

A WITNESS TO THE LIGHT

John 1:6-9

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, July 22, 2007

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world (Jn. 1:6-9).

The prologue to John's Gospel follows an historical progression. Verse 1 places the origin of Jesus Christ in eternity past: "in the beginning was the Word." When the beginning happened, the Word already "was." Then comes Christ's role in the work of creation: "All things were made through him" (Jn. 1:3). Next, John speaks of Jesus' coming into the world, as a light shining in the darkness (Jn. 1:5). Now, in John 1:6-9, we enter the record of history with the witness of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ.

This reminds us that John's Gospel does not merely present ideas about God and salvation or a set of ethical principles. To be sure, Christianity does produce a philosophy and a worldview. But, unlike every other religion, it grounds its truth claims in certain facts of history. The word *gospel* means "good news" – and Christians have news, good tidings, to tell the world, God's actions in history to save lost sinners. Something wonderful has happened in the coming of Jesus Christ that we want the world to know. The purpose of John's Gospel, as with the whole New Testament, is to proclaim this good news and tell us how we might be saved through faith in it.

THE WORLD'S GREAT NEED

As John introduces the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, it is clear what he considers to be the great need of our world. If we were to take a poll, asking people what is the world's greatest need, the answers would be many. Some would say we must end world hunger. Others would say we need to provide education to all. Still others would suggest an end to all wars or point to the environment, calling for an end to pollution. A famous song from the '60s said, "All you need is love," while some today look to self-esteem as our cure-all.

What does the Bible say? According to the Gospel of John, the world's great need is belief in Jesus Christ. He wrote his Gospel to show that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31).

Starvation is a terrible problem. Lack of education keeps multitudes in ignorant darkness. Both of these are often caused by war. There are legitimate concerns about our stewardship of the planet, and Christians should care about that. God himself commands us to love one another, and we also should have a proper sense of self-love and dignity. But none of these is the greatest problem of this world. The true problem is that we are alienated from God because of our sin. God is holy, and the guilt of our sin has placed us under his just condemnation. Meanwhile, the power of sin works evil throughout our lives, so that John could say in his first epistle that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 Jn. 5:19). If these are our great problems – God's condemning judgment and the insidious effects of sin – the answer is Jesus Christ, the Savior God has sent as a light to this darkened world. John's most famous verse says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That passage continues, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (Jn. 3:16, 18). This is why our greatest need is to believe in Jesus Christ.

A WITNESS TO THE LIGHT

If our greatest need is to believe in Christ, then what a blessing it is that God has sent us witnesses to him. This is the point of John 1:6-

7, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light.”

The prologue to John is loaded with key terms that introduce the themes of this Gospel. Our study of John 1:4-5 revealed three of them: life, light, and darkness. Another of these theme-words appears in John 1:7: *witness*. This word appears fourteen times in John. John’s purpose in writing is to prove that Jesus is the Savior and the Son of God, and to do this he marshals an impressive array of witnesses.

Witnesses are essential in establishing any claim to fact. When a news station wants to report a notable event, it interviews eye-witnesses. We accept the testimony of credible witnesses, especially when there are a number of them who agree. This principle guides our legal system. When credible witnesses testify to an event, we are morally bound to accept it as true. This is exactly what we find in the Gospel of John. John presents us with witnesses to Christ which morally constrain us to belief. Leon Morris writes, “He is insistent that there is good evidence for the things he sets down. Witness establishes truth.”¹

What witnesses does John present? Let me briefly list eight of them. First, is the witness of God the Father. In John 8:18, Jesus says, “The Father who sent me bears witness about me.” Second, Jesus bore witness to himself. He said, “If I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going” (Jn. 8:14). If that is not enough, Jesus points to his works: “The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me” (Jn. 10:25). This is an important emphasis in John; the chapters that follow record miraculous works that conclusively demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God and our Savior. Fourth, is the witness of Scripture. This was the most important purpose of the Old Testament: to give prophecies that when fulfilled point to Jesus; to teach God’s will in a way that would be completed by Jesus; and by various means to symbolize and anticipate Jesus’ coming and the salvation he brings. Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (Jn. 5:39).

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 66.

One of the prophecies concerned a forerunner to the Messiah, whose ministry would resemble that of the prophet Elijah. This was John the Baptist, the fifth of John's witnesses. The sixth witness is given by men and women who personally encountered Jesus. One was the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met by the well. After Jesus had revealed himself to her, she went through her town presenting her witness: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (Jn. 4:29). Another such witness was the man who was born blind, but was miraculously given sight by Jesus. When the religious leaders tried to silence him, he gave this witness: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (Jn. 9:25).

John's seventh witness is that of Jesus' disciples, including himself. Jesus told them, "You also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning" (Jn. 15:27). Eighth, and last, is the witness of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised to send when he returned to heaven: "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me" (Jn. 15:26).

