



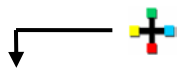
## Witness in a Biblical Perspective

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What follows is a brief response to the questions raised in the letter of Dr F.J. Verstraelen dated 19th March 1986, with reference to the paper of Prof. M.R. Spindler entitled: 'Visa for Witness'.

It seems to me that the divorce between biblical scholarship and missiology is only part of a much wider problem which affects the way in which the Bible functions (or is not allowed to function) in the life of the Church.

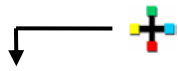
When the International Missionary Council (of which I was then General Secretary) asked Johannes Blauw to write a book on the biblical concept of mission, as one part of a wider study programme, we were still living in the age of the so-called 'Biblical Theology'. It was the age which produced many books with such titles as: 'The Biblical Doctrine of the State', 'The Biblical Doctrine of Work', 'The Biblical Doctrine of Marriage' etc. That era ended when the consensus on 'biblical theology' was shattered. Its demise was (as far as the ecumenical movement was concerned) most dramatically signalled in the address of Professor Ernst Kbsemann to the Montreal Faith & Order Conference in 1964, which insisted that the Bible does not have one teaching about anything but only a mixture of conflicting doctrines which it is the business of the biblical scholar to disentangle.

Since then biblical scholarship (at least as perceived by a non-expert) has worked in an area remote from the issues which Christians have to face in the worlds of ethics, politics, churchmanship and – of course – missions.

But the distinction between the two ways of studying scripture is not (as Prof. Spindler's paper suggests) between a 'scholarly, uncommitted approach' and the approach which is committed to the gospel mission. The distinction is not between commitment and non-commitment. It is between two different commitments. The 'scholarly' approach, like every intellectual activity, relies upon a whole framework of belief about the nature of reality and the conditions of knowledge. They are the beliefs which rule the world of the secular university and which are normally taken for granted. The scholar who imagines that he is 'uncommitted' is merely blind to his own commitments. The scholar who approaches the Bible with a commitment

to the belief that Jesus is God incarnate, the one in whom all things hold together and in whom all things are to be finally summed up, is in a no more vulnerable position than the scholar who approaches the Bible with the belief that the ultimate nature of things is to be discovered by adopting the standpoint and methods of contemporary science. And of the two alternative commitments, perhaps the former is more likely to lead to understanding, since it is also the commitment of the biblical writers.

This point has a special relevance in considering the question of witness. 'Witness' is primarily a term from the law-court. It refers to one who is taking part in a trial of



which the outcome has not yet been announced. Basic to the modern scientific method is the belief that the way to arrive at the truth is the way of observation and induction from observable facts. The biblical concept of witness belongs to a different world-view, one in which we acknowledge that in respect of ultimate truth we may be witnesses but we do not have in our hands the text of the final judgment.

I turn now to the biblical evidence. Obviously, the word 'witness' is used on many occasions in a non-specialist sense, that is to say to refer to occasions when witness is borne – true or false – in the course of normal relations between people, but where there is no reference to Christ, to the Gospel or to the Church. Omitting such non-specialist uses, I have assembled in what follows all the texts of the New Testament where the words **martyreo**, **martyria**, **martyrion**, **martyromai** and **martys** occur, and also the single case of **amartyros** in Acts 14.17. This Greek root is represented in the English versions by a variety of words – witness, testimony, record. I have also included a few texts, marked (x), where these words do not occur but where the reality to which these words refer is distinctly present. Although no doubt the references in Isaiah 43 and 44 to Israel as Yahweh's witness are in the background of the New Testament language, I have not considered these in detail.

The NT evidence may be set out as follows.

### 1. Jesus himself bears witness

- (a) In the trial before the Sanhedrin many false witnesses speak. Finally the High Priest puts the direct question to Jesus and Jesus answers in words which in effect bear witness of who he is: Mark 14.62 & parallels (x).
- (b) In the trial before Pilate (according to John) Jesus says that he has come into the world 'to bear witness to the truth' (Jn 18.37). This is reflected in 1 Tim 6.13 – 'Jesus Christ who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession'.
- (c) In his long argument with the Jews in which Jesus is mainly concerned to point to other witnesses, he nevertheless says: 'Even if I do bear witness to myself, my witness is true' (Jn 8.14).

