

# Witnesses

Acts 2

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## **First Century Preaching**

How thrilling it is to read, as we have read this morning, of the founding and establishing of the Truth in the earth by the apostles in the first century! In one day's preaching there were added three thousand converts!

It is not, of course, to be supposed that the conversion of these Jews to Christianity compares with our preaching today. Today a new Christian has had to let go of totally different world-views, and accept an entirely new set of principles, but a devout Jewish person of the first century still continued to worship the God of Israel, still held to the promises made to the fathers, still believed in the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Israel, still believed and accepted and respected the Old Testament Scriptures as God's Word.

The audience to which the apostle Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost were all committed Jews, assembled from many parts of the earth at Jerusalem for to keep the "Feast of Weeks". They had a good knowledge of the Law and the Prophets from which Peter quoted, clearly on the assumption that the references to those writings would be quite familiar to them. Peter's task was just to show how that the coming, the life, the death and the resurrection of Christ were all foretold in those Scriptures. The proof of the truth about Jesus was shown in the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit which was then given to them.

The Jews were convinced at once. They saw the whole thing. They were devout men, after all. They were conscience smitten immediately because of the guilt of their nation. But nevertheless they were ready to accept. They realised at once that they

had obligations. Men and brethren, what shall we do?. They obeyed. We have read this morning: They that gladly received his word were baptized. They continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

So we here this morning are doing just that, and in spite living nearly two thousand years later, we are still intimately connected, like the links in a long, long chain, with the pioneer efforts of those brothers and sisters who paved the way so long ago for our acceptance of the Truth of Jesus, and how thankful we are for that inheritance!

### **Witnessing**

Now we cannot read this account of these remarkable beginnings without noticing the emphasis on the need, with God's guidance, to be **witnesses** to the Truth of God. It's repeatedly emphasised. Just before his ascension to heaven Jesus told his disciples that they must soon be *witnesses*. In The Acts of the Apostles Chapter 1 verse 8 we read these words:

*But 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.*

The appointment of Matthias to take the place of Judas was to make up again the number of the **witnesses**, and we read in chapter 1 verse 22:

*beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a*

*witness with us of his resurrection.*

In our chapter this morning Peter stresses this in his address to the devout Jews. Chapter 2.32: This Jesus has God raised up, whereof we all are **witnesses**. **Witnesses**. Now we'll think about that for a moment about that, and try to extract the lessons that it contains.

The word translated witness in the Greek, is a word which rather means **martyr, Martus**. Our word martyr comes from this very word. Witnessing for Christ must inevitably bring some form of martyrdom: persecution, rejection, hatred, in some cases death itself. In the case of some of these disciples their martyrdom is historically recorded. In other cases there is no record but we can be assured that though they may have died painfully, their names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

From the book of Revelation we learn that witnesses for Christ have existed in every age from the days of the Apostles right down to our own times. My two witnesses is the Lord's own description of a community whose members gladly received the Word and were baptised, like the three thousand on the Day of Pentecost. The brothers and sisters of Christ, my two witnesses, who for the most part lived, prophesied, spoke the Truth in sackcloth, and who were instrumental in maintaining the Truth in the earth.

## **Revival**

We read in the book of Revelation of souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. It is the same idea of martyrdom. For a while

during the Dark Ages their witnessing was silenced but after the civil and religious liberty that emerged from the French Revolution their witnessing was revived. In 1805 Dr. Thomas was born. He revived the witnessing. His work was complemented by that of Bro. Roberts, and we today carry on the same witnessing work. Our one aim in life should be to preach the Truth by word and through example as faithful witnesses of Christ.

There are many branches of Christian religions which say they witness for Jesus. True witnesses though continue in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers, and self-styled witnesses don't. Not the least of the errors held by many Christians are that Jesus pre-existed, and that the Devil is a personal, supernatural angel of evil, or Jesus has come back invisibly, challenges all, to the very essential facts concerning Jesus Christ and him crucified and his future Kingdom on earth. The apostle John classes all such ideas as *anti* Christ, not witnesses *for* Christ.

In the first epistle of John we read there about the true witnesses. Chapter 4 verse 2:

*This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus, is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.*

Erroneous views concerning Christ and his nature are designated *anti*-Christ. To believe that Jesus Christ is come *in the flesh* is to believe exactly what the apostle Peter told those Jews on the

Day of Pentecost as we have read, he showed that Jesus was a descendent of David according to the flesh; the very expression - **according to the flesh** that he suffered upon the cross, that he died, and was buried, and was raised to life again by resurrection, that he is now in heaven, and will return to the earth to sit as king upon the restored throne of David.

*Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.*

### **First Principles**

Those are the first principles of our faith, and in believing them we associate ourselves with the first century witnesses for the faith that was **once for all** entrusted to God's holy people. That should be a cause of reassurance to all of us. It helps us to see that we are not following cunningly devised fables in accepting the principles of the Truth so passionately believed by us. There is no mistake about it. Peter's address to those devout Jews in Acts chapter 2, becomes meaningless without a proper understanding of the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ. There are about a dozen first principles of our faith all embodied in that speech by the apostle Peter.

Now, that should confirm to everyone, especially our younger members, that we are not mistaken, that we have the Truth and that Christian churches have gone astray in their attempt to stay relevant to *our* age.

These, then, are the first principles of our faith. Now John says in this same epistle, chapter 5 verse 10: He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself. - has the witness in him-

self. How is that personal witness, then, *expressed*, that which is in each one of us? Well to answer that let's look more closely at those words in the verses of 1 John.

### **The Threefold Witness**

Initially, John says, the Father Himself witnessed to the credentials of the Son. Verse 6:

*This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth*

The Holy Spirit testified that Jesus came by water and blood, and was truly the Son of God. Well it was at the baptism of Christ that the Holy Spirit bore testimony of him. He was baptised of John in Jordan,

The witness of the **water**.

*At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*

The witness of the **Spirit**.

Again, the same declaration was made with brilliant glory of Spirit power at the Transfiguration.

*suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!*

And thirdly, at the crucifixion a great darkness descended, the veil of the temple was rent, there was a great earthquake, rocks were rent and the graves of many of the saints were opened, and the onlookers were moved to exclaim:

*Truly this was the Son of God.*

On the third day

*the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep*

The witness of the **blood**.

He was the firstborn from the dead, the Son of God with power.

All these aspects of the Divine witnessing for Christ are brought together by John in this epistle. So we go on reading:

And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony

Now it is quite clear that Peter on the Day of Pentecost must have included these sublime truths in his preaching to those devout Jews. The very record in Acts tells us what happened as a result of this preaching and gives us a clue as to what Peter must have said in addition to that which is actually recorded. It is, of course only a shortened version of what he said. Peter made it clear to his hearers how they could become possessed of the witness in themselves.



So we turn back to Acts 2 verse 37:

*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do? Peter replied, Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*

### **The Threefold Acceptance**

Notice the conditions attached to the acceptance of the Truth. The three witnesses.

- The converts must be baptized, so that in them would be the witness of the **water**;
- they must acknowledge that Christ's blood was spilled for their sins - the witness of the **blood**;
- they must become possessed of the Holy Spirit to give power and confirmation to their testimony - the witness of the **Spirit**.

In our day the witness of the Spirit in open manifestation has been replaced by the completed Spirit Word. We have the Spirit Word in that form which they had not. They needed confirmation of the testimony by the wonderful works. We receive today the wonderful confirmation of prophecy, the fulfilment of the word of promise, to confirm our faith in exactly the same way.

So then we today become possessors of the witness in ourselves, when we *believe* the Truth, are *baptized* for the remission of sins, and then testify by the *power of the Word* in our lives the

reality of the gospel message. The apostle Paul has set an example for us of what our witnessing should be like. He refers to it in his defence before Agrippa. Which we'll soon be reading in Acts 26, let's see how Paul refers to his witnessing and how it is an example for us in verse 15. Paul is speaking to Agrippa about the circumstances of his conversion, and how the Lord appeared to him.

*Then I asked, Who are you, Lord? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, the Lord replied. Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*

Verse 22:

*God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.*

### **An Example of Witnessing**

That then, is our example as successors to the witnesses in the very first century. In following this example we do as Paul did.

We defend the Truth. We give our lectures and support each other as we work, we preach online, we write, we rely on God when we preach the Word in public and in private, and lead by example.

*let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

That is what is meant by having witness in oneself. It makes us realise the degree of our responsibility. As we try to let our light shine. As we go about our daily lives or mingle with our colleagues, going home in the evening..., to the meeting..., we should be always witnessing, being a witness to the Truth of God by our manner of life. The Word of itself needs living witnesses to demonstrate it to our neighbour. That is the way to preach the Truth, in following the example of our first century brothers.

Now in this 2nd chapter of the Acts, Peter touches on many other matters. Verse 40 says And with many other words did he testify and exhort. Would we not like to know just what Peter said? But still, we have enough. That shortened form of his address to those believing Jews sums it up in one expression:

*and he pleaded with them, Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.*

If Peter were here with us today preaching the Truth would he say anything different from what he said on that Day of Pentecost?

