

Witness

“And you shall be my witnesses...” (Acts 1:8).

A “witness” is someone who gives evidence of something. The person testifies that something is true based on personal knowledge. He speaks what he knows to be true, typically from his own firsthand experience. The Apostles were right there with the resurrected Jesus. They had been with Him for three years and saw miracle after miracle and heard all His sermons and teachings. So it was their responsibility to bear testimony to the Jews in Judea and to all nations everywhere that Jesus was the promised Jewish Messiah. He was crucified and buried, and then raised from the dead. He was indeed all that He claimed to be. They proclaimed (and wrote) what they knew to be truth (Acts 4:33). Paul also was commissioned to be such a witness (Acts 22:15 and 26:16).

In Hebrews Chapter 12, the author refers to those Old Testament saints named or referred to in Chapter 11, who anticipated Christ, as “witnesses” (verse 1). Witnesses of what? In their era, they bore testimony to the prophetic truth that in the future God would do something great thru a Person of great faith and obedience. They were witnesses of something that would happen in the future, and they lived their lives based on that. Moreover, they endured reproach and hardship and even death to confirm the truth of their testimony. (That’s why the Greek word for “witness” is “martyr.” In Acts 7, Stephen, the Church’s first martyr, confirmed with his life his testimony that Jesus is the promised Righteous One, who stood at the right hand of God in heaven.)

In Isaiah Chapters 43 and 44, three times, God refers to His people Israel as His servants and “witnesses” (43:10,12, and 44:8). For example, **“‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen’”** (43:10), and **“‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘that I am God’”** (43:12). Witnesses? How? Did they know *firsthand* the goodness and blessings of their sovereign God? No. It was a previous generation that experienced the Exodus from Egypt, with a wall of water on their right and a wall of water on their left, and the manna, and the Shekinah, and the Conquest. But this generation in Isaiah’s time knew of it from their Scriptures. It therefore was their responsibility to proclaim the truth of a living God to others. It fell to them to bear testimony to the Gentile nations that the Creator God loved all His creatures and wanted to bless them as well. The basis of their being witnesses was the truth of Scripture, which they both possessed and knew.

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony [same Greek word as witness] to all nations and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). Not just people, but things can be witnesses too. The Gospel itself thus is a witness. It witnesses to the goodness of God. And the Church has the responsibility of declaring it to the world. We, believers, are witnesses in the same sense that Israel, God’s servant, was. We know from the Scriptures what is absolutely true, and we therefore declare it to others. The resurrection of Christ is just as real and true for us as it was for the Apostles. Because God’s Word is truth.

How do we know that God created this world in 6 days? Because the Spirit of God was there (Genesis 1:2), and He bore witness to Moses, and we read what Moses wrote. The Spirit also testifies to us of the truth of the Gospel, that Jesus is who He claimed to be (1 John 5:6-10). Thus, **“Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony [same Greek word as witness] in his heart.”** The Holy Spirit bears witness, just as the Father does, as well as Jesus Himself, and the Scriptures (for example, John 5:36-39).

We typically define Church in terms of what it *is*. For example, it is the community of believers, or it is the Bride of Christ. These and other such terms certainly derive from the Bible. But more precisely the Church should be defined in terms of *function*. Thus Acts 1:8, we are witnesses. **“You are witnesses of these things,”** Jesus said (Luke 24:48). We weren’t called to “worship” [attend Sunday morning services], but to witness to a huge world of unbelievers, so that they too may become believers and be eternally blessed with salvation.

Let’s understand our calling: We’ve been brought by the Spirit of God into union with Christ and indwelt by that Spirit, and we’ve been adopted as children of God, made partakers of the divine nature. All this is so that we participate with God in His great mission of bringing His beloved lost creatures back into relationship with Himself. We do the witnessing, and God does the saving. A witness who refuses to bear testimony is in contempt. And of what do we bear witness? The Gospel, of course. And our own experience of conversion, and the present reality of Christ in our life. We don’t have to argue with people. We don’t have to answer all their questions, which often are merely expressions of skepticism. We just tell people what we know to be true and leave the rest to God. That’s witness. It’s being a vessel of the Holy Spirit.

Of What Do We Bear Witness?

