

THE WORD AND THE VOICE

John 1:19-28

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He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (Jn. 1:23).

In his book *Ten Days that Shook the World*, John Reed chronicles the October Revolution of 1917 that toppled the Russian Tsar and installed the Communist regime. As the years pass, those events have started to lose their significance. The world was briefly shaken, but ultimately moved on. But in the opening scenes of his Gospel, the apostle John presents a sequence of days that truly shook the world, seven days that began the ministry of Jesus Christ. These are days that will never lose their earth-shaking significance.

Genesis 1 presents the first creation in seven days, and John presents the coming of Christ in seven days, telling us that here is the new creation. Like the Genesis account, there are two sections of three days each, followed by a seventh day of blessing. First are three days in which John the Baptist bears witness to Christ, followed by Jesus' first three days with his disciples. This culminates on the seventh day with Jesus' first miracle, the turning of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana.

The first of these seven days is recalled in John 1:19-28, when John the Baptist gave witness to a delegation of religious leaders. This is significant because witnessing has always been vital to Christianity. Historians tell us that the astounding expansion of the early church was due largely to the witness of every Christian. Adolf Harnack asserted: "We cannot hesitate to believe that the great mission of Christianity was in reality accomplished by means of informal

missionaries.”¹ In John’s witness on the first day we can discern four key elements. They are four elements that will make any Christian’s witness to Christ effective even today.

A LIVING WITNESS

John’s first witness to Jesus was prompted by the arrival of a delegation from Jerusalem: “And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” (Jn. 1:19). These religious leaders came because they had heard about John and his ministry. Mark 1:4-5 describes him:

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John’s witness to this delegation rose from their knowledge of his life and ministry. The same should be true of our witness. An effective witness to Jesus begins as a living witness. John led a holy life and taught God’s truth. St. Augustine says “So great was the excellence of John, that men might have believed him to be the Christ.”² This bears out in the first question and answer: “Who are you?” the delegation asked. He replied, “I am not the Christ” (Jn. 1:19-20). They wondered, “What then? Are you Elijah?” John replied, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.”

Based on Old Testament prophecies, the Jews thought Elijah would return before the Messiah (see Mal. 4:5). John wore garments associated with Elijah (Mk. 1:6; 2 Ki. 1:8), lived in the wilderness, and confronted sin just as Elijah had done. “The Prophet” refers to Moses’ promise that God would raise up another prophet like him (Dt. 18:18). These questions reveal the extent to which the Jews were looking for someone to come and deliver them again. John’s life and ministry raised hopes among the people (and concern among the religious elite) that he might be the One. Likewise, our lives and ministry are to cause people to ask us who we are and what we

¹ Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 368.

² Augustin, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13 vols, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 7:26.

represent. Peter said, “Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12).

Many Christians are not sure how to start witnessing. The answer is to start witnessing with the manner of your life. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments:

The first great step in evangelising is that we should start with ourselves and become sanctified... When the man of the world sees that you and I have got something that he obviously has not got, when he finds us calm and quiet when we are taken ill; when he finds we can smile in the face of death; when he finds about us a poise, a balance, an equanimity and a loving, gentle quality... he will begin to take notice. He will say, ‘That man has got something,’ and he will begin to enquire as to what it is. And he will want it.³

There was an aged woman who credited her salvation to George Whitefield. People doubted this because she was barely old enough to have heard this great preacher from a prior age. She replied that when she was a little girl he had stayed at her house. “It was not any sermon that he preached,” she explained; “it was not anything that he ever said to me. It was the beautiful consistency and kindness of his daily life... I said to myself, ‘If I ever have any religion, Mr. Whitefield’s God shall be my God.’”⁴ Similarly, John the Baptist’s life prompted his witness to Jesus, and ours must do the same.

A WITNESS NOT TO SELF

In John the Baptist’s answer to the religious leaders’ questions we see the second element of a successful witness. “Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah or the Prophet?” they asked him. John said, “No.” John’s witness was not to himself. He was not the savior. He was not the man they should admire or trust for salvation.

It is curious that John denied that he was Elijah, because the angel who announced his birth spoke of him ministering “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk. 1:17). Moreover, Jesus identified John as “Elijah who is to come” (Mt. 11:14; see Mt. 17:10-13). So why does John deny that he is Elijah? One reason may be the sense in which this was meant. John was not a reincarnation of Elijah, as some literally expected to happen. He did not want people looking to him

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sanctified through the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, ?), 25-26.

⁴ Cited from J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 265.

as the coming deliverer. But he did accept the Elijah-like role he came to fulfill: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (Jn. 1:23).

It is important for us to follow John's example in refusing to focus our witness on ourselves. John was a witness to the Savior, not a savior himself. This is essential for us to remember and emulate. Our lives and ministry are to attract people's attention, but the danger is that we would allow them to focus their admiration on us. People are often glad to admire good qualities we have and participate in ministry events, so long as we do not emphasize Jesus as Savior. Things are comfortable with the world so long as we merely witness about ourselves – the good things we do and the success we seem to enjoy. But these must not take the place of our witness to Christ.

