

Reformation
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Many Christians think that the task of witnessing should be fulfilled primarily by ministers, but this is an error and a serious one at that. Witnessing is every Christian's job.

An acceptance of this task was, I believe, the single most important factor in the astounding outreach and expansion of the early church. It was not simply that Paul and the other leaders carried the gospel to the farthest corners of the Roman world. Many of the so-called leaders were not particularly zealous about the missionary effort. It was rather that all Christians—small and great, rich and poor, slaves and freedmen—made it their consuming passion to tell others about the Lord.

Edward Gibbon was by no means sympathetic to our faith. Nevertheless, he chronicled the spread of Christianity until, as it was said, by A.D. 49 the gospel had reached the shores of India and by A.D. 61 even the distant borders of China. Tertullian, who was writing slightly before and after the year 200, declared to his contemporaries: "We are but of yesterday, yet we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods" (*Apology*, ch. 37).

How did this happen? Gibbon wrote that in the early church "it became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relations the inestimable blessing which he had received" (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. I, ch. XV). Adolf Harnack, the great church historian, declared: "We cannot hesitate to believe that the great mission of Christianity was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries" (*The Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, p. 460).

Informal missionaries! That is what all Christians should be.

The Witness of John

In the first chapter of John's Gospel we have an outline of what our witness must be if we are to become "informal missionaries." The outline is given to us in verses 6-9: "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." If we outline these verses, we find that they contain three statements about John the Baptist's testimony: 1) he was not the light, but 2) was sent to bear witness to that light, in order that 3) all men through him might believe. This outline is then followed quite accurately in the narrative section of the chapter. Thus, in verses 19-28 we have John denying that he is the light; that is, that he has any personal, independent importance. In verses 29-34 we have him bearing witness to the light, a section which concludes with the formal statement: "And I saw and bore witness that this is the Son of God." Finally, the remainder of the chapter shows the results of John's testimony as the first disciples begin to believe in Jesus.

No doubt there are many other important things that can be said about witnessing for Jesus Christ. Yet I believe that if only these three points are followed, the witness of any Christian, no matter how halting or weak it may be, will be effective. First, the believer must recognize in the depths of his being that he is not the answer to men's problems, that he is not the light. Second, he must know that Jesus is the light and must point men to Him. Third, he must do it all with the express intention of having men and women believe.

The Workman's Voice

The evangelist begins, then, by telling us of John's confession that he was not the Christ.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" (vv.19-23).

These verses anchor the testimony of John firmly in the context of first-century Judaism, just as our testimony (if it is to be effective) must be anchored in our own century.

Apparently, the delegation from Jerusalem thought of three things John might claim to be, and the first of these quite obviously was *the Messiah*. We must remember as we read these words that the Jews were a people living under the dominion of Rome and that they were looking with great expectation for their deliverer, as any captive people would do. If we want a feeling of this from our own time, we need only think of the Philippines under Japanese rule during World War II. At the start of the war, General Douglas MacArthur had been in the Philippines, but he had been forced to abandon his base there in the face of the Japanese attack. As he left, however, he gave a speech in which he uttered the promise: "I shall return." It was a simple promise. MacArthur was not even a Filipino. Yet this promise sustained the island people during the days of the occupation as they waited for their deliverance. They remember MacArthur with these words today. In the same way, the Jews of John's day waited for the deliverer that had been promised to them in the Old Testament.

Moreover, there had been many Messianic pretenders. We know of some of them through such works as the *Antiquities of Josephus* or his account of *The Jewish War*.

Other false messiahs are mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 5:36-37; 21:38). It would have been easy for John, who by this time had received quite an impressive following, to have announced that he was the Messiah. But not only did he reject the temptation, he even rejected it with the hint that the one who actually was the Messiah was present. By this time he knew that Jesus was there, for the baptism of Jesus by John must have taken place before the events that John the evangelist narrates. Hence, when he rejects the title "Messiah," John does so emphasizing the first person pronoun "I." It occupies a prominent place in the Greek text. It is as though John had said, "I am not the Messiah, but the one who is the Messiah stands among you."