But Jesus does not need to bear witness to himself, for there are other witnesses.

### 2. Moses, David and the Prophets bear witness to Jesus.

'You search the scriptures ... it is they that bear witness to me' (On 5.39) David bears witness to Jesus (Acts 2.25-31) (x)

'To him all the prophets bear witness' (Acts 10.43) 'The law and the prophets bear witness ...' (Rom 3.21) 'Moses was faithful ... to testify ...' (Heb 3.5)

The testimony of Melchizedek (Heb 7.8)

The testimony of the Holy Spirit in Jeremiah (Heb 10.15)

The cloud of witnesses (Heb 12.1).

### **3. John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus.**

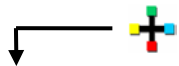
'He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe in him (Jesus) (Jn 1.7-8)

The testimony of John (Jn 1.19-23)

'John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend ..."' (Jn 1.32)

'I have seen and born witness that this is the Son of God' (Jn 1.34)

'He ... to whom you bore witness' (Jn 3.26).



### **4. The Father Himself bears witness to Jesus.**

This witness is both in the words spoken from heaven and in the mighty works which it is given to Jesus to do on earth, the 'signs'.

Jn 5.31-37 - the witness of John and of the Father

'I bear witness ... and the Father bears witness to me' (Jn 8.18)

'The works which I do in the Father's name, they bear witness to me' (Jn 10.25)

'Jesus ... a man attested to you by mighty works, wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst' (Acts 2.22) (x).

### **5. There are also Human Witnesses to Testify to Jesus.**

'This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses' (Acts 2.32)

'To this (resurrection) we are witnesses' (Acts 3.15)

'We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit' (Acts 5.32)

'We are witnesses to all that he did' (Acts 10.39)

'Those who came with him ... who are now his witnesses' (Acts 13.31)

'They (Jews) will not accept your testimony about me' (Acts 22.18) Paul is to bear witness in Jerusalem and in Rome (Acts 23.11)

'I stand here testifying both to small and great' (Acts 26.22-23)

'Proclaiming the testimony of God ... Jesus Christ, crucified' (I Cor 2:1f)

'Our testimony to you was believed' (II Thess 1.10)

'Do not be ashamed of testifying to our Lord' (II Tim 1.8)

'Exhorting and declaring (testifying) that this is the grace of God (I Pet 5.12)

'That which we have seen ... we saw it and testify to it ...' (I Jn 1.1-3)

'Witness to the-word of God and the Testimony of Jesus' (Rev 1.2)

These witnesses are not self-appointed; they are chosen beforehand.

'Not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses' (Acts 10.41, and see also Mat 10.1-15 & parallels (x) )

'The God of our fathers appeared to you ... for you will be a witness for ('the Just One') to all men' (Acts 22.14-15)

'I have appeared to you ... to appoint you to serve & bear witness' (Acts 26.16)

'One of these men must become with us a witness ...' (Acts 1.22)

In all these cases what is referred to is verbal witness to Jesus, his works, ministry, death and resurrection. But

### **6. The Father Continues to Authenticate this Witness by mighty works given to the apostles, as to Jesus.**

'The Lord bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by (the apostles)' (Acts 14.3)

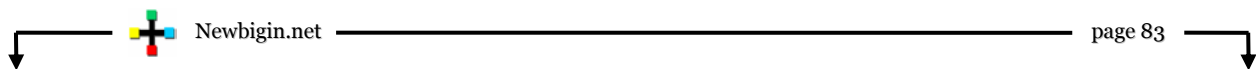
'God ... bore witness to (the Gentiles), giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us' (Acts 15.8)

'God bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit' (Heb 2.4)

See also Rom 15.18f (x) and John 14.12 (x)

This recalls us to the primary role of God himself in witness.

