

Christian Witness

Acts 1:1-3

The past three messages in our series through the book of Acts have emerged as a mini series, covering the basics of Christian teaching. So far, we have examined (1) the *essence* of Christianity (the kingdom of God and its King, Jesus Christ, Acts 1:1-3) and (2) the *power* for Christianity (the Holy Spirit, Acts 1:4-8). Finally, this Sunday, we discover (3) the *mission* of Christianity (bearing witness about Jesus Christ, Acts 1:8).

Five Words Bursting with Importance

To his disciples gathered around him on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave them this mission, “You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Although this sentence contains only five English words,¹ it is like a strand of DNA, packed with meaning and significance for the life and activities of the Christian church. We will summarize this idea of bearing witness to Jesus under the term “Christian witness” and unfold its meaning in three statements: (1) Christian witness is experiential; (2) Christian witness is necessary; (3) Christian witness is personal.

1. Christian Witness is Experiential

In our world, as in ancient times, a *witness* is someone who has personally experienced something and now advocates for its truth and reality. In the courtroom, a witness is called forth because he or she has some experiential connection with the crime. In commercials, advertisers use “real people, not actors” who taste the spaghetti sauce, smile, and rave to viewers about how mouth-wateringly delicious it is.

The experience of God’s people in the Old Testament. The experiential component of witness may be traced back to the Old Testament. God redeemed a people who, having experienced his saving love and power, could now bear joyful witness to that great salvation (Exodus 15:1-18). God’s logic in Exodus 19:4-6 is especially clear. “You yourselves have seen . . . how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. . . . Now therefore, you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The people of Israel were to be an irrefutable premise, proving to the watching world that Yahweh is the only true God, and this proof was based on their *experience* of his salvation.

The experience of Jesus as God’s true witness. Although Israel miserably failed to bear witness to God’s unique love and power (they constantly reverted back to idolatry), Jesus the true Son of God bore perfect witness to God because he is God. “He who comes from heaven,” John writes about Jesus, “is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard. . . . For he whom God has sent [in other words, Jesus] utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure” (John 3:31-34, see Revelation 1:5).

The experience of those who follow Jesus. The apostles, who had experienced Jesus (they heard him teach, some saw him die, all saw him alive after being dead) could bear witness to the reality that Jesus is the living king, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, the defeater of sin and death, and the Savior of all who believe. It is true that the apostles were witnesses in a unique way in that they saw the resurrected Christ with their own eyes (1 John 1:1-2). Others, however, who personally experience the saving power of Christ, can also be his witnesses (1 John 5:10; Revelation 2:13; 12:11).

Without a personal experience with Christ, it is impossible to properly bear witness to Christ.

¹Three words in Greek (ἑσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες)

2. Christian Witness is Necessary

Jesus' mandate, "you *shall* be my witnesses," carries a tone of urgency and necessity. Why is this mission so necessary? It is necessary (1) because Jesus' person and work changes everything, and (2) because this is not universally understood or believed.

If Jesus' life and work simply provides us with an outstanding moral example, people might find that example in another great spiritual leader. If, moreover, Jesus' life and work merely affects people's *religious* outlook, then it would leave the rest of our lives unchanged. But Jesus' resurrection proves that *nothing* can ever be the same. It means that right and wrong are not just hiccups in our evolving brains, but God-given values by which he will judge the world (Acts 17:21). It means that history is neither sloping toward an eventual "heat death" when the last humans expire, shivering on a distant planet; nor is it doomed to an endless cycle of reincarnation. Jesus' resurrection was the in-breaking of the kingdom of God and proof that the one who defeated sin and death will one day stand as Judge (Acts 17:21; 2 Timothy 4:1). Because Jesus is Lord of all, the good news about him must be declared to all.

But this message is not universally understood or believed. Our default mode is to assume that we can save ourselves, or to insist that salvation is to be found in other things. Moreover, the message about Jesus Christ is being opposed by a spiritual enemy, the devil, who would "snatch it up" lest people hear and understand (Matthew 13:19). Christian witness takes us to a hotly contested battleground, in which people ignore this message to their eternal peril.

3. Christian Witness Is Personal

The personal pronouns in Jesus' mandate ("you" and "my") call our attention to the personal nature of Christian witness. We are not merely to report on *a set of facts*, although explaining the good news does mean recounting certain historical events (that Jesus died and rose again, 1 Corinthians 15:1-3). Rather, we proclaim a *person*—Jesus the Messiah—and the full significance of who he is (see Colossians 1:28). Nor are we merely to deliver a message about Jesus, like a mail carrier drops letters in a mailbox. Rather, *we are* the message about Jesus.

That fact that Christian witness is *personal* means that we must not only confess that "Jesus is Lord" with our lips; we must declare it with our lives as well. This also means that Christian witness is not just one of many things we *do*. Instead, the many things we do are all part of this one thing: "you shall be my witnesses."

Questions for Discussion and Application

1. **How do you feel about witnessing?** What usually comes to our minds (think about emotions, definitions, and tasks) when we hear the word "witnessing?" How has this study changed your understanding of what it means to witness?
2. **Experience.** Consider the statement above: "Without a personal experience with Christ, it is impossible to properly bear witness to Christ." What happens when someone claims to be a witness for Christ, but does not cultivate a relationship with Christ?
3. **Is it *all* about Christian witness?** Consider the statement that "Christian witness is not just one of many things we do; the many things we do are all part of this one thing." Does this hold true, even for "mundane" tasks (housework, maintaining a vehicle), schooling, career (making a living), and recreation (vacations, hobbies, downtime)? How are these activities connected to Christian witness?
4. **Witnesses.** Seldom do people come to faith in Christ only after reading a book or hearing a talk. Most often a personal relationship with a Christian is involved somehow. Share ways in which Christians' lives have demonstrated to *you* that Jesus is really the living Lord.