The delegation of the priests and Levites next asked him whether he was Elijah. Why should they have asked him this? The answer is that the Jews of John's time believed that the prophet Elijah would appear on earth once more before the coming of the Messiah. This idea is evident from several passages in the Gospels. For instance, in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew there is an account of Christ asking the disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They answer, "Some say John the Baptist [who had been killed by Herod in the interval]; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:13-14). In the seventeenth chapter, after some of the disciples had seen the Lord glorified in the transfiguration, they asked Jesus, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" (Matt. 17:10).

The Jews had a reason for their expectation. In Malachi 4:5-6, in the two last verses of the Old Testament, there was the promise:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to

their fathers; or else I will come and smite the land with a curse.

This was the basis of their belief. John the Baptist was not an entirely unlikely candidate for the fulfillment of this prophecy. He was rugged like Elijah. He resembled Elijah in his work (cf. Matt. 17:12). Nevertheless, John was not Elijah, and he refused this designation.

Finally, the interrogators asked him whether he was "the prophet." This was a reference to the prophet predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (v. 15; cf. v. 18). John denied that he was that prophet.

Who was John then? John says that he was "a voice" who had come to prepare the way of the Lord, as Isaiah had prophesied.

A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isa. 40:3-5).

You cannot see a voice. You can only hear it. No one looks much at the workman who is only preparing the roads for the coming of the king. Yet this was what John the Baptist declared himself to be: a voice and a workman. The last thing in the world that he wanted was for men to look at him. He said elsewhere, "He [Jesus] must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). John wanted men to forget him and see only the King.

This should be our pattern. If we are to witness for Jesus Christ, we must first of all forget ourselves—our likes, our

dislikes, our needs, our personal interests, our free time, even at times our work or our ambitions—and we must think first of the other person and of his need for the Savior.

What is it that will make a person forget himself in order to point to Jesus? Only an awareness of Jesus' worth and glory! Some years ago an African convert became a great witness to Jesus in spite of the fact that he suffered from the painful disease known as elephantiasis. This is a terrible thing in many tropical countries. It causes the skin of a person to become coarse, thick and enlarged. This poor Christian had elephantiasis in his legs, so it was extremely difficult for him to walk. Nevertheless, he thought nothing of making his way around the village to introduce others to the one who had transformed his life.

After a period of several months, during which he had visited all of the huts in his village, this man began to take the gospel to another village that lay two miles away through the jungle. Every morning he started out painfully on his monstrous legs, and every night he returned, having visited as many of the homes in the second village as possible. After visiting these homes he remained in his own village for several weeks before becoming restless again.

He asked the missionary doctor if another village which he knew of and had visited as a child had heard the gospel. The missionary said it had not. The African Christian wanted to take the good news there, but the missionary advised against it because the village lay more than 12 miles away over dangerous jungle paths. The burden so grew upon this Christian that one day he slipped away quietly before dawn. The missionary learned later that the elephantiasis convert had arrived in the new village some time after noon, his legs bruised and scratched, and had begun immediately to tell the people about Jesus.

He went to everyone in the village. Then at last, when the sun was sinking low in the sky, he began his dangerous trip

back along the jungle paths toward home. At midnight he arrived, bleeding and almost unconscious, at the house of the missionary doctor who tended to him and dressed his feet.

Here was a man who had been sent by God to point men and women to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was effective because he had forgotten himself in serving his King.

A Verbal Witness

The second great principle for witnessing is that we must bear witness to the light, and this means that we must witness verbally. Our testimony must move out of the area of life and into words. If it does not, we will be like the young man who went from a Christian home to a secular college. His parents were concerned about him. So when he arrived home at Christmas they asked him anxiously, "How did you get along?"

He answered, "Oh, I got along great. Nobody even knows I'm a Christian."

I am not denying the importance of the Christian life. There must be the kind of upright character and true commitment to Christ that will back up the witness by words. But important as this is, the living of the Christian life by itself is not enough for a witness. There must also be words.

