

An Authentic Witness

In the first chapter of his gospel, John portrays in his prologue the significance of Christ's incarnation, his comments about the witness if John the Baptist seems almost an interruption; but obviously John has something important to say. I'll read **John 1:1-9**, focusing on verses **6-9**.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. This is the word of the Lord.

Perhaps as at no other time of the year, Advent is an exceptionally advantageous time to witness to family, friends and associates as we share the meaning of the Christmas celebration.

Thirteen Christmases ago, my wife, Nancy, read a little book about the historical events of Christmas (an approach to "the Bible as history") to her public school elementary music classes in the US. She was summarily informed by one of her second graders, whose parents might have belonged to the American Civil Liberties Union, that she wasn't supposed to talk about Jesus in school. She replied that she was telling them that the history of Christmas is centered in the birth of Jesus. When she taught about other national holidays, like Thanksgiving, she told about Governor Bradford, so when she taught about Christmas she told about Jesus. She taught about Jesus at Christmas just as she taught about the presidents on Presidents Day. (She did stop short of giving an evangelistic message and public invitation to receive Christ!) In other words, Christmas is fairly meaningless apart from at least the mention of Jesus. As followers of Christ, it's appropriate to witness for him at Christmas.

John tells us about the role of John the Baptist as a witness to Christ. The word and concept used in the Gospel of John for witness runs throughout the book. "Witness" is used 14 times in the noun form and 33 times as a verb. Our text tells us this forerunner of Jesus, the last of the Old Testament prophets, was a bridge between the Old and the New Covenant (Testaments). John the Baptist/Baptizer was a man whose diet consisted of locusts and wild honey and who preached a message of judgment and the call to repentance in the desert wilderness. His unusual, counter-cultural lifestyle is an indication he may have belonged to the prophetic Qumran community.

Regardless of any eccentricities, John the Baptist models for us the life and ministry of an authentic witness in contrast to the many false witnesses of his day. Instead of being called John the Baptizer, a more accurate moniker would be John the Witness.

An authentic witness is a mortal human being, created by God in his image. John the Baptist was a unique personality for certain! And God has created you and me in our distinctiveness for his pleasure and glory. Never despise what God has created, and trust that he is continuing to complete his creation in you as he shapes your character into his likeness. God has created us to reflect his glory.

John the Baptist was one who was sent from God, which means he had a personal relationship with God. He could point others to God because he himself knew him and not just about him.

I know a man who is retired from ministry who lives in North Kansas City, Missouri. His job now is with a travel agency, and he specializes in travel to Australia. I asked Wendell about Australia, since this is a place I've never visited. He confessed he hasn't been there either. He's in somewhat of a professional dilemma. Evidently he has to sell a number of trips to Australia before he can earn his own trip to the Land Down Under. I would think he is at a distinct disadvantage of having to sell folks on a place he has never been himself (I wonder till this day if he's ever made his first trip to Australia).

Of course, an authentic witness to Jesus Christ is someone who knows Jesus personally, and is sent from him to tell others about that relationship. How can you lead someone else to go where you haven't been yourself? An authentic witness is one who can relate a fresh experience with God. Inquirers want to know the difference a relationship with Jesus makes in your life today. They want to know what he has done for you lately.

Jesus told his enemies about the greatness of John the Baptist, and how they refused to repent at his powerful preaching. He said, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John;" Jesus added some amazing words that should humble each one of us: "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28). John the Baptist was Jesus' forerunner and the link between the Old and the New Covenants. We are privileged to belong to the New Covenant and to live this side of the resurrection of Jesus. We are also this side of Pentecost, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We are able to live our entire lives in the full measure of the Holy Spirit, and are part of the eternal Kingdom through the church of the risen Lord.

We should live as authentic witnesses, daily led by the Holy Spirit. We belong to the powers of the New Age of the living Christ. Every morning when you step outside your house, you should live as one sent from God, with the incredible privilege of representing him and giving a witness for him. Through our lives of holiness, love, and obedience, and by our words about Jesus, God will work through us even in ways beyond the work of John the Baptist. We are allowed to introduce people to the power of the completed work of Jesus. We join God in his work of drawing people to himself. God wants to empower us that we might become his witnesses he has selected and is sending as missional people in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As one has said, these words describing the appointment of John the Baptist as "sent from God" are "exalted terms," which are used of Jesus in 16:27 and of the

Holy Spirit in 15:26 (Whitacre). You too are chosen and called to this exalted position as a witness and an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Three years ago when in Belgium, I watched a television news journalist interview the newly appointed US Ambassador to China, Gary Locke, who had formerly been Governor of the State of Washington and then US Secretary of Commerce. He spoke of the high honor of this appointment and yet his commitment to living a simple, family-oriented lifestyle, shunning the privileges of his new status as arguably the nation's most important diplomat.

(By the way, that's one of the reasons I like Pope Francis, his choosing to live simply !)

You and I are created, chosen and sent on a high mission that no one else can fill. We must approach our task as witnesses with humble dependence on God's power to enable us to be his best representatives to those to whom God is sending us in our unique spheres of influence, with family, friends, colleagues and fellow students.

Our text is clear that John the Baptist was subordinate to Jesus, the true Light (verse 8). This attitude of humility is seen particularly in chapter 3, where John states his subordinate relationship to Jesus:

"He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

Jesus himself, speaking about John the Baptist, said, "John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light" (John 5:35). Jesus was clearly saying John had a role to point others to him who is the true Light.

As the Apostle Paul said, we too, unlike the "superstars" who denigrated Paul and his leadership, are to say that Christ is our life, and to live is Christ (Philippians 1:21). Jesus is the Light of the world, and we are called to be lights in the world (Matthew 5:14), but like John the Baptist, our light is derived from and dependent on the true Light of the World (John 8:12).

Our world doesn't want to see people who have all the answers in themselves. Our world needs to see ordinary, struggling people who are learning to trust a great God. Your world around you needs to see in your life an authentically dependent person who is learning to trust an almighty, loving, and faithful God. They need to see that you, like John the Baptist, are under the Lordship of Christ.

I'm seeking to be a faithful witness to those in my "traffic patterns, and this past week, as I entered the fitness center for a workout, I was given the usual friendly greeting from the receptionist: "Hello, Roger, how are you today?" "Terrible, I replied on a morning that had been especially horrific. Then I wondered, "What kind of witness is that?" Yet, perhaps she needs to know I have my bad days too.

Although not above common struggles and failures, an authentic witness is one who has a sense of responsibility for others, and realizes this is a personal, irreplaceable task. It is lifelong and non-negotiable. Our text says that John the Baptist "came as

a witness....” And we know he died violently as a martyr after his faithful ministry was completed (Matthew 14:1-12).

The word in our text for witness is “martureo.” From that word we get the English word, “martyr,” which means one who dies for his/her faith. The early witnesses were so faithful to Christ they were willing to die for their faith, and often did. Thus the word for witness became synonymous with one who dies for her or his faith, as would John the Baptist, who was an authentic witness.

God has called every one of us to be a missional Christian, which is one who is on mission to take Christ out into the world, instead of trying to bring the lost into the church or simply sending others to the mission field. Our focus is not just to disseminate information about Christ, but to do whatever it takes, in the power, wisdom and love of the Spirit, to lead them to faith in Christ.

Being a faithful witness, as John the Baptist knew, requires the grace of God and the anointing of the Spirit in our lives. Your witness requires the divine power of God to sustain you and to encourage you, especially when it seems your witness is spurned and ineffective. Your part is to be faithful. John the Baptist was faithful to fulfill his calling. Even though his life ending in a violent martyrdom, he had finished the work that God had appointed him to do. And this is all that the Lord requires of you—to be faithful, whether or not your witness appears to be immediately successful.

In this Gospel of John we have a summary of the effectiveness and fruitfulness of John the Baptist’s witness. He had prepared the way for the Lord through preparing the hearts of “many people” to come to Jesus (10:40-42). Like John the Baptist, you may not live to see all the fruit of your life, but in eternity you will realize that God honored your faithful witness to family, friends and those you have perhaps long forgotten.

A witness has to take a stand, and cannot remain neutral. The language John the Evangelist uses for John the Baptist is “courtroom language.” If you take your stand in the witness box and testify that such-and-such is the truth of the matter, you’re no longer neutral. You’ve committed yourself. Just as a witness in a courtroom cannot remain silent, and that the life of the defendant might depend on us, so we must be faithful, bold witnesses for Christ in behalf of those under condemnation.

We need to ask the Lord God to make us aware of unique opportunities to share Christ this Advent Season, perhaps by inviting guests to our home and seeing symbolic Christmas decorations and hearing from us the message of Christ’s birth. It’s perfectly legal in this country to talk about Jesus in your home! And we have better news than you read about in the papers or hear in the countless ads on television.

William Booth was the founder and for many years the leader of the Salvation Army. Every Christmas he would send a greeting to all the members of the Army. But one particular year finances were critically low. He could afford to send a one-word only telegram around the world. What one word would he use for a Christmas greeting and word of challenge and encouragement? The word he chose was “others,” which

became a motto for the Salvation Army. Evidently this motto “took,” with the spirit of sacrificial service embodying the members in the ensuing years.

On May 29th 1914 the Empress of Ireland, a ship carrying 1,477 passengers and crew, was struck by a freighter in a heavy fog on the St Lawrence River. 1,012 were drowned in the icy waters, making this the deadliest disaster in Canadian maritime history. Among the passengers were 175 Salvation Army officers in route to a conference http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Empress_of_Ireland. Of these, 167 SA officers were drowned, and not one body that was picked up had on a life-belt. The few survivors told how the Salvationists, finding there were not enough life-preservers for all, took off their own belts and strapped them upon even strong men, saying, ‘I can die better than you can;’ and from the deck of that sinking boat they flung their battle-cry around the world - Others!”

<http://www.salvationarmy.org/heritage.nsf/36c107e27b0ba7a98025692e0032abaa/df2ca83194d5599b802568cd00377023!OpenDocument>

We can die better than others. That’s why we are witnesses and must be faithful to our task. This is the reason we’re God’s being-rescued people. Not primarily to escape hell, but we were saved to glorify God by joining him on his rescue mission of redemption—to be his witnesses, “to testify *to others* about the Light and the One who gives life to all who believe