THE BEREA PAGE

"Examining . . . to see if these things are so" ~ Acts 17.11

Let Acts Define Our Witness

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As Ceslas Spicq begins his discussion of μάρτυς (*martys*; witness) in the NT, he writes, "A witness is a person who was present at a material fact or at the accomplishment of a legal action. He is informed because he was there; he saw or heard" (Spicq 1994, 447).

That definition should be paramount in our thinking as we ask how the Acts "witness agenda" (Acts 1.8; Graham 1997, 1204) informs our participation in Christ's mission (see here for the Acts witness words). Can we witness in the way they did? To answer, we must begin with an analysis of their witness in Acts. What did it entail? And how should that inform our use of the word today?

We can set aside 10 uses of the words that are not directly germane. Some refer to someone's good reputation (Acts 6.3; 10.22; 16.2; 20.26; 22.12; 26.5). Others note God's witness: in the blessings of nature (14.17), in giving the Spirit to the Gentiles (15.8), or in validating David's kingship (13.22). In 20.23, the Holy Spirit testifies to Paul about his impending imprisonment. Three texts refer to Stephen: false witnesses against his teaching, witnesses to his stoning, and Paul's reference to his witness (6.13; 7.58; 22.20).

The remaining 29 uses refer to the disciples' proclamation where their witness was always expressed in terms of an object. Some are mentioned singularly; the disciples: testified and spoke "the word of the Lord" (8.25); were witnesses to Jesus' ministry (10.39); reported the prophets' witness that all who believe in Jesus receive forgiveness (10.43); bore witness to "the word of his grace" (14.3) or "the gospel of the grace of God" (20.24); testified "of repentance … and faith" (20.21); and were "testifying to the kingdom of God" (28.23).

More often, Acts says the believers were testifying about Jesus' identity. Peter said the apostles were to testify that God has appointed Jesus to be judge (10.42). "Paul was occupied with the word, testifying … that the Christ was Jesus" (18.5). Jesus warned Paul that some in Jerusalem would not accept his witness about him (22.18), and later told him that after he had "testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome" (23.11).

Most prominent is their "witness to the resurrection" which they both declared and defended (Graham 1997, 1204). On Pentecost, and later in the temple, they declared themselves witnesses of God's raising of Jesus from the dead (2.32; 3.15). Their testimony to the resurrection fueled the church's advance during and after their trial before the Jewish rulers (4.33; 5.32), an examination prompted by the rulers' annoyance at their resurrection preaching (4.1–2). Testimony about the resurrection was the focal point of their proclamation to Cornelius (10.41) and the people of Pisidian Antioch (13.31).

But, while testifying to the facts of Jesus' story was primary, the disciples' witness included more. In Luke 24.48, the beginning of Luke's emphasis on their resurrection testimony, Jesus tells the apos-

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tles that they "are witnesses of these things" — i.e., his suffering, resurrection, and granting of forgiveness (vv. 45–47). The inclusion of forgiveness illustrates that their witness was not limited to being "witnesses to facts," but also entailed being "witnesses of conviction," witnesses to the "salvific meaning" of the events (Beutler 1991, 394) (cf. Acts 22.15; 26.16). Spicq elaborates:

> These missionary-preachers are not content to tell about the deeds and words of Jesus—and this is where their testimony differs from a legal witness—they express their personal conviction and identify with the cause that they defend. In proclaiming of the Lordship of Jesus, they make public confession of their faith. It is not simply a matter of reporting facts—which need to be interpreted—but of speaking and vindicating the truth, of somehow insisting on doing it justice (Spicq 1994, 449).

This broader perspective is necessary to properly understand what witnessing should entail today. First, the fact that their witness included public confession and personal identification with the meaning of the story shows that there is a place for sharing our testimony about the difference Jesus makes in our lives. But witness in the manner of the apostles must involve more. Of themselves, our subjective experiences carry no more weight than anyone else's. What distinguished the apostolic witness was not the disciples' subjective fervor, but the presentation of the evidence for the events which validated their conviction. Without the factual core, we are not engaging in apostolic witness.

Of course, testifying to those facts is different for us. We were not "present at [the] material fact" (Spicq 1994, 448); in other words, we did not hear, see, look at, or touch what they did (1 John 1.1). But we have access to the evidence they experienced. If we will deepen our conviction and help others experience the "salvific meaning" of Jesus' story, that is where we must begin.

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