Someone will say, "Oh, but isn't it true that many persons have been helped to Jesus Christ by the conduct of some Christian?" That is quite true; many have. The conduct of Christians has been an important step, even an essential step, in the salvation of many thousands of persons. But I am convinced that the matter has never stopped on that level and that these thousands would never have come to Christ unless the witness through the lives of Christians had not at some point moved beyond actions to a consideration of the person and claims of Jesus Christ as these truths were

presented to them verbally.

If we are to bear a witness to Jesus Christ, we must know something about Him. We must have a message. What is our message? The major parts are suggested in our story. They are: 1) who Jesus Christ is, and 2) what He has done.

First, we witness to who Jesus Christ is. John did this when he said, "This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me'" (v. 30). And again, "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (v. 34). This is where we begin our witness, because all the points of Christian doctrine gain their significance from the fact that Jesus Christ is God. If Christ was only a man, then His death on the cross might have been inspiring as an example or a means by which we are excited to good works. We might say, "I never want such a tragedy to happen again." But if this is all that Christ is, then His death was in no sense an atonement. He did not die for sin, and we are still under the condemnation of God. We are children of wrath. In the same way, if He is not God, then we have no living God to worship. We cannot know God apart from Jesus Christ.

As you begin to witness, let me suggest that you begin here. Begin with Christ's claims about Himself. You might refer to John 5:18, which tells us that Jesus was calling "God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." Or John 10:30, where He said, "I and the Father are one." He told the disciples, "Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Most non-Christians have never actually faced these claims; many have never even heard of them.

Second, we witness to what Jesus Christ has done. In one sense this is an overwhelming topic. If Jesus is God, then all that God does, Christ does. He has been active in the creation of the world, in guiding the history of redemption, in giving us the Old and New Testaments, in helping us today in temptation and in other things. Still there is a sense

in which the work of Christ focuses in something much more limited and therefore much easier to share. The focus of Christ's work is to be found in His death on the cross. Hence, we want to share the meaning of His death when we try to tell others about Him.

In His day, John the Baptist did this by reference to the Jewish sacrifices. He said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 29). For centuries Israel had known about the sacrificial lamb. They had learned about it first from the story of Abraham, who was the father of their nation, humanly speaking. At God's command Abraham had been on his way up the mountain to sacrifice when Isaac turned to him and asked, "Father. . . the fire and wood are here . . . but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham had answered, "God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." Israel had also known about the lamb as a result of the institution of the Passover. On that occasion the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the house was the sign for the angel of death to pass by. Moreover, they knew that daily in the services of the temple lambs and goats were sacrificed. They knew that in every instance the sacrifices meant the death of an innocent substitute in place of the one who had sinned.

On this basis John the Baptist then came along and exclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God." He recognized that the sacrifices were to be fulfilled in Jesus and that He would bear our sin as Isaiah had said.

Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows
. . . . He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed
for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was
upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:4-5).

Bellef in Jesus

Thus far we have looked at two very important principles

for witnessing, both illustrated by the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus Christ during the earliest days of Christ's ministry. The first is that John did not bear witness to himself. He confessed that he was not the light. The second is that he bore witness to the light. That light was Jesus. John bore witness to Him verbally. These two points lead now to a third great principle: John bore witness to Jesus, not to unload a certain amount of information (like a mountain climber putting down his pack) but to lead others to believe in Jesus personally. This means that he had their life and destiny in view when he was witnessing.

We see this in two ways. It is presented doctrinally, and it is illustrated by the narrative. The doctrinal statement is found in the verses we have already referred to several times previously: John 1:6-8. We read that John "came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through Him all men might believe." In Greek the flow of the thought is emphasized by a succession of relative clauses which build the thought in a characteristic Greek construction. The Greek says that John came for a witness in order that (as a specific and immediate object) he might identify the light and in order that (as a final and ultimate object) all men might believe. These were the two objects of his witnessing.