At the very beginning, God gave to Adam, the first human creature, made in God's image, a command, "Of that [certain] tree, you are not to eat." As Creator and sovereign Ruler of His creation, God has the right to make demands of His creatures and to enforce them. A warning therefore went with the command: "For in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." As creatures and guests in God's house, Adam had the responsibility to obey God. It was, in a way, a test of loyalty, of humble submission, and of goodness: Did Adam express God's image? It also was necessary because Adam was given (a certain degree of) free will, and free will means nothing unless there are choices. Well, Adam didn't obey. He knowingly took of the fruit of that tree and ate. He defied God. So God, in perfect justice, His infinite holiness and goodness violated, carried out the stipulated punishment: death was decreed. **"The soul that sinneth, it shall die."** **"The wages of sin is death."** So sin entered the human race. All descendents of Adam, *all* human beings, have this innate proclivity to sin; let's call it a "sin nature." **"All have sinned and come short of the glory of God."** And so all are alienated from God, and all die.

But God is good. He loves His creatures, and He wants them to be blessed by being in intimate relationship with Him. So when He called the nation of Israel, with the intent to dwell among them, He gave them this precious gift: God would accept a substitute's death for the death of the sinner. Death was still demanded! But an animal's death would be accepted as punishment for sin instead of the death of the one who offended God's holiness. Thus atonement, that is, forgiveness and reconciliation, was possible.

So a system of animal sacrifices was instituted to make atonement, called the Levitical sacrifices. There were four basic types of sacrifices, each expressing a slightly different aspect of atonement. They are the trespass (sin) offering, the guilt offering, the cleansing offering, and the fellowship (or peace, or reconciliation) offering. (Various commentators and expositors use slightly different names for these.) Thus, there was an offering because of the offense, one for the guilt thereof, one to restore purity, and one to re-establish the relationship with God and with others in the community who also were harmed (because in God's eyes, Israel was a corporate unity). In addition, once a year, there was a special Day of Atonement when all sin in the nation was atoned for. This last unique sacrifice wasn't to deal with an individual Israelite's sins, which is what the four above-mentioned sacrifices were for, but to atone for the sinfulness of the entire nation as a whole, as a corporate unity, in whose midst God resided.

For forgiveness of sin, whether individual sin or corporate sin for the Day of Atonement, confession of sin and/or repentance was essential. That's because God expected the sinner to take responsibility for what he had done. If no acknowledgement of having offended God there was no forgiveness, only deserved wrath.

What types of sins were amenable to atonement? Sins could be unintentional, done in weakness or carelessness, or perhaps even done in ignorance of what God had required. Or they could be done knowingly and intentionally. These violations of God's standards would be atoned for by means of the Levitical sacrifices, assuming of course there was confession/repentance. But sins could also be willful and defiant. This type of sin was rebellion against the rule of God. For this type of sin, there was no sacrifice. That doesn't mean there could be no forgiveness for such high-handed sin, but it would have to be simply by God's grace, and of course based on confession/repentance. When David sinned, that was defiant sin, and for that there was only God's gracious forgiveness based on David's repentance (see Psalm 51). No Levitical sacrifice was possible for what David did. When the writing prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, others) later in time called the nation to repentance, there was no mention of sacrifice. That was precisely because for Israel's rebellions there was no sacrifice possible, only God's grace and willingness to forgive on the basis of repentance.

"The blood of goats and bulls...sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death..." (Hebrew 9:13-14). Christ Jesus' death on the cross is a better substitutionary sacrifice for sin because, as deity, His life has infinite value. So His death provided atonement for all sin. ALL sin. God accepts what the Son did as necessary atonement for all sins of all people. Forgiveness of sin, now freely available to all, is a gracious provision of a loving and good God. It's based of course on confession/repentance, that is, acknowledging that we've offended a holy God and are therefore deserving of death, and that *only* thru Jesus and what He did for us do we escape God's wrath.

There are more benefits from Christ's atonement of course: Resurrection life (or eternal life), justification, sanctification, adoption, and the gift of the indwelling Spirit. But of the forgiveness of sin and deliverance from deserved wrath, the most precious of anything possible in life, God's greatest gifts to us, we must bear witness. Let's do it.