

Worship, Wonder, and Way

Reimagining Evangelism
as Missional Practice



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BEACON HILL PRESS
OF KANSAS CITY

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Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City

PO Box 419527

Kansas City, MO 64141

978-0-8341-3525-3

Printed in the
United States of America

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Cover design: Sherwin Schwartzrock

Interior design: Sharon Page

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015931269

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Mission as Witness

Acts 1:8: But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Driving home on a sunny day in beautiful Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, I stopped at a traffic light and noticed a sign tacked to a telephone pole just outside the passenger side window. It said: “Witnesses needed.” I leaned over the empty seat to get a closer look and read that there had been an accident at that very intersection. It gave the date and time of the accident and asked for anyone who had seen the accident to call the phone number listed on the sign. It is such a simple request: *Witnesses needed*. But it’s a weighty request as well. Without a witness, the victim’s ability to resolve the claim with the insurance company is significantly diminished. Without a witness, the circumstances surrounding that event will never be fully revealed. Without a witness, the truth of what occurred at that intersection will never be known.

The operation of our whole legal system hinges on the willingness of credible witnesses to report what they have seen and heard. A witness often appears in the courtroom as part of a trial. “This witness is in every way one of the people, but...is placed on the stand because of two credentials: the witness has seen something [that is of importance to the outcome of the trial], and the

witness is willing to tell the truth about it—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”¹

But not every act of witness takes place in the courtroom. Every day we tell truthful stories to one another, bearing witness to things we’ve seen, heard, felt, learned, and experienced. We bear witness to truth in a variety of ways. Some people are natural storytellers who take you on a journey in their retellings. Others prefer to speak directly and get straight to the point.

A good novelist writes stories that witness to the truth of human experience through the use of fictional characters. A director instructs actors to perform in such a way that truthfully bears witness to a story written by another. A symphony bears witness to a piece of music by performing it truthfully before an audience—interpreting, but not deviating too far from the notes originally penned by the composer. Artists bear witness to the full scope of human experience through the media of paint or pencil, canvas or computer, stone or clay. Historians bear witness to the past by reconstructing events into a truthful timeline, discerning meaning by connecting pieces from the past. Scientists bear witness to the validity of their experiments by publishing their research in peer-reviewed scholarly journals.

What we know about life in this world, how we understand the past and present, and even what we expect of the future is constructed largely on the basis of witnesses. As a people, we are constantly adding to our understanding of the world we live in through the witness of those who are willing to tell the truth about a whole range of human experiences. So, too, is our knowledge of God based on witnesses who are willing to speak truthfully about the God who comes near, entering human history in both powerful and humble ways.

The people of ancient Israel—the sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—are the first to bear witness to the God we’ve come to know through the Bible as *YHWY*, the LORD, Creator of the heavens and the earth. They bear witness to the truth

that the God who creates is also a God who calls and makes covenant promises. The LORD is a God who blesses and a God who sends. This God also liberates, rescues, saves, and redeems. The children of Israel personally experience the redeeming and liberating power of the LORD in the Exodus event. They write songs that truthfully sing the story of how God delivered them from the powers of Egypt. They tell this story to their children, and instruct them to pass it on to their children. It is important to the Israelites that every generation bear witness to the next generation of how the LORD delivered them from bondage and brought them into the promised land.

The tabernacle in the wilderness and, later, the temple in Jerusalem bear witness to the wondrous—and, at times, dangerous—presence of the LORD among the people. The law of Moses organizes the life of Israel in such a way that it bears witness to a way of living in the world that expresses the holiness, mercy, and justice of the LORD. And through the witness of prophets, priests, and kings, the word and way of the LORD are made known to the people of Israel and the nations. When the people fail to bear witness to the saving deeds of the LORD, they lose their identity as a people and are sent into exile, where they remember who they are and *whose* they are. Also in exile, the longing is cultivated for a faithful and righteous king to come and make Zion a place of healing for the nations.

Israel's vocation at this time, as a people chosen by God, is to bear witness to the truth of God among all the nations of the earth. "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD in both Isaiah 43:10 and 43:12, "that I am God;" and in 43:13, "Yes, and from ancient days I am he."

When Moses goes up Mount Sinai, the LORD says to him:



If you were to name a person in the Old Testament who witnesses God's saving, rescuing, or healing power, whom would you choose? Why? What makes this person a credible witness?

This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Exodus 19:3b-6a

Reflecting on this scripture, Michael Goheen writes: “It is hard to overestimate the importance of these words for understanding the role and identity of Israel.”² Goheen continues:

Israel is to embody God’s creational intention for all humanity for the sake of the world, living in such a way as to draw the nations into covenant with God. Or, to use the later language of Isaiah, Israel is called to be ‘a light to the nations’ (Isa. 42:6 NASB).³

There is no question that when Jesus comes preaching and teaching in Galilee, he understands his mission as an extension of and fulfillment of Israel’s missionary vocation. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus says in John 8:12, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Israel is called to be a light to the nations. Jesus is the light of the world.

In Revelation 1:5, John calls Jesus “the faithful witness.” Israel’s witness is imperfect. Jesus’s witness is perfect. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Hebrews 1:1-3a

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Jesus truly and fully embodies God’s creational intent for every person. Through his life,

death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus witnesses to the presence and reality of the kingdom of God that is now open to everyone who will believe, enter, and receive. Jesus announces and embodies the good news that, through repentance and faith in him, all people everywhere are set free from the powers of darkness and death; forgiven from the guilt and healed from the scourge of sin; and welcomed as children into the eternal-life-giving, loving fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit. And to all of this, the Holy Spirit bears witness in the life of believers.