### **7. It is the Holy Spirit who is the Witness, and the Witness of the Apostles (words and 'signs') is subordinate.**



The coming of the Spirit makes the apostles to be witnesses (Acts 1.6-8)

'We are witnesses ... and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him' (Acts 5.32)

'When the Paraclete comes ... he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses'. (John 15.26f)

When you are on trial, the Spirit will speak for you (Mk 13.9-11) and parallels in Mat and Luke (x)

'The testimony of Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift' (I Cor 1.6)

It is the Spirit who 'seals' the testimony, thereby authenticating it as true (John 3.32-35)

'The Spirit is the witness because the Spirit is the truth' (I Jn 5.7-10)

'The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' (Rev 19.10)

'The Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit' (Rom 8.16).

### **8. The witness is for Jesus and therefore against those who reject him.**

'The dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them' (Mk 6.11)

'I testify of (the world) that its works are evil' (Jn 7.7)

'Jesus testified ... "One of you will betray me"' (Jn 13.21)

### **9. Witness is frequently in the context of Suffering**

In spite of scholarly statements that the association of martyrs with 'martyr' is a post-biblical phenomenon (e.g. Kittel Dictionary s.v.) it is very clear that there is in the NT a link between witness and suffering.

For example:

The promise of the Spirit to testify is in the context of trial (Mk 13.9) (x)

The promise that the Spirit will bear witness is immediately following the warning that the testimony will be rejected by the world (Jn 15.18-27)

The reference to 'the blood of Stephen thy witness' (Acts 22.20) would seem to justify the linking of witness with suffering, and the appellation of Stephen as the 'first martyr'.

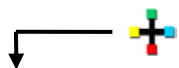
In many places the Apocalypse seems to link witness closely with suffering, e.g. 'The souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne'

'They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death' (Rev 12.11)

'The dragon ... went off to make war ... on those who keep the commandments of God and bear the testimony of Jesus' (Rev. 12.17).

### **10. 'God has not left himself without witness'**

This text (Acts 14.17) is sometimes invoked to suggest that 'witness' in the NT does not necessarily denote verbal witness to Jesus. It does indeed affirm, in line with the rest of Scripture, that God's love and wisdom is inscribed in his works (cf Psalm 19), but it ought not to be taken out of its context in Paul's whole statement. The context is the sharp contrast which Paul draws between 'past generations' (v 16) in which people did indeed have the witness of God's bounty in nature but nevertheless put their trust in vanities, and the new situation which is the subject of the 'good news' (v 15) which Paul brings. This new situation requires a radical conversion from 'these vain things' to serve the living God. This 'news' is – of course – the message about Jesus.



### **Conclusions**

This group of texts in which the word martyrs or its cognates occur needs, of course, to be placed in the wider context of Scripture as a whole if valid conclusions are to be drawn. However, on the basis of the above evidence one may perhaps draw the following conclusions.

1. God himself bears witness to Jesus. He does this:
  - (a) in the prophets and others of the Old Testament;
  - (b) in the ministry of John the Baptist;
  - (c) in the ministry of Jesus himself by the 'signs' which he is enabled to accomplish;
  - (d) in the ministry of those chosen as witnesses, since they are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is God himself in action.
2. Thus in the ministry of the apostles the primary witness is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers them both to speak and to act in such a way that witness is borne to Jesus as Lord.
3. Word and deed are not to be set against one another. The deed validates the word, but without the word the deed may be misinterpreted (e.g. Acts 3.12-16). The word is a word about Jesus. There are many gifts of the Spirit, but the authenticating mark of the presence of the Spirit will be the confession of Jesus as Lord (John 16.14, I Cor 12.3, I John 4.1-3).
4. The primacy of the Spirit is attested by the fact that the most powerful witness is often given at the point where the disciple is not capable of either speech or act, but remains faithful. Here it is made clear that the witness by which God brings men and women to know Jesus as Lord is not human achievement but is His own work. This marks the dividing line between witness and proselytism.

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