Do you realize this? When you meet someone whose life needs to be straightened out, who needs to find hope or meaning or peace, do you remember that you cannot ultimately provide these things? Certainly, you should minister as well as you can in Christ's name. But you are not the answer to their need, and you must not covet their admiration or trust. If you really want to help someone, you must point them away from you or any other human savior, and away from any merely human program or spiritual solution, and point them to Jesus Christ, who alone can truly save. Realizing this is essential, because whenever a Christian starts thinking that what he is doing is important, "he or she will always cease to be effective as Christ's witness. The testimony [to Jesus] will stop."⁵

This is a great principle for all of the Christian life. It is true of justification, that is, our standing and acceptance with God. The Bible is not a book that tells you what you must do to be accepted by God. The Bible is not about what God requires you to perform to make it into Christianity. Instead, the Bible is about what the holy God has done for you in his marvelous grace, especially through the death and resurrection of his own Son, so that you may be forgiven, cleansed, and adopted as a dearly-loved child. This is also true when it comes to sanctification, that is, the Christian life of holiness. The Bible does contain commandments and precepts, but when it comes to you

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

making it as a Christian, the Bible's primary message teaches what God is doing for you, mainly through the mighty ministry of the Holy Spirit, and especially as he empowers the ordinary means of grace: the Word, sacraments, and prayer. And this is true when it comes to our witness to Christ and his gospel. Our message is not what we have achieved or what others must perform for God, but the good news of the amazing salvation God has provided as a gift of his loving grace. Therefore, as Paul insisted, "What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5).

"Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah or the Prophet?" they asked. "I am not the one you should be focusing on," John replied. "Who are you?" they pressed. "We need to give an answer to those who sent us." John answered, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (Jn. 1:22-23). That should be our witness. We should say, "I am here to show that you need a Savior and to point to Jesus as the one you should worship and trust."

A WITNESS TO CHRIST

John went on to speak about Jesus – the third element of his witness – and we see this in a number of ways. First, he identified himself as "a voice." We remember that John's Gospel has called Jesus "the Word." Now, John is "a voice." A voice is the vehicle by which a word is made known. Jesus is the eternal Word, but he enters into our present world in part through our voices. This is our pattern of witness: we are to live as lights in the world to create opportunities to witness; we are to refuse to focus attention on ourselves; and then we are to be the voice that presents the Word, Jesus Christ.

As John's interview progressed, some Pharisees in the group questioned his practice of baptizing. They asked, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" (Jn. 1:25). The Jews understood that the Messiah's coming would involve a cleansing. Zechariah had said, "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1). So, if John was not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what gave him the right to institute this cleansing? John answered, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know" (Jn. 1:26).

John shows that when Christians are challenged about our right to proclaim Jesus as Savior, we must not back down but rather stand upon Christ's own authority. Also, notice how John does not get tied up in a personal defense. Instead, he directs them to Jesus. The reason you ask me these things, he says, is that you are not aware of the one who has come. John's baptism was all about Jesus, the true Messiah, and their hostility towards John and his ministry arose from their ignorance of the Savior.

The same is true today. People are hostile to our witness because they do not know Jesus. They do not realize the mercy he offers or the power he gives. They do not know the glory of his character or the faithfulness of his love. They do not realize why he died or how he lives today. True, some have heard and turned away in hardened unbelief. But many people today have never heard the truth about Jesus Christ and his gospel. He really is to them one they "do not know" (Jn. 1:26).

This means that when people argue against Christianity or different teachings of the Bible, it is less important for us to debate the issues and more important to tell them about Jesus. Teachings that are outrageous to the worldly mind are made clear and lovely in the light of who Jesus is and what he has done. Let me give an example. Secular people today are incensed that Christians insist that Jesus is the only Savior. This seems arrogant and intolerant. But how this changes when one realizes that the one true and holy God sent his own Son to make a way for our salvation at the cost of his blood! Then people stop wondering why sinners must all come to him, they start wondering why anyone would not want to come to Jesus, and they realize what an offense it is to God when people don't.

The difference is all in knowing Jesus. So we should look for opportunities not to talk about the controversial teachings of the Bible, but to talk about Jesus. Consider the apostle John's example in writing this Gospel. He said that Jesus is the Word made flesh. He is "the true light, which enlightens everyone" (Jn. 1:9). "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (Jn. 1:4). Such truths should always be at the core of our witness. We need to tell people that while "the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:17). This is our witness: Jesus as Lord and Savior and Revealer. John the Baptist said, "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). He was saying to this delegation: “Oh, if you knew him, you would understand. All I can really say is how great he truly is.”

John makes a reference that is obscure to us. He says he is unworthy to untie the strap of Jesus’ sandal. In ancient Palestine, the roads were hot and dusty, so feet were dirty and smelly. Rabbinic writings indicate that disciples were required to perform all kinds of menial service for their rabbi, but not this! Not the strap of the sandal! But John said not only was it not beneath him to perform such menial task for Jesus, but it was above him! So great is the glory of Christ!⁶

Do you feel this way? Do you count it an awesome privilege to serve Jesus in any capacity? Instead of begrudging your duties as a Christian and especially any actual sacrifice you may be called to make, are you overwhelmed at the privilege simply of serving a glorious Lord like him? If you are not, your witness will lack power. But if you convey to people what a thrill it is to know and serve the Lord Jesus, your witness will be that much more effective. Far from decrying that he might have to perform menial service on Jesus’ behalf, John was overwhelmed with the privilege of giving even the lowliest witness to so great as Lord as Jesus, God’s true Son and Messiah.

