

The Bible and Evangelism 2: Lessons in Witness-Bearing

F.F. Bruce

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This is the second of three articles by the Head of the Department of Biblical History and Literature in Sheffield University.

In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we are told how the apostles received their evangelistic commission their risen Master in the words: "shall be my witnesses." (This wording, incidentally, illustrates what was said about the unity of the Bible in our preceding article, for it was in these terms, according to Isaiah 12, that the restored community of Israel was commissioned to spread the knowledge of the true God and His saving acts among the nations.) In the remaining chapters of Acts, and indeed we may say in the rest of the New Testament, we are told how the apostles discharged their witnessing commission.

Although so many centuries separate apostles' time from ours, there are still practical lessons of great value to be learned from the narrative of their evangelistic activity. In the Book of Acts, particularly in the earlier half of the book, we have several summaries of addresses delivered to various audiences by the apostles and their colleagues. Without entering here into the critical questions raised by a study of these addresses, we may confidently take them as genuine outlines of first-century Christian preaching. And we may recognise in them several features of evangelistic substance and method which the lapse of time has made obsolete.

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Jesus Christ was central to their message. The apostles never forgot that their primary business was to witness to Christ, ambassadors of Christ. So, in all their preaching, they put Him in the foreground. His appearance on earth, they affirmed, marked the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose, whether that purpose had been explicitly revealed through the prophets of Israel or dimly guessed by poets and sages of other races. By His life and death and resurrection God had brought His long-promised salvation near, not for Israel only but for other nations, too; not for that one generation only but for their children as well.

God had reversed the sentence of death passed against Him by an earthly court by raising Him from the dead and exalting Him to a position of universal supremacy. (The "right hand of God" was as much a figure of speech to first-century Christians as it is to us.) It was therefore right and wise that men should acknowledge as Lord the one to whom God had thus committed all sovereignty, the more so as God had declared Him to be judge of the living and the dead. (And these words are not to be confined to Jesus' role at the Last Assize; they also mean that here and now men and nations are judged by their submission to Christ and His teaching, and will stand or fall accordingly. The Last Assize is but the eschatological promulgation of a judgment already decided; as St. John insists, it is by our attitude to the light here and now that we are "justified already" or "condemned already.")

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The note of personal experience was struck. The apostles were sure of the truth of their message because it had verified itself in their own lives. Theirs was no hearsay gospel. "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard," they said (Acts 4. 20). If they proclaimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they also proclaimed that they themselves were witnesses of His resurrection. This meant that they had not only seen Him with their eyes, but had also experienced the power of His risen life in their own lives.

But here we encounter a difficulty. In the early apostolic age the historic events which formed the basis of the preaching were very recent; the first witnesses were those who had been companions and disciples of Jesus of Nazareth during His Galilean ministry. The objective facts and the inward experience which together constituted the subject-matter of their witness were practically simultaneous. With us it is different. The historic events took place over nineteen centuries ago; how can we demonstrate their saving relevance to our contemporaries? How else than by demonstrating the difference they have made to us in such a convincing manner that our witness cannot be contradicted?

We cannot dispense with the historical foundation of our faith—the appearance of Christ in the fullness of time and His death for our sins "under Pontius Pilate." If necessary, we must be prepared to defend the historical character of these saving events. But it is equally true that we cannot dispense with the emphasis on personal experience. It is difficult to shake the testimony of a man who says "I know this is true, because it has happened to me"—provided that his life tells the same story as his tongue! And the testimony to the power of the gospel in personal and community life must be singularly compelling if modern man is to be convinced that the events the life and death of Christ are something more than "old, unhappy, far-off things."

If every Christian church was marked by such an infectious spirit of joy and love and fellowship and witness that those outside could not resist the invitation to come in and share it—well, the situation which faces us would be different from what it is. But why is every Christian church not marked by such an infectious spirit? Perhaps it is due in part to our failure to give the Holy Spirit the place which was His in the Church of apostolic days. And that same failure may explain much of our evangelistic ineffectiveness. For it is the Holy Spirit who can bridge the gulf of centuries that separates New Testament times from our own; it is He who can make the redeeming work of Christ real and live and relevant to men and women to-day.

The effectiveness of the early Christians' witness was not due simply to the recency of the events to whose, saving significance they testified; it was due even more to the fact that in and through their testimony the Holy Spirit Himself was bearing witness to Christ and convincing those who heard of sin and righteousness and judgment. "We are witnesses to these things; and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5. 32).

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The method of presentation was adapted to the audience. The apostles were strategists; they went with their message to the great centres of communication from which it could most easily be disseminated. And in those centres they sought out the groups whose previous preparation had made them ready to listen to the gospel with understanding and to accept it with eagerness. In many cities such people were found among the Gentile God-fearers who

had already some loose attachment to the Jewish faith and way of life, and some acquaintance with the Old Testament writings. When once a group of such people could be formed into a community of witnessing believers in Christ, they could be left to carry on their witness in the place where they lived. Thus the Church grew by what has been called "spontaneous expansion."

But those early preachers knew the importance of finding an initial point of contact with their hearers. Their basic message was one and unchangeable; their ways of getting it across differed with the type of audience. When they spoke to a company of Jews, whether inside a synagogue or outside, they knew that they could presuppose considerable familiarity with the history of Israel and with the Old Testament literature in which that history was recorded. How simple, then, it was to proclaim Jesus as the one to whom Israel's foregoing history led up, as the one in whom the promises made by God to Israelites of earlier days had been fulfilled! As descendants of those to whom the promises were made, the apostles' Jewish hearers were the primary heirs of the promises. "God, having raised up His Servant, sent Him to you first" (Acts 3. 26).

Again, when a God-fearing Gentile like the Ethiopian chamberlain asked Philip to help him understand the prophecy of the Suffering Servant, how easy it was for Philip to begin with that scripture and tell him the good news of Jesus!

But the great majority of Gentiles had no such background. The Hebrew scriptures and history provided no point of contact for presenting the gospel to them. But even so, God had not left them without a gospel preparation; in creation and providence and conscience He had provided means of knowing Him to which the apostles could appeal, and from which they could lead them up to the perfect revelation of Himself and His will which He had now given in Christ. If the writings of the prophets were unknown to them, certain of their own poets had given voice to sentiments which lent themselves to an evangelical sense. How this line of approach could be followed may be seen in the brief speech to the unsophisticated pagans of Lystra in Acts 14. 15-17 or in the longer speech to the cultured pagans of Athens in Acts 17. 22-31.

Here, then, is a good example for every evangelist to follow. Find a point of contact with your hearers; make use of the background which is already theirs, but don't speak as if they knew things which in fact they don't know—whether Biblical allusion, or theological terminology, or ecclesiastical practice, or anything else.

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