This is a story that needs to be told. It is a story that is for the life of the world. Jesus is the firstfruits of the new creation that is coming, the One who will reconcile the whole creation to God the Creator. The Christian church today is called to bear truthful witness to this story. The church bears witness to the wonderful truth that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel as well as the true Lord of the rest of the world; that, in Jesus, the reign of God has come near and is open and available to everyone who would receive; that the Creator God has reached into the world through the Son and the Spirit to enfold all people into God's rescuing, redeeming, and reconciling embrace, where we find life. Christians are sent to bear witness to their experience of and participation in the kingdom of God. The shorthand for this news is the gospel. Christians are a people whose life together in the world bears witness to the gospel.

Once upon a time, I was taught that the gospel was a set of logical propositions about God, humanity, sin, and salvation. I believed that witnessing to the gospel meant presenting these propositions in such a way that would convince a person to give assent to these facts by praying something that was called a "sinner's prayer." The problem with this approach is that this is not the way the Bible talks about the gospel. In its Old Testament us-



In what ways does Jesus fulfill Israel's calling to be a witness to the nations? How is Jesus's witness different from Israel's witness?

age, the word *gospel* was used for the good news that the reign of God—which sets captives free, brings exiles home, reconciles estranged peoples, and renews the whole creation—has come near. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the gospel is the good news that the reign of God that the Old Testament prophets spoke about has finally arrived—in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are the gospel!

According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, the gospel message includes the news “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve.” But that is not the extent of it. Paul goes on to include in his telling of the gospel the good news that Jesus Christ now reigns as King, and will one day hand over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power, including the power of death. The gospel, therefore, tells the whole story of Jesus and the rescuing, redeeming, and reconciling implications of his life, death, resurrection, ascension and imminent return for all people and all creation.

To bear witness to Jesus in our world today is to represent the whole story of Jesus for our whole world today. It is to speak and live the truth and nothing but the truth—the whole truth—about Jesus. This includes our witness to Jesus’s ministry as a prophet greater than Moses, who graciously restores our knowledge of God’s will for human life.⁴ Jesus is the greatest teacher who ever lived. For example, in what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents a compelling vision for a whole and integrated life. But it is also Jesus’s prophetic ministry that calls us to consider the ways we fall short of the righteousness of the kingdom of God and our need for forgiveness and reconciliation and re-creation, the new birth made possibly by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The whole truth about Jesus includes witnessing to Jesus as our great high priest. On the cross, Jesus took our sin upon him-

self, making full atonement for human sin. Through Christ, our priest, “we are each assured of the pardon of our sin, a pardon that initiates our restored relationship with God and that maintains us in that relationship.”⁵

We live in a world that is vandalized by sin on a daily basis. We participate in this vandalism both willingly and unwillingly, burdening ourselves with guilt. And we are vandalized by the sin of others, which fills us with shame. Christ our priest atones for the guilt of sin and removes our shame, reconciling us with God and one another.

The whole truth about Jesus includes witnessing to Jesus as King, the Shepherd-King with healing in his wings, who makes all things new, restoring the image of God to those who have been reinstated in his favor and reigning at God’s right hand until all things have been reconciled to him.⁶ This includes the hope of Revelation 11:15, the day when “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” This is good news for the life of the world because it means the end of injustice, tyranny, pain, oppression, evil, sin, and death. Jesus is the King the world longs for, the King the whole creation groans for. Jesus is the one who makes all things new.

Who will do this? Who will bear witness to this good news? Who will tell the truth, the whole truth, about Jesus and the reign of God? “You, church!” Jesus says in Acts 1:8. We will be Jesus’s witnesses.

This, then, is our vocation, the mission of the Christian church, our mission of witness. But it is more than just a vocation, more than just a job, more than a task, more than a mission we are obligated to fulfill. Witness describes our very identity. Witness is



What is happening in the world today that causes you the most concern? What is happening in your life today that causes other people to be concerned about your words, thoughts, or actions?

who we are called and chosen to be. When Jesus says, “You will be my witnesses” in Acts 1:8, he is making a promise to his disciples, not giving them a command. And, by extension, he is making a promise to us today; we will be witnesses to Jesus Christ and the reign of God in our cities, neighborhoods, towns, and villages.

Of course, when Jesus first speaks these words to the apostles in Acts 1:8, he is speaking to those who have been physically with him from the very beginning of his public ministry, starting with John’s baptism, throughout his ministry in Galilee, right through his rejection, passion, death, and resurrection, up to the time he returns to the Father in the ascension. He is speaking to those who have personally experienced the power of the kingdom of God through his miracles: restoring sight to the blind, healing lepers, rescuing people from demonic possession, raising the dead, forgiving sinners, preaching the good news to the poor.

But we, in the Christian church, are also those who have experienced the rescuing, redeeming, liberating, reconciling, and life-giving power of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. We can speak truthfully about times in our lives when we experienced release from the guilt and shame of sin; about times we have experienced the grace and love of God enfolding us into the mysterious, triune life of God in wondrous ways; about times we experienced God’s help to love and serve others in ways contrary to our very nature; about how God worked in the lives of our families. For example, I can bear witness to how the LORD rescued my great-grandparents from the oppressive powers of communist Russia and delivered them safely to Canada. We witness to what we have learned and heard, and also to what we have personally experienced.

And we are not alone in our witness. The apostles are not the only witnesses to Jesus. In John 5:31-47, Jesus provides a list of other witnesses, including John the Baptist; the miracles he did; the Father, who says at Jesus’s baptism: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased”; and the Scriptures, the entire Bible, bear witness to the truth about Jesus.