It is interesting to note that John’s witness to Jesus was not as clear as it might be. On the very next day he would provide a doctrinally clearer witness. John may have been reluctant to volunteer details to this hostile delegation. But there may be another explanation. According to the other Gospels, it must have been about six weeks earlier that John baptized Jesus in the Jordan, saw the Spirit descend on him like a dove, and heard God the Father praise Jesus with a voice from heaven. Jesus had spent the intervening time being tempted by the devil for forty days in the desert and was now on the brink of his return. John 1:29 says that on the day after meeting with this delegation, John saw Jesus walking by the Jordan and cried, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” Prior to that epochal revelation, he may still have been sorting out the details of his understanding.

⁶ Cited from Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 33.

The application is that if you have come to Jesus as your Savior, and if you are just starting to understand biblical doctrine, don't let what you don't know keep you from witnessing what you do know. You should press on to a better doctrinal understanding of Jesus and the gospel; this is valuable and important. But as the Lord gives you opportunity, tell people whatever you have personally learned about Jesus already.

This reminds us, too, that there is no substitute for a growing, personal relationship with Jesus. John spoke of one whom "you do not know;" this implies that he did know him. Likewise, we must give not a second- or third-hand but a first-hand witness that arises from personal experience with Jesus. The more you know Jesus, the more you will not merely *give* a witness, but you will *be* a witness for him.

A CALL TO REPENTANCE AND FAITH

Lastly, an effective witness includes a call to repentance and faith. **L**John said he was a voice "crying out in the wilderness" (Jn. 1:23).

The wilderness is the place of barrenness and poverty and death. We must show people that this present life is a wilderness apart from Christ. We must be candid with people about the real misery, emptiness, or bondage they experience. The world devotes itself to denying these realities; Christians must point out the truth. John cried, "Make straight the way of the Lord" (Jn. 1:23). The idea is leveling hills and filling in holes so that the coming king would have a smooth highway. We do this for Jesus by leveling our pride so as to be humble before him, and by filling our emptiness with faith to make a royal way for his entry into our hearts. Do you have obstacles that are blocking Jesus' way? You should remove them, because he is the only Savior and his coming brings eternal life.

Specifically, John's ministry of baptism called people to repent. When Gentiles wanted to join the Jewish people, they were required to be baptized as a way of confessing their sin and need of cleansing. John applied this truth to the whole nation: he called all the Jews, high and low, to be washed in preparation for the Lord. Likewise, we must humbly point out to people the truth that they are guilty before God, they have broken God's law and are worthy of just condemnation. Their greatest need is to be washed not with water but with what the water symbolized: cleansing from sin by the saving work of Christ.

Such a witness may arouse hostility. But this is the only way that Jesus comes as Savior to the sinner's soul. The royal road for the King of kings is paved with humble penitence and trusting faith. John said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (Jn. 1:23). To be effective, our witness must include this same call to repentance and faith.

NO WITNESS WASTED

None of us is John the Baptist. We are not the prophet called first to identify Jesus as the world's Savior. But we are called as Christians to give a witness that is like John's, pointing to Jesus and calling for people to clear his way into their heart.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to our usefulness as Christians is the false belief that our witness does not matter. This is especially a danger if we think our previous attempts have been ineffective. I suppose even John might have thought that. After all, few people went to follow Jesus after John pointed him out. But there is a detail later in this Gospel that helps us to understand better. John 1:28 says, "These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing." In John 10, we learn that Jesus at one time took the disciples back to that same place: "He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. And many came to him. And they said, 'John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.' And many believed in him there" (Jn. 10:40-42). Despite his apparent failure, John the Baptist's witness was not wasted; in God's timing it led many to be saved.

Another person who might think poorly of her testimony is a woman who attempted to witness to a man she had met. He was moving into an apartment right when she was moving out next door, and he carried one box of books to her car. After thanking him, she asked if he was looking for a church to attend. The man's body language made it clear that he did not welcome this kind of conversation. So she quickly stammered, "If you are ever looking for a church I would recommend this particular church a few blocks away." With that, she drove off and he never saw her again. I have often imagined her kicking herself for her weak attempt to witness. It was a pretty minimal witness, and she probably felt she had failed, but at least she

had tried. And for that I am eternally grateful, because I was the young man to whom she spoke. A few months later when the Holy Spirit had prepared a way for the Lord into my heart, I remembered her words, went to that church, heard and believed the gospel, and was saved.

You may think you are just one “voice” and that your witness doesn’t matter. But if Jesus is the Word your voice brings – and if he is One you know and who is living in you – then your witness is mighty to cast down strongholds and lead dying sinners to salvation.