



His Presence Extended in Witness

Psalm 68; John 17:1-11; Acts 1:6-14; 1 Pt 4:12-14, 5:6-11

We often think of witnessing as a task assigned to the church. Sure, we would like it to be assigned to missionaries, pastors, or maybe deacons—just as long as we are not among those charged with the mission. As Baptists, we have grown up with the Great Commission as a hallmark of our faith, tradition, and essential understanding of our identity. Dealing with witness as a task, however, may actually do us more harm than good.

Robbie was out mowing yesterday. I can see evidence down to the tractor, awaiting his return to a seemingly constant task. I can tell that someone was busy this week cleaning the church facilities. The bulletins in your hands are testimony to Shirley's accounting, copying, and folding. The recorded balance on hand tells us Bruce has written more checks. Task after task, job after job, the process of life in our church community goes on and on. We like jobs with visible results. We also like jobs that have a definite endpoint. Eventually, we tire of adding on to the daily grind. How can our witness rise above a list of jobs we have to get around to accomplishing? Can it ever become more than just another job?

People of the ancient Near East saw God's presence visible in the clouds. They pictured gods riding through the sky with storm clouds to drop water on parched lands. Rain proclaimed divine action. Our own insurance companies will be talking about last week's tornadoes as "acts of God." The coins in our pockets proclaim God's existence, but isn't witness to be more than some recognition that God is real or somehow responsible for things we can't control. Somehow such witness does not challenge us to faithful dependence on God.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples about his own witness, he focused on clarifying the identity and character of God. That is the essence of the term "glorify"—to reveal who one truly is. This was Jesus' essential task, but more than a job to accomplish. It was the task of a life and ministry, wholly pointing to the revealing of God's full identity and character. Rather than a set of words to the unbelieving or a sermon to the disciples, it was the focus of a life.

Jesus' ministry and witness was not a pat statement of "getting saved." It was not a phrasing of the Romans Road plan of salvation. You know, admit you are a sinner, confess your need for God's grace, believe that God loves you and has done all for your salvation, then call on Jesus to be your Lord and Savior (Romans 3:10, 23; 6:23; 8:5; 10:9-10, 13). That is all true, but Jesus' witness goes beyond that little capsule. It is somehow more than our reduction of the gospel to a four-step tract. Jesus' witness was so much more than a formula. The demands of that witness were, too.

Jesus talked about revealing God's name—*Ha Shem*, God's full character and identity. He spoke of God's redeeming love, all the while living its full reality. His life evidenced that God loved him enough to enable him to love others in kind. "I have made known your name." I have displayed before the world who you truly are. This was the essence of Jesus' witness. It was the mission of his living. It was by making God fully known in character that Jesus' life was fulfilled.

Jesus' living was witness. Jesus' living was testimony. Jesus' interaction with the disciples and the world was a statement of God's identity, purpose, and will for all humanity. He was the message that God had come to live among humanity, calling all into divine fellowship.

The intimacy with God his life portrayed was something he prayed for the disciples, as well. It would be their witness—the continuation of his own. “As you and I are one, so may the also be one.”

This is an interesting unity Jesus addresses. He speaks of the unity of the disciples, but he also speaks of the disciples’ unity with himself after the character of his own unity with the Father. This is certainly no formulaic witness. This is not a pat answer of bumper-sticker slogan that reduces faith into a nutshell. It is a charge of life-long witness and challenge.

Perhaps it is something we might best understand from the backdrop of Peter’s words to the disciples in the Dispersion. Their suffering and tribulation was participation in the life and ministry of Christ Jesus. In their suffering, Jesus’ own suffering could find a reflection. In the midst of their suffering, they could bear witness as did Jesus to God’s grace, love, forgiveness—God’s true identity and character flowing through them as through Christ Jesus.

The world around us is looking for a very different kind of witness. They are looking for that witness of the popular gospels of prosperity, health, wealth, and welfare. They want to hear a gospel that is no gospel at all. They want to hear a proclamation that will rather lull them into believing that the message of God is for immediate gratification.

We want quick fixes for our problems. We want to think that something as simple as a tax rebate, a tax holiday, or a check in the mail will magically solve the woes of an economy based on greed. We want to believe that swallowing a pill will fix health issues that have resulted from years of systemic abuse on our bodies. We want to believe that throwing money at our problems will fix what is wrong with the inclinations of our hearts.

Jesus did not proclaim quick fixes. Jesus did not proclaim a feel-good gospel. Jesus proclaimed in his living, suffering, and dying the character of a God who will go to any lengths to offer us love, life, and reconciliation unto himself. He revealed the very character and identity of God.

This is the task which we were likewise left. It is not a short answer, pithy comment with which to blast another. It is a life of revealing God as Christ so revealed. It is making God’s very presence known, just as God was visible in Christ Jesus, reconciling the world to himself. We are not called to stand around staring into the clouds for Jesus’ return. We are empowered to employ our lives in witness that he is indeed here with us yesterday, today, and forever.

At Jesus’ ascension, the disciples wanted to know, “Are we there, yet?” They were thinking of a limited task—a specific job with a visible end. Jesus spoke of a lifetime witness. He called for a new incarnation of testimony through our living. “Is it time yet?” Yes, it is time. Well, maybe not for some of the things we are expecting and anticipating. It is time to see ourselves immersed in God’s power and authority to witness to God’s presence and redeeming action in our lives.

There is no simple checklist for this witness and calling. There are no pat phrases and answers that will do the task justice. There is no memorized spiel that will suffice for our Christian witness. The only sufficient witness will be that of our lives laid at Jesus’ feet. Our witness becomes sufficient as we allow Christ Jesus to live and move in us. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” and you will extend my presence in the witness of your living. Are we ready to so extend Christ’s presence in witness?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*