup.

Wesley was a sufficiently great man to change his mind when convinced that he had been mistaken. Apparently, in his maturity, through further study of the Scriptures and a deeper understanding of the ups and downs of the struggle of faith, he discovered, with Luther, that faith rests solely on Christ, and that one may be held by Christ even when his own awareness of that is dim. I believe he would finally have agreed with Dora Greenwell:

Happy for us, if Christ can look [at us] and find His own image reflected, however faintly; but we must look at Him, at the sun in the heavens, not at the sun in the brook, its broken and ever-varying reflection. So long as we are resting in anything within ourselves, be it even in a work of grace, there remains, at least to honest hearts, a ground for continual restlessness and continual disappointment. To know that we have nothing, are nothing, out of Christ, is to know the truth which makes us free. 21

In this vein, P.T. Forsyth says:

In your faith you are more conscious and sure of Him than you are of your faith. For your faith, you well know, may fail Him, but you know still better that He will not fail your faith. And you are more conscious and sure of Him, as the source and cause of your experience, than you are of the experience itself, which you forget to think of. The very apostles never asked us to believe their experience, nor to believe on the ground of it, but to believe with them in Christ. 22

IV

There is one further aspect of “witness” in the New Testament that should not be overlooked. It is the nonverbal testimony of the Christian community manifested by their commitment to the truths they profess. The facts on which faith is based, and the unique interpretation of the meaning of those facts which faith gives, is embodied in a life lived in commitment to those facts and the truths they imply. This does not mean that these facts and their meaning are irrelevant if not adequately embodied in a committed community. If that were so, Christian truth would have vanished long ago in the light of the failure of both Israel and the Church to embody their faith. The very judgment of God
brought on by the lapses, however, is itself a witness that they should not have occurred, and God's faithfulness both to Israel and the Church is witness to the truth they often fail to embody. This is clear in the Old Testament where Israel's survival of the judgment of the Exile becomes a "witness" to the nations of the God by whom they survived. Israel's very existence after the Exile made them "witnesses" to Yahweh's saving purpose and His lordship of history (Isa 53:9ff). So the very existence of the Christian community, in spite of its lapses and failures and weaknesses and denials, bears witness to the God to whom it is committed and testifies to the fact that the truth by which it lives is greater than it is. The Church is summoned to live by the faith which it professes, and to the extent that its failure to do so is willful and blatant, it is under the judgment of God. But the God to whom the Church witnesses is greater than it is, and will not "leave himself without witness" even when the Church fails Him.

Years ago I heard Dr. George W. Richards tell of E. Stanley Jones asking Gandhi what he would like him to tell the American Christians when he visited America. Gandhi replied: "Tell them to live their religion." Dr. Richards remarked that this indicated Gandhi's failure to understand the Christian faith. This was a modern repetition of the old Pharisaic notion that if all Israelites would only keep the law for twenty-four hours, Messiah would come. This would place the achievement of God's purpose in the hands of men rather than in the will of God. It manifests, too, a faulty estimate of the tragedy of the human situation, assuming that by human effort, even on the part of good and devout people, the kingdom of God can be established on the earth and the ravages of the human condition be overcome. Karl Barth frequently quoted the phrase: _Die providentia et hominum confusionem_. The providence of God and the confusion, or bungling, of people—even good people—accounts for history. The purpose of God for humankind is too great ever to be perfectly embodied in history, either in the life of individuals or the structures of society. Utopians, both secular or sacred, hold out false hopes. There will never be a time when we shall not have to continue praying, "Thy kingdom come," so long as history lasts. The kingdom will come as God's gift in His own way and time. Committed persons do not achieve it, but bear witness to its coming because God is God, and they seek to live now—though failing at every turn—in a way that will be commensurate with that kingdom when it comes.

Browning's familiar saying, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" puts it well. But a genuinely believing person keeps reaching and, aware with Paul that he or
she is not “already at the goal,” presses on “toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:13). And even an imperfect effort to live one’s faith, to the degree that a person is genuinely penitent, is a silent witness to that truth which is greater than human achievement. Discerning people can distinguish between a willful flaunting of the Christian ideal—the fraudulent attitude that says, “let us sin that grace may abound”—and the authentic failure of a high-minded struggler after righteousness. The life-commitment of a believer to the truth he or she attests, and the effort in the long history of the Church to read the meaning of the judgments of God upon it and to renew its life accordingly, are eloquent “witness” to the fact that God is at work in the world through His Church and that He speaks to “those who have ears to hear.”

John Calvin once suggested that in the liturgy of the Church the Gloria in excelsis be replaced by a recital of the Ten Commandments, thus witnessing that confessing a true desire to live by them would be the best way to glorify God. The supreme commitment of life to the glory of God is a mighty witness to Him.

V

This leads to the ultimate in “witness”—the laying down of one’s life for God’s glory. The New Testament applies the word “witness” to Jesus in the laying down of His life (1 Tim 6:13), and twice in the Revelation applies it to those who had died martyrs’ deaths (2:13, 17:6). This usage of martus became customary in the early centuries to designate those who gave their lives for the Christian faith, and has now passed into our English language as “martyr.” This eloquent “witness” of those who died for Christ rather than live without Him became one of the most effective testimonies to the One for whom they died, and made a great contribution to the final triumph of the faith over paganism. This was perhaps the most effective witness that could be made to the lordship of Jesus, either then or now.

Such witness is foreign to our present Western experience, but it is startling to think that in other parts of the world more people have died for Christ in our generation than in any other since the Christian era began. I do not refer to those who have died in wars ostensibly fighting to save what we think of as Christian civilization, but people who have been martyred in cold blood in peacetime simply because they dared openly to confess faith in Christ. In a world that has grown increasingly secular and pagan, where the Church’s witness has in many areas been weakened by compromise and accommodation to the surrounding culture, the Church’s opportunity to glorify God in such a manner is all the more significant.
witness of martyrdom may be the means by which the world will once more be conquered by the faith. And that sort of witness can never be a self-conscious effort to turn persons' attention to the one who makes the sacrifice. No martyr expires saying, “Look at me and see my courage in dying,” but rather silently testifies to Him whose “head was crowned with thorns, and that face that was spit upon” for him or her.

One last word. The New Testament makes it clear that no “witness” can be effectively made to the world, either by word or by life, that is not empowered by the Holy Spirit. Conversely, no “witness” can be heard or rightly interpreted apart from the aid of the Holy Spirit. All our efforts to be or to speak are vain save as they are “begun, continued, and ended” in Him.

Notes


2. Ibid.

3. Professor Balmer H. Kelly, in conversation.

4. This statement was made in a lecture at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.


9. The difference between recognizing authority and imparting it may be seen in an experience of a friend of mine who, in Chicago’s gangland days, was accosted at night by a hoodlum. The man demanded, “Give me a buck!” My friend just handed him a dollar without looking and went on his way. He imparted no authority to the hoodlum, but recognized a certain type of authority which the hoodlum possessed at the time.
that time!


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p. 358f.

18. Ibid., 7:114.

19. Ibid., 5:16