Then, no sooner is the witness of John given in the narrative section of the Gospel (vv. 29-34) than we find this doctrinal statement illustrated by the account of the conversion of those who actually did believe as the result of John's witness (vv. 35-51). They were Andrew and an unnamed disciple (who was probably the apostle John), then through their witness and the witness of Philip, also Peter and Nathanael.

The lesson at this point is that the witness-giving of John was immediately picked up by those who believed, so that Andrew and Philip and eventually John the Evangelist, Peter and Nathanael became the next witnesses. What is

more, they followed the same pattern of witnessing that John the Baptist had followed. That is: 1) they did not attract attention to themselves, 2) they bore a verbal witness to Jesus, and 3) they did so in order that those to whom they were speaking might also believe in Him.

John the Baptist was standing with two of his disciples near the place where he had been baptizing when Jesus walked by. We read:

When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are You staying?"

"Come," He replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where He was staying, and spent that day with Him. It was about the tenth hour (vv.36-39).

We do not have a record of what was said that evening, but whatever it was it must have been tremendously exciting for these two original disciples. When morning came one of the two who had followed Jesus (Andrew) immediately set out to find Simon Peter, his brother. We are told that when he had found Peter he said to him simply, "We have found the Messiah." He then brought Peter to Jesus (vv. 41-42).

Family Evangelism

At this point we should mark the significance of this great witness. It was the witness of Andrew to his brother, a witness that began, as all true witnessing should begin, at home.

One commentator has written:

Oh, it is true that the first generation of believers in any tribe

come straight out of heathenism, generally by the witness of some foreigner who has brought the witness to that particular tribe. And so it is that most of church history is the story of some alien who entered a tribe with little knowledge of the language, and who preached Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit so that people were saved. Paul, the Greek Jew, took the gospel to the tribes of Asia Minor, to Macedonia and to Greece. Irenaeus, a Greek, was the first to take the gospel to Gaul, which is now France. A Latin from Rome, the second Saint Augustine, was the first missionary to England, while an Englishman, Boniface, was the first to carry the gospel to Germany. Young Patrick, of high family, was kidnapped by marauders and carried to Ireland at the age of 16, later to become the instrument of the conversion of Ireland. In modern times the list of similar instances crosses the world. Henry Martyn took the gospel to Hindustan and to Persia. We have Adoniram Judson of Burma; Hudson Taylor of China; Mary Slessor of Calabar; Livingstone of Central Africa. . . . and the list goes on until we have Betty Elliot of the Aucas, and Wycliffe Bible Translators in many another tribe.

But in spite of all this list, which grows longer every year, these pioneers win but a small proportion of those who come to Christ. The informant who teaches his language to that strange creature, the missionary, usually ends up by coming to know the missionary's Savior. He has seen Christ in the missionary first of all, and then the informant goes and finds his own brother. That is a first in countless tribes. The God of Abraham became the God of Sarah, Abraham's wife, and then the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Household salvation is a very precious truth ("He First Found His Brother," in *First Things First*, pp. 15-16).

Charles Spurgeon once said,

Though grace does not run in the blood, and regeneration is not of blood nor of birth, yet it doth very frequently—I was about to say almost always—happen that God, by means of a household, draws the rest to Himself. He calls an individual, and then uses him to be a sort of spiritual decoy to bring the

rest of the family into the gospel net.

Has God used you in that way? Have you a brother or a sister still outside Christ? Do you have a husband who doesn't know Him? A wife? I do not see how you can ever consider yourself a true witness to the Lord Jesus Christ if you are not making a maximum effort to lead these whom you best know to Him.

But perhaps you are saying, "I have no brother. I have no sister. In fact, I am quite alone in this world." If that is the case, then you must see that the story of the opening week of Christ's ministry also includes the witness of Philip, who had no brother, but who brought his friend to Jesus. We are told that on the next day when Jesus was about to depart for Galilee He called Philip, saying, "Follow Me."

Philip, who did follow, went to his friend Nathanael with the report, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

At first Nathanael was skeptical. "Nazareth! Can any good thing come from there?"