The name *John* means "the gift of God." Through John the Baptist God gave Israel the gift of a witness to Christ: "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him" (Jn. 1:7). John's importance is proved by his inclusion in all four Gospels. The other three Gospels give more details of his ministry, calling Israel to be baptized to show their repentance and to prepare for the Messiah. But the emphasis in John is the Baptist's role as a witness to Jesus. Jesus said, "He was a burning and shining lamp" (Jn. 5:35), and through his witness many of John's disciples went on to become Jesus' disciples.

FEATURES OF A FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN WITNESS

I listed eight witnesses presented by the apostle John so that we would believe in Jesus Christ. But there is another witness that is essential to the work of the gospel today. This is *our* witness to the world as Christian people. The work of witnessing that Jesus gave to the first disciples now falls to us. Jesus prayed to the Father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (Jn. 17:19). We are thus essential witnesses to Christ today.

By considering this description of John the Baptist, we can see three key features of a faithful Christian witness. The first has to do with the *content* of our witness. John 1:7 says that John “came as a witness, to bear witness about the light.”

A Christian witness is first and foremost *about Christ*. We tell people what the early church enshrined in the Apostles’ Creed: that Jesus is God’s only Son and our Lord; that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; that he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried, and descended into hades, but on the third day he rose to resurrection life; that he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; and that from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. These are claims that make up a Christian witness. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it this way:

We are meant to talk to people about the Lord Jesus Christ and to tell them he is the Son of God and that he has come into this world in order to save men and women... We are meant to tell men exactly why the world is as it is; we are meant to tell them about sin in the human heart and that nobody and nothing can deal with it save the Son of God... We are very ready to talk about our doctors, and to praise the man who cured us when so many failed; we talk about some business which is better than others, or about films and plays and actors and actresses, and a thousand and one other things. We are always glorifying people, the world is full of it, and the Christian is meant to be praising and glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ.²

John the Baptist sets an ideal example of this. His message was not about his experiences or what he felt about God, but it was about Jesus. When he saw Jesus, he declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29). We, too, need to declare that Jesus is the Savior for our sins. The next day, “John bore witness” to Christ, saying that he saw “the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him” (Jn. 1:32). We, too, must testify that Jesus is the One who came to do God’s will by God’s power. John the Baptist said, “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (Jn. 1:34), and we must, too.

Secondly, what we read about John the Baptist tells us the *manner* of our witness. John 1:8 says, “He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” It is important for us to lead lives that will

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Safe in the World* (Wheaton, Ill. Crossway,), 88

commend our witness to Christ, but our testimony is never based on what good people we are or what we ourselves have to offer non-Christians. When John began his extraordinary ministry, the priests and Levites came out from Jerusalem to inquire about him. He deliberately directed them away from what he was doing and to Jesus Christ and what he would do. He said, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (Jn. 1:26-27).

When many Christians give their witness, they talk about themselves. This is why we often speak of “giving our testimony;” that is, we tell people about our conversion and how Christ has helped us. There certainly is a place for that. But I remember seeing an ad in a secular newsmagazine that featured a handsome, smiling young man. It began by talking about his previous problems: he had been into drugs, he had been lost in life and depressed, but now he was clean and fulfilled. The ad was like many Christian testimonies, except this one was on behalf of one of the more bizarre cults spreading today. It is true that the cults can help you to get off of drugs – but that does not make them true. So it is for faith in Christ: its usefulness does not prove that it is true. Our witness must therefore center not on our experience but on the facts of Christ’s coming into this world.

It is especially important that we never think that whatever we are doing for Christ is of ultimate importance. James Boice warns us, “Whenever a Christian layman, minister, writer, teacher, or whoever it might be, gets to thinking that there is something important about him, he or she will always cease to be effective as Christ’s witness.”³ Moreover, we must never permit people to glorify us for what God has done in our lives. If people notice that you have changed, you must praise God and tell them that it is Jesus’ work; the only way for them to gain what you have is not by admiring you but by believing on Jesus. In some cases, this will result in people who had previously admired you becoming hostile; if the world hated Christ it will often hate a faithful witness to Christ. But we must accept this risk so as to bear testimony not to ourselves but to Christ.

In John 5:35, Jesus said that John the Baptist “was a burning and shining lamp.” Some Bible versions say that John was a “light,” but

³ James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:53.

the word Jesus used means a candle or a lamp (Greek, *luxnos*). A lamp does not shine with its own light. It has to be supplied with light from another source, and it requires a supply of oil or it burns out. The same is true of us. The manner of our witness is to shine not our own light but Christ's light. Just as a lamp requires oil, we depend on our fellowship with Christ and the Holy Spirit's enlivening presence, so that Christ's light shines through us. To use a different metaphor, we are like the moon reflecting the light of the sun; on our own we are in darkness, but a great light has shined on us and we are to reflect that light into the world.

