

## **GOD'S WITNESSES**

### **Introduction**

Christians are constantly challenged by people who say there is no God. There is also a great deal of misinformation about the God of the Bible. Most of it comes from society but some comes from the church. There are huge swathes of humanity where God is not known.

That grieves Jesus, and if we have his Spirit it will grieve us too. He described eternal life as knowing 'the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. Christian, you profess to know God and to live by his grace. Are you not grieved that people are 'without God and without hope in the world'? You love the Lord so you want to see others honour him. You love the Lord for his grace to you so you want others to know his grace too. You love your neighbour as yourself so you want him to escape the wrath of God and know his love instead. The saying appeals to you, "Then they shall know that I am the Lord".

You feel the world's contempt when they do not see him. You feel despondent when you do not see him. Our text is the answer to both.

Christ's work is to make God known. He is the light of the world. He died "to bring us to God".

The Holy Spirit was sent to unite us to Christ and to make us God's children.

The teaching of our text is at the heart of Christian living. It is about Jesus sending his apostles to be his witnesses, just as he was the Father's witness. It will help us understand the implications for us if we think first about what the Old Testament says about God's witnesses, then what the New Testament says.

### **Old Testament**

The dismal history of humanity after the Fall has some bright spots – people such as Abel, Noah, and Abraham who knew God and were able to pass on their knowledge

In Isaiah 43 Israel is described as God's witness (along with his 'Servant'). They had God's promises and presence. They had experienced his saving power especially in the Exodus. They knew something of his holiness in the way he treated them, the laws he gave them, and their experience at Sinai.

He called them to worship him alone and thus be a witness to their neighbours. It was their refusal to do so that led to his judgements.

God has never left himself without witness; even the harvest speaks of him. "Then they will know that I am the LORD" is an Old theme.

It occurs in Exodus 6:7 when God says he will make Israel his people; "then they will know ...". In Exodus 7:5 he speaks of impending judgements; "then the Egyptians will know ...".

It occurs around 70 times in the Prophecy of Ezekiel, 41 times referring to judgement (e.g. 12:5), and 21 times as a reference to acts of mercy and faithfulness.

It occurs in the Prophecy of Isaiah including in his promise to increase the number of his people (49:23).

God's witness to himself is designed to silence his enemies' contempt and dispel his friends' despondency.

## **New Testament**

Our text is about Jesus calling his apostles to witness to him after he had departed to heaven. A witness is someone who recounts what they have observed. What had the apostles observed?

They had witnessed what Jesus was like. They witnessed his miracles and heard his teaching. They witnessed his death, resurrection and ascension.

All these things were unlike anything that had gone before and were evidence of God turning normality on its head.

They also realised the significance of what they had seen. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

They realised that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself". They realised all sin could now be forgiven for Jesus' sake.

It all brought them peace with God, peace of conscience, and the hope of glory. The knowledge of God's love for them developed love for him and for their neighbours. One of them wrote, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." And they lived like that. "We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard.

Their experience and Christ's command made them the witnesses who show the way of salvation.

Two things are worth noting. The apostles were unique; there cannot be any witnesses of Jesus' resurrection today (see Peter's comment in Acts 1 about replacing Judas). The other matter is that they needed the Holy Spirit to give them understanding, boldness, and success. So do we.

## **Church and individual**

The church is God's unconscious witness. There are observers the church is not aware of. It is seen by the spirit world (Ephesians 3:10). Conflict and competition are part of humanity without God; but when natural enemies love one another it is obvious that God's salvation is present. Christlike lives are salt and light in a dark world. When we realise that we see our responsibility to receive one another and live in cheerful obedience knowing that shows God's glory.

The church also witnesses consciously and deliberately. Its message must be the message Christ gave of God's kingdom brought in by his atoning death and our faith. There is no other gospel (see Galatians 1:6-9). We have no authority to preach any other message – the apostolic gospel is a sacred trust. And the church has no authority to remain silent; that would be a betrayal of Christ, ingratitude for salvation, and hardness of heart. It is as wrong to suppress the true gospel as it is to preach a false gospel.

Like the apostles this witness comes from our experience of salvation. If we know God's holiness and his grace in Christ they will motivate us. Without such experience we have no personal story and if we tell Christ's story it will come across as dry.

Like the apostles, Today's church needs the Holy Spirit to impel and enable the proclamation of the gospel. There are times when he works in greater power than normal and many more people are brought to Christ. How we ought to pray for that!

There is a lot of confusion about the proclamation of the gospel. It is the responsibility of the church as a whole. Christ's gifts to the church includes people equipped by the Spirit for evangelism. All believers have a personal story regarding the faith we have in common but we are not all evangelists

any more than we are all pastors or teachers. We all have a duty of care and the Spirit who produces love; that may prompt and enable us to speak to someone (certainly to pray for them) but our normal role in witness may be to fully support the rest of the church while it does Christ's work.

### **Conclusion**

This subject should prompt reflection both as a church and as individuals.

We should think about the Christ who died and rose again. We should think about our experience – do we have experience of his salvation that prompts our love and gives us a story to tell?

We should think about the dark world around us, and the saving love of God. Will personal gratitude for mercy received lead us to show others where to find the mercy they need, praying always for the Spirit to work.

About all we should be hugely grateful for the apostolic gospel that we have received from God's earlier witnesses.