

Has Witnessing for Christ Gone Out of Style?
Luke 24:36-9

Why are you and I Christians? Why are we not Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or members of one of dozens of faiths and sects? Why are we worshiping in a Christian church and not in a synagogue or mosque? Why do we seek to know and relate to God through Jesus the Christ?

These are not trick questions. The answers are rather obvious. Whether you have become a Christian through some kind of dramatic conversion experience or have simply grown into the faith, as most of us have, the truth is that you and I are Christian because witnesses to the faith have led us to believe in Christ. I became a Christian almost by osmosis. My parents read Bible stories to me and helped me learn to pray. They took me to church where Sunday School teachers and preachers taught me what it means to know God through Christ. My community was saturated with so-called Christian influences. At a certain point in my youth church members suggested that it was time for me to make a profession of faith. How could I not be a Christian? Was your situation similar?

Many people in many ways have witnessed to you and me of the Christian faith. I call attention to something that might seem mundane and I use the term “witness” repeatedly, because I want us to be reminded of something very important. Jesus commissioned all of his followers to be witnesses. That is a major theme of the Season of Easter. Note how the gospels state Jesus’ charge to his followers: Matthew has Jesus saying to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee: “Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples” (28:19); Luke writes in his gospel that Jesus

said, "You are to be witnesses to it all" (24:48), that is, to the message that is to be "proclaimed to all nations" (24:47); Luke writes also in Acts: "You will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and throughout all Judea and Samaria, and even in the farthest corners of the earth (1:8); and, according to John, Jesus said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (20:21).

We are witnesses! Causes you to flinch, doesn't it? Witnessing is a word that makes most Christians very uncomfortable. What images do you get when I use the expression "witnessing for Christ"? Negative, aren't they? You think of someone who goes door to door or who stops another person on the street and asks, "Are you saved?" You might think of the tent evangelist or the missionary who goes to some remote part of the world to win converts.

I have always felt that I should not condemn this kind of witnessing, but I have been very glad someone else was doing it. Generally speaking, the idea of witnessing has bad associations for us. That is extremely unfortunate. The Christian movement grows through the witness of its adherents, and each of us is called to be a witness. Has witnessing for Christ become optional for the people of God? Has witnessing gone out of style?

It should be clear to us that witnessing for Christ is as essential as ever. Our society, even here in the Bible Belt, is no longer saturated with messages that point to our faith. We see numerous church buildings but not much evidence of the church's presence. Recently I was talking with someone about a program offered by one of the churches I serve. This person lives three blocks from the church. When I

explained what we were doing and issued an invitation, this person said, “Now, where is that church?”

We need to become conscious witnesses of and for Jesus the Christ. Not in the old sense. Don't worry! I am not going to ask you to go out with me to preach on the street corner. And I will not suggest that we call people out of the blue and ask whether they are saved. I've done that in the past; I haven't done so in a long time. For me that kind of witnessing has gone out of style. There are better ways.

A conscious, intentional witness begins with a message. Jesus, according to Luke, met with his followers to guide their understanding of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. He explained that “everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the psalms was bound to be fulfilled.”

This is an amazing insight into the message to which we witness. Think about what is suggested here. Here are themes that have certainly not gone out of style. The reference to Moses makes one think of the Exodus and of God's liberation of his people. The Exodus was the most significant event in Hebrew history. It brought the Israelites into their own land and gave them their identity. Is Jesus the new Moses? Does Jesus not bring freedom from all that enslaves us? And the prophets? The gist of the prophetic genius was that God is best served when human beings show compassion toward one another. The prophets held compassion and care for one's fellow man to be more important than belief and public worship. Jesus grasped that truth and lived and proclaimed it. And the psalms? The poetic literature of the Hebrew Bible points to a God of wonder and

love, a God who touches life at all points who leads us “through the valley of the shadow of death” to “abide in the house of the Lord forever” (*Ps.23*).

The message of Jesus—the message of liberation, of love, of joy—has not gone out of style. In fact, if my impressions of lives all around us are valid, this message is sorely needed. Let’s be honored that we have been given the privilege of witnessing to someone and something that can deeply bless people around us.

But how do you witness? That’s the sticky part. The church needs to be honest and to acknowledge that there is no one way to witness. Maybe you can sit down with another person and talk openly about your faith pilgrimage. If you cannot, your witness is no less important.

You and I witness by being who we are. If the way of Christ influences the way we work and speak and relate, he shines forth through us. We are called to live by a particular standard—love for God and love for fellow man. A life based on that standard is a powerful witness.

We witness through the causes we support. Somewhere in my reading I picked up a phrase that has meant much to me over the years. It is “representative identity.” We become identified with the persons and organizations to which we attach ourselves. That identity points to things that are good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. That, too, is a strong witness.

We witness to Christ through serving in his name. Persons who would turn red-faced to mention what they believe will often generously give their skills and time in ministry. Recently I came to know a man who, in a group, never opened his

mouth. In private, however, I learned that he had participated in several mission trips in Latin American countries.

We witness to Christ in the way we treat other people. A couple of weeks ago I mentioned the story of Giovanni Francesco Bernardone who was so moved by his experience with a leper that he changed his entire orientation in life. We know him as St. Francis of Assisi. The change was reinforced when Francis went to Rome. There he was not drawn to the beautiful buildings of the Holy City but to the beggars. Among the outcasts of society Francis felt that his prayers were answered. He became their missionary. In 1208 he founded the Franciscan order. His rule was simple: Whoever may come to us, whether friend or foe, a thief or a robber, let him be kindly received. Should there be a brother anywhere in the world who has sinned, no matter how great his fault, let him not go away after he has once seen thy face, without showing mercy to him.” Treating others with compassion is a form of witness.

No, witnessing for Christ has not gone out of style. It is still the way of discipleship. It’s not a question of whether we are witnesses. What concerns us is that we become good witnesses. I stress the word “conscious” in that regard. When we consciously witness for Christ we are aware of his Spirit moving in and around us. We don’t have to ask whether we are witnessing. We rejoice that we can.

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