

Bearing Witness to the Love of Christ with People of Other Faiths

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Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Michael Ramsden as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Morning Plenary session on 'Bearing Witness to the Love of Christ with People of Other Faiths.' Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the author and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

'And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated - of whom the world was not worthy - wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.' (1)

Love is costly. Out of love, something may be offered to a recipient for nothing, but that is not the same as saying it didn't cost the giver anything. It may cost everything. Yet when it comes to the issue of witnessing to people of other faiths, we seem to be looking for methods and means that cost us nothing. The only way to achieve such an end would be without love- which is maybe why so much of it comes across as clanging symbols and noisy gongs. Rejected love is painful - Jesus expressed his heartfelt longing in the face of stubborn rejection. There is an urgent need for us to pour out our lives into reaching the lost as he poured out his life and reached down to us. It was E.M. Bounds who famously remarked that as the world is looking for better methods God is looking for better men, and perhaps we need to concentrate more on changing our hearts than working on our methods.

Jesus, in preparing his disciples for the trials of this world, told them that difficulty would come. They might have thought that, with God on their side, no suffering would ever befall them. Jesus however told them:

'I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think that he is offering service to God?? (2)

Immediately, before he utters these words, Jesus says 'And you also will bear witness??(3) The word witness is from the Greek word 'martyr.' This word was translated into Latin 'martir', and as its use was developed down through church history it became the word 'martyr' as we have and understand it today. Even in the New Testament though, the connection between being a witness and the suffering it entails is very clear. We are all called to be witnesses. In being a faithful witness to Christ, persecution will come. 'If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.'(4) 'The world hated me,' Christ said (5), and so we should not be surprised at the hatred that we ourselves attract on account of his name. (6) As we read in Hebrews, faith and faithfulness lead both to great victories in his name - kingdoms were conquered, justice was enforced, promises were obtained, mouths of

lions were stopped, the power of fire was quenched, the edge of the sword escaped from, foreign armies were put to flight, and women received back their dead by resurrection; and also to great cost as the world would see it - some were tortured, others suffered mocking, flogging, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. Truly they were those of whom the world was not worthy.

So let us set aside any thoughts we may have about being able to witness to those not of our faith without cost. There are both great miracles ? escaping the sword; and great martyrdoms ? many were killed by the sword. There is no contradiction here. Just the certain knowledge that we are called to give our lives in his service and will one day be called home.

Let us also remember that we follow in the footsteps of the ?martyrs?, the witnesses, who went before us. They were not simply spectators wishing to be entertained. They have gone ahead of us and run the race well. They are not few in number, they are a great cloud. The stands they occupy are not sparsely filled ? they are packed ? with those who laid down their lives in service of Him who is the author of life itself, and who now have eternal life through the founder and perfecter of that faith. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we read in Hebrews, so let us not lose heart, nor lose our way, but rather fixing our eyes on Christ, let us run after him who despised the shame of the Cross, and is now seated at the right hand of God. Let us fix our eyes on things above.

This is not a unique time in history. There is always a cost to reaching people with the good news about Jesus. It is a cost that perhaps many who claim Christ may not ultimately be prepared to pay. But this is this context in which the Gospel took root and spread. Preaching a message of repentance and faith has always been challenging. I have had the privilege of speaking in some parts of the world in which personal safety cannot be guaranteed. It is always disappointing to hear some people?s concerns that maybe I shouldn?t go to a particular place because the risks are too great. Yet our goal is not to conserve our lives at any cost, but rather to live our life in obedience to the call we have received. We are not called to ignore risk, or to be reckless. Everything must be prayerfully considered. But to refuse God?s call to go because of hardship is to demand something that the first Apostles would struggle to recognise as genuine Christian obedience.

There are several pointers for us in Hebrews: Travel light. Don?t be held up by the weight of sin or the weariness that comes from the world. Have we let the things of this world weigh us down? Be aware. Watch out for the sin that so easily entangles us and clings to us, slowing us down and eventually tripping us up. Are we spiritually alert and alive? Run. Run the race with endurance. This is not a quick sprint. We are running a marathon. Are we in danger of collapsing before the end without pacing our life in a God honouring way? Focus. Fix your eyes on Christ. Don?t be distracted ? that so easily leads to despair ? but instead keep your eyes fixed on our goal, the one with whom we are now, and will be for eternity. There is only one Gospel we have to preach - are we looking to God or to man? Rejoice. Christ looked forward to the Cross with joy. Not because it was going to be a pleasant experience. Rejoice in the fact that though outwardly we may waste away, inwardly we are being renewed. If we run well, there is much to look forward to, even in the face of death ? ?some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.? (7)

This passage in Hebrews is riddled through from beginning to end with the hope of the resurrection. We follow in the footsteps, not of the dead, but of those who have the hope of new life in Christ, a resurrected life that Christ has already won for us. Let us not fear death; if we lose our life for Christ we end up keeping it.