And what a wonderful picture is presented of the happiness and perseverance of these converted ones, verse 42:

*They continued **stedfastly** in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*

## **Four Aspects of Thankful Witnessing**

Four particular aspects of thankful witnessing are emphasised:

### **Hold Fast**

Firstly, a continuance in the apostles' doctrine. How sad it is to reflect, that departure from apostolic doctrine, not steadfast continuance in it, has characterised the history of Christianity from these earliest days to our own. Practically every epistle of the New Testament contains warning of departure from the faith, the introduction of wrong ideas and false doctrine. The seven letters of Christ to the Churches all warn against corrupt doctrines and practices. What had happened? The thoughts, the opinions, the philosophy of men had taken precedence over the simple teaching of Christ, and they probably didn't even realise, they just wandered into myths. Yet salvation still depends upon a continuance in apostolic doctrine, and if that doctrine is abandoned or rejected, our very salvation itself is in jeopardy. That's how important it is to read God's Word and reflect on it.

And that's why Paul wrote to his son in the faith Timothy:

*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them,...*

persevere in them - just like those converts on the Day of Pentecost, continuing in the apostolic doctrine -

...because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

So there is a dual responsibility of the Truth inviolate, expressed in life and doctrine.

Part of the martyrdom of the witnesses of Christ *is* the unceasing warfare against false doctrine.

Our younger and newer members must resist the temptation to lower boundaries or smear the differences between true and false - usually that turns out to be just a first step anyway.

Our business is not to find ways to compromise but instead to maintain our own individual faithful testimony exactly as it was delivered by Peter, by John and Paul, and the other pioneers in the first century, and to help others to do the same, teaching with humility and with love.

### **Fellowship & Communion**

Secondly, they continued in the apostolic doctrine **and fellowship**. The word signifies communion. It describes a condition of common interest. Fellowship is friendly, loving togetherness, springing from oneness of mind in Divine things. - J Thomas (updated)

Again, that is based upon sound doctrine. John says:

*If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

The fellowship of the gospel is an apostolic expression, a very precious and close relationship that we should preserve. Let each of us try to cultivate the fellowship of the gospel in an Ecclesia, in our community. Let us encourage it, practise it, re-

member that it is based on mutual love, common goals, hopes and aspirations. However different our personalities, however idiosyncratic or eccentric, the fact still remains that every brother and sister shares a common desire to reach towards the Kingdom of God, in a world that rejects the whole thing as fantastic and ridiculous. That is a common bond. Let's treasure it and foster it, and preserve it. It's worth doing. There is nothing in the world to compare with that happy and pure and holy fellowship which should exist among the servants of God. And will in the future exist in ways we cannot imagine, and, for ever.

Peter speaks of the common salvation. We have all got that same one hope. The common salvation. Does it not lift us all above the petty, mundane irritations where perhaps from time to time bitterness and ill-feeling spring up like weeds? It is not worth a bit of weeding, when the reward is beauty and joy to be experienced in a garden of fellowship in the sunshine of the hope of the gospel?

### **Remembering Our Lord**

Thirdly, the breaking of bread, the continual reminder of the Lord's sufferings and death, and his promise to come again. It would appear from our chapter that originally it was celebrated every day, and at home, verse 46:

*They, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house (in the margin - "at home") did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.*

What a delightful picture that is! In later times the celebra-

tion became a weekly practice, and in a place where all could meet together, where there could be as it were in one home, a spiritual home for all Christ's weary pilgrims, where there could be unity and peace, friendship, confidence and trust and companionship. Those are blessings associated with the command that we should assemble together, wherever and whenever possible - of course when we cannot it is another matter, it is still a command - but the idea of the whole thing is an assembly where we encourage the others by our presence, and our example too. It is a work, borne out of love, done willingly.

### **Pray!**

Then fourthly, they continued in prayers. Well, we could start all over again in exhortation upon that, but the time is gone. Let our prayers be as our brothers' and sisters' prayers were so long ago: genuine and sincere, reverent and humble, worshipping with praise and thanks and asking for help in humility and submission, all are well pleasing to God.

Just one final thought. Peter told the assembly on the Day of Pentecost that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit powers was a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel. Turn it up and you will see that that prophecy had a much greater application than on the Day of Pentecost. The reference shows that there will be an outpouring of Spirit on an even grander scale than was witnessed then, and that was mighty enough. The Spirit will be poured out in profusion upon God's sons and daughters - Even on my servants, both men and women - men and women all one in Jesus Christ. All God's servants, *all* will receive the outpouring of

the Spirit in the future, if accounted as worthy in Christ, as they did on the Day of Pentecost.

Then what a wonderful thing it will be to witness the great deliverance in Zion and Jerusalem of which the prophet Joel speaks. The Holy Spirit will become one of the conspicuous powers of the age to come. Not three thousand in one day but countless thousands will be converted to the Truth, until at last the whole earth will be enlightened with God's glory, and the knowledge of Him shall fill it as the waters cover the sea.

Let us then try now to be faithful witnesses of Christ, that we may in that glorious day which is coming, receive that wonderful Spirit power by which the righteous will administer the affairs of the Kingdom of God, to the happiness of mankind and to the glory of Him who created the earth and placed us on it to give Him pleasure.

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