Thirdly, we see in John the Baptist the *goal* of a faithful Christian witness. John 1:7 says that John "came as a witness... that all might believe through him." Our goal is for others to believe through our witness. Boice writes, "It is possible for a person to become so mechanical in his witness that he can go through all the motions of witnessing without actually looking and praying for the response to Christ in faith by the other person. If we could remember this, we would find witnessing exciting, and we would learn that winning the argument often becomes far less important than winning the person to the Lord."⁴ Since our goal is actually to persuade unbelievers and win over sinners, we will be eager to display the power and grace of the gospel in our lives, we will labor earnestly in prayer before and after our witness, and we will persist in telling others about Jesus even in the face of hardship and persecution. If we will commit to this pattern of a faithful witness, as modeled by the example of John the Baptist, we will find that God will cause people to believe through us and we will have the great joy of being used by the Lord for the salvation of others.

THE TRUE LIGHT

If we are looking for a summary statement to focus our witness to Jesus, we can find it in John 1:9, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." The word *true* carries the idea of *genuine* or *real*. There may be other lights in the world, ideas or products or endeavors that satisfy us partially and for a time. But Jesus is the true light: no other light can show us the truth about God

⁴ Ibid., 54.

and ourselves, about life and eternity; no other light can inspire us to become what we truly were meant to be or convey the power needed to change our hearts; and no other light will guide us “in paths of righteousness” (Ps. 23:3), so that our souls arrive safely in heaven.

I mentioned that according to John’s Gospel, the great need of this world is to believe in Jesus Christ, the true light. That is why God sent not a management consultant, not a psychologist, not a soldier or politician or stock-broker, but he sent John the Baptist as a witness to the light so that we might believe. Believing in Christ is the world’s great need and it is your great need, too. I wonder if you realize that?

If you are not a believer, your greatest and most urgent need is to believe on Jesus. Do you not realize that you have sins that must be either forgiven or punished by the wrath of a holy God? Without the cleansing blood of a true Savior, what will you do with your sins when you die and stand before God’s throne? If you expect God to admit you to heaven apart from faith in Christ, do you not realize that this is a fantasy spread by others also seeking to avoid belief in Christ and that flies in the face of God’s revealed Word?

I have a friend whose dying father told his Christian children that he did not think he needed Jesus because of the outstanding life he had lived. The children sent for their pastor, who came and admitted that the man had lived a virtuous life, at least as we measure such things. But then he asked him, “Do you mean to tell me, though, that you have never sinned?” The father admitted that he had committed sins, many of them in fact. The pastor replied, “Well, what are we going to do about those sins?” With tears, the man opened his heart to Jesus, believed, and was saved.

Others will say that they are happy without Jesus; they are following other lights more to their liking. If this is your position, should you not compare these other so-called lights to the true light of God’s Son? There is no other light that can lead you to true joy now or eternal life in days to come: not money or adventure or success; not the pride of morality or the pleasure of immorality. The only true light is Jesus Christ, and God in his grace sent him into this world to be our Savior and Lord. What will happen to you if you reject him? How will God respond if you do not receive his Son, bowing the knee and opening your heart to believe and be saved? John declares,

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36).

Let me also address Christians. Your great need also is to believe on Jesus. Faith in Christ is once-for-all in its *effects*, eternally reconciling us to God. But faith in Christ is not a once-for-all *event*. The greatest need of Christians is to exercise their faith in Christ – to make their belief not a mere assent but a living practice and habit.

Let me provide some practical examples. What if you are taken gravely ill? You may say that your greatest need would be to receive expert medical care. That is valuable, to be sure. But the greatest need of a gravely ill Christian is to know that God holds your life safe for all eternity, to know God’s loving care in the present and the peace that only he can give. These things come only through the exercise of faith in Christ.

What is the greatest need of a Christian who gains success and outward blessing? It is an active belief in Christ and his Word to protect him from pride and the snares of the world. A Christian facing poverty needs most of all not money but the realization that God hears our prayers and takes care of his own. A Christian who is lonely needs first of all the companionship of Christ. A Christian beset by temptation needs a shield of protection. A Christian who is weary needs strength and refreshment. All of these come from one and the same source: through belief in Jesus Christ, in his promises, in the teachings of his Word, and in the God and Father who rules over all and because of his great love for us sent the true Light into the world.

How can we be sure to have a ready faith when we need it most? The answer is by devoting ourselves to God’s Word, the bread that feeds our faith. Let us guard our faith against the many false lights in this world, not daring to dabble in darkness and sin. And let us commit ourselves to a life of prayer and worship and discipleship to Jesus, all of which depend on faith. Are you praying devotedly? Are you worshipping seriously and regularly? Are you walking daily in the light of Christ? If the answer is no, then do not blame God when your faith seems to fail in you in time of need. If you are too busy to study God’s Word and read other godly material, if you are disinterested in gathering with other believers for prayer, and if you walk in the

shadows, then you are not tending the precious gift of your faith – the most precious possession you have. But if you do tend to your faith and hold to the true light, you will have all that you need in every circumstance.

Lastly, have you offered yourself as a witness, reflecting the true light of Christ to a dark and dying world? God sent John the Baptist to Israel, and he sends us to our world. A faithful witness to Christ is the world's greatest need. "Truly, truly, I say to you," Jesus said. "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).