Other papers written in this series cover other vital aspects that could very legitimately be presented here. In particular let me highlight the paper by Rebecca Manley Pippert. I have not talked about prayer and proclamation, scripture and the Holy Spirit, Christ and the cross. These are essential: the object of our witness, the power behind our witness, the content of our witness, the goal of witness and the nature of our witness. But unless we understand that in light of the Gospel, because of the Gospel and for the Gospel we must be prepared to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before us in obedience to God?s mission we will not even be able to begin to address the issue at

hand.

Let me offer two additional thoughts. For the early church, everyone was by definition of "another faith". So we learn much just by simply reading the New Testament. Firstly, we see how Scripture employs witnesses. As A A Trites has written about the Gospel of John:

"The Fourth Gospel provides the setting for the most sustained controversy in the NT. Here Jesus has a lawsuit with the world. His witnesses include John the Baptist, the Scriptures, the words and works of Christ, and later the witness of the apostles and the Holy Spirit. [I would add that we too are being called as witnesses.] They are opposed by the world? John has a case to present, and for this reason he advances arguments, ask juridical questions and presents witnesses after the fashion of the OT assembly. The same observation is true of the Book of Acts, though Luke develops his case somewhat differently from John.

All of this material is suggestive for twentieth-century apologists. The person and place of Jesus? is still very much a contested issue. The claims of Christ as the Son of God are currently widely disputed. In such an environment a brief must be presented, arguments advanced and defending witnesses brought forward, if the Christian case is to be given a proper hearing. To fail to present the evidence for the Christian position would be tantamount to conceding defeat to its opponents. That is to say, the controversy theme, so evident in the NT, appears to be highly pertinent to the missionary task of the Church today?

? it is noteworthy that faithful witness often entails suffering and persecution.?

There are three marks of these Biblical witnesses: First, witnesses are passionately involved in the case they seek to present. They have been apprehended by it, and so they have an inner compulsion to plead its merits with others. Like their first-century predecessors, they cannot but speak of what they have seen and heard. Secondly, witnesses are held accountable for the truthfulness of their testimony. Perjury was, and still is, a serious offence punishable by heavy penalties. This solemn sense of being responsible under God for speaking truthfully appears in Paul, who four times declares "God is my witness?... Thirdly, witnesses must be faithful not only to the bare facts of the Christ-event, but also to their meaning. This entails presenting Christ and his message. (8)

Secondly, we must also give much thought to our credibility as witnesses. Someone may be an excellent eye-witness to an event, but if they are a known drunk their witness to any event will be questioned. We are to be known by our fruit. Titus 2:14 tell us that the "purpose of Christ's death was to purify for himself a people enthusiastic for good works." (9) These are not the basis of our salvation, but they are the evidence of it, and by them our Gospel is "adorned and commended to others." (10)

Sadly, it seems that as a church we have wrestled with the balance between good works and having a people eager to do good works, and the preached word of the Gospel. Yet these two always go together. The writers of the first Lausanne Covenant had exactly the same struggle, and we would do well to reflect on the balance that they expressed: "The church may evangelize (preach the Gospel); but will the world hear and heed its message? Not unless the church retains its own integrity, the Covenant insists. If we hope to be listened to, we must practice what we preach? In particular, the Cross must be as central to our lives as it is to our message. Do we preach Christ crucified (I Cor. 1:23)? Then let us remember that a church which preaches the Cross must itself be marked by the Cross." (11)

What we preach must be evidenced in our lives; otherwise we will always be seen as offering theories and speculations when what the world is looking for is concrete transformation.

There are many issues that could be addressed in this advance paper. There are many useful and effective models and approaches, some of which are described and discussed within this forum. We

have also made some large assumptions ? namely that it is agreed that we should be witnesses, that we are agreed what we are witnesses to, and that the purpose of that witness is to see disciples made amongst the nations. Others are addressing these issues.

Yet without a resolve to accept that we are called to lay down our lives, we end up with glorious theory and no action. The opposite danger of springing into action without growing in our understanding of the Gospel also ends up crippling the church ? without deep roots the church withers. Are we prepared for the cost?

May we all learn to be true witnesses.

© The Lausanne Movement 2010 Hebrews 11:32-12:2 John 16:1-2 John 15:27 John 15:20 John 15:18 John 15:21 Hebrews 11:35 This summary is drawn from: "Witness, Testimony" in New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol.3, Translated with additions from Theologisches Begriffslexikon Zum Neuen Testament, A A Trite, Colin Brown, General Ed, 1976. John Stott, Titus, Bible Speaks today, on Titus 3:1-8. Ibid. Titus 2:9-10. The Lausanne Covenant: An exposition and commentary by John Stott