Philip replied, "Come and see." When Nathanael came and had his meeting with Jesus he then concluded for himself: "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel" (vv. 43-49).

If you have no brother or sister (or any other family), then you must begin with your friend or neighbor. This is the one God has placed in your path. It is a witness to this one that God has most entrusted to your charge.

Come and See

If we are to witness successfully in the circles where we are best known, there must be a change in our manner of life. We must take second place so the ones we are witnessing to might see Jesus.

If you are sitting in a waiting room somewhere with a packet of tracts in your pocket and a person sits down next to you whom you do not know, you can witness to him and it will cost hardly anything. That is not difficult. But if you are going to witness effectively to your brother, there must be life changes. Because, unlike the man on the seat next to you, your brother knows you. He knows whether the thing you are professing has affected you personally. He knows whether you take your turn drying the dishes at home or whether you try to wiggle out of the responsibility. He knows whether you put thought into caring for the other members of the family. He knows whether or not you are touchy or anxious to defend your own interests. In short, he knows whether the faith you profess is real or ineffectual. He knows whether Christ occupies the highest point in your life or whether you do.

Andrew put himself second in order to bring others to Jesus. We do not know a great deal about Andrew. In the New Testament he is usually introduced as Simon Peter's brother. Everyone knew who Peter was; Andrew was only the man who was related to him. Yet Andrew was constantly introducing others to Jesus. There are only three stories in the Gospels in which Andrew plays a significant role. There is the story recorded here. There is the time he brought Jesus the lad with five loaves of bread and two fish (John 6:8-9). There is the incident in which the Greeks were brought to Jesus (John 12:22). In each case Andrew put himself second in order to introduce others to the Savior.

How are we to become charged, as Andrew was? Andrew and the other disciple became witnesses after they had first spent time with Jesus. John tells us that they arrived at the place where Jesus was staying at about the tenth hour—that is, about four o'clock in the afternoon—and that they spent the night there. What do you suppose they talked about until nightfall? We are not told, but the story reminds

us of the story in Luke in which Christ spoke to the Emmaus disciples, showing them from the Old Testament how it was necessary for Him “to suffer these things and then enter His glory,” after which they confessed, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:26, 32). After such time spent with Jesus, when the heart burns, one is constrained to go out and find his brother.

Do you spend time with Jesus? Nothing can be a substitute for that. Only if you do that will you begin to show something of the character, particularly the love, of Him with whom you are spending time.

Fernando Vangioni is an evangelist with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. He says that he was in South America for a series of meetings on one occasion, after which a woman came up to him. She said, “I wonder if you would take time to speak to a girl whom I am bringing to the meeting tomorrow night. She went to New York some years ago full of hope, thinking that America was the land of opportunity. Instead of doing well she went through terrible times in the city. She was used by one man after another. All treated her badly. Now she has returned to this country bitter and hostile to all forms of Christianity.”

The evangelist said that he would speak to her.

On the next night the girl was there, but when they met there was not the slightest response to Mr. Vangioni's attempts to speak with her. He said that he had never looked into eyes so hard or listened to a voice so hostile. At last, seeing that he was making no progress, he asked, “Do you mind if I pray for you?”

The girl said, “Pray, if you like, but don't preach to me. And don't expect me to listen.”

He began to pray, and as he prayed he was greatly moved. Something in the tragedy of her life caused tears to run down his face. At last he stopped. There was nothing to add.

He said, "All right, you can go now."

But the girl did not go. Touched by this manifestation of love for her she replied, "No, I won't go. You can preach to me now. No man has ever cried for me before."

This is the secret of all effectual witnessing. If we spend time with Jesus, then the other matters—knowing we are not the light, pointing to the light, desiring men and women to believe—these will come naturally. And we will find ourselves increasingly used of God as He sends revival to our land.

Author

Dr. James Montgomery Boice is senior pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA. He is the author of numerous books and articles, and has previously contributed to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He also serves as an advisor to Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc.