

The Christian as Witness¹

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1. *Witness is a human word to which God gives authority and power to remind other men of His sovereignty, grace and judgment. Wherever human words are invested with this authority there is the Church.*

If the Bible speaks of witness and witnessing it means always human speech addressed to other men, words such as man can speak and hear. Even if it is said in the Bible that God witnesses Himself, that angels are His witness or that (as in the Old Testament) the tables of the law or other objects are called His witness, such speech is meant as is addressed to men. When in Romans 2 : 15 it is said that "the human conscience bears witness", it is added that "the law is written in their hearts", that it is therefore readable. There are, of course, other ways by which God proclaims Himself, for instance His acts. These the Bible calls signs. On the whole we may say, however, that witness means words spoken from man to man. The few exceptions, such as John 5 : 36 and Hebrews 2 : 4, in which works are called witness, simply prove the rule.

This human word has the task to remind man of God's sovereignty, grace and judgment. The word witness is taken from the terminology of law. That God needs witnesses presupposes that there is a lawsuit between God and men. In this process the cause of God, the right of God must be victorious. God calls up witnesses against men who have turned against Him and who are inimical to Him. And these witnesses witness to God's sovereignty, grace and judgment. In the Old Testament they witness to the Covenant which God has established with His people. And in the New Testament they witness to the works, the suffering, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the revelation of the

mystery of God which has been made through Him. Examples are Luke 24 : 48 ; I. John 4 : 14 ; I. John 1 : 2 ; I. John 5 : 11.

This human word God invests with authority. I mean to say that "witness" in the biblical sense is a dynamic word of a very special nature. It is not self-evident that there are words which have the task to remind other men of the sovereignty, the grace and judgment of God. Just as it is not a matter of course that there are such things as the sovereignty, grace and judgment of God, so it is not a matter of course that there are witnesses who are called and enabled to carry out this particular function. Not every man is a witness. Witnesses are the prophets, the apostles and the disciples. The authority to witness does not depend on the special qualities of these men, neither on their piety nor on their activity or suffering (as the later conception of the martyr would have it), but merely on the fact that it is God Who in His process with men has chosen *these* particular men to witness for His cause.

Wherever human words are invested with this authority there is the Church. The Church is the place where the process between God and men takes place and in which God brings forward His witnesses. In the Old Testament it is the People of Israel, in the New Testament the *ecclesia*, the community of Jesus Christ. "On this rock I will build my Church", Matth. 16 : 18, or again : "You are built upon the foundations of the apostles and the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone", Eph. 2 : 20. Wherever this dynamic word of witness is spoken and heard there is the Church.

2. *The original and veritable witness of God is no man but God Himself. At His command and in His service men become, are and remain witnesses of His witness.*

This brings us to the central question. If I can say clearly what needs to be said at this point, I will have given an adequate explanation and if you understand what needs to be understood at this point you will have understood rightly.

¹ For discussions following this lecture see "Student World Chronicle" p. 355

We may again start from Eph. 2 : 20, "Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone" and we may compare I. John 5 : 9, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater". Though I have just said that witness is a human word, I must now say that, if we ask who according to the Bible gives witness, we find that it is not man but unmistakably and literally *God Himself*. Both the Old Testament and the New emphasise again and again that it is God Who witnesses to God. An example is I. John 5 : 6, "It is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth". Truth in the Bible means reality which reveals or communicates itself. How could it be otherwise? How could man bear witness to God? Man is a creature, a mortal being, a sinner turned away from God. How could he be able to become a witness of God? For God God must speak Himself and no one else can be sufficient. This is the indispensable insight without which no one can become a witness of God.

The real witnesses have always known and confessed that God is His own witness and that God cannot really use *their* witness. I am not an appropriate instrument in God's hands and if God uses me nevertheless it is nothing short of a miracle. If I speak, I can only speak in the hope that God Himself speaks and my speaking can never be more than a reference to His speaking. God Himself and God alone is the real witness; but this God allows it to happen (it is the mystery of His will which we cannot fathom or understand or prove) that there are men who in spite of everything become His witnesses. He commands and it happens. This majestic God who lives in a light which we cannot approach calls men and puts words in the mouth of men which they should say in His name. If it is said in Acts 1 : 8, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me", we can only understand such a commission as an incomprehensible condescension of God. This God with all His holiness and mercy, Who is so far away from us, comes so near that there are men who may really be called His witnesses.

We find a summary of all that the Bible means by witness in the case of John the Baptist. It is said of him that "he was not the light but was sent to bear witness of that light".

Such is the grace of God that there are men sent by Him. But since it is His *grace*, these men are *not* the light themselves. God witnesses and man assists. The first thing which is necessary for a real witness is to understand this, for only so can he possibly become a witness. And this must also remain the standard of his witness that God is witness and that he has been called by a miracle of God's mercy to become a witness of God's own witness.

3. *A human being becomes witness of God through thankfulness for the fact that God has first given us His own witness.*

This thesis belongs together with the next two theses in which I try to answer the questions, how man can become, be and remain a witness of God. The decisive answer to those three questions has been given in the second thesis, but I must now try to explain it in greater detail.

How can one become a witness? The answer is in the word *thankfulness*. One becomes a witness by recognising that God has already given us His own witness. Thankfulness is the opposite of all egocentric attempts to ascribe to man himself the capacity to become a witness of God. A real witness knows that he has been *made* a witness, that he has been chosen for this task and that God's witness has already been given. This thankfulness must not simply exist in the insight that God is in heaven and that we are on earth, that God is the Lord and that we are the servants. It must take the very concrete form that man does not only look towards heaven but also to the witness of God which he finds on earth, in his life and in the reality of human history. The witness does not begin as the very first witness. He must look back to those witnesses of God who were before him and he has to accept their witness. He is obedient to God and to the men who have given him this witness. We may think of Psalm 119 which repeats endlessly this one thing, that what we live by, what we hope for, what we want to hear and to say is God's witness, His justice and His commandment. The man who wrote this psalm becomes a real witness because he recognises that witnesses exist already. Similarly the prophets do not begin

their work in some enthusiastic mood but take their stand on the basis of the Covenant which God has made with Israel and they say nothing else but what God has always said to His people. They enter into the ranks of their fathers and proclaim God's way in constant reference to them. Again, in the New Testament, the word of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "I have not come to destroy the law or the prophets", must be taken very concretely. That is why Paul, who understood better than the other apostles that with Jesus Christ something absolutely new had come into the world, said also in Romans 3:21, that "Christ is being witnessed by the law and the prophets". Thus as a messenger of Jesus Christ he also enters the ranks of the witnesses which have preceded him. The utterly new thing which he has to say, he proclaims at the same time as the very old thing which God has always said. In other words what matters for us Christians, if we would become witnesses, is not in the first place whether we have the Holy Spirit, but quite simply whether we understand what it means that we have been baptised and that we are, therefore, members of the Church of Jesus Christ. If we remind ourselves of our baptism, we are reminded of the certainty of the Word of God which overcomes the world because it has overcome ourselves. The great question which the witness must first ask is: "Has anything been said to you so that you can go and speak to others?" Yesterday in the discussion it was asked whether those things which have been said for the Christians are also true for the world as a whole? The question reveals a lack of understanding of what thankfulness really means. For if the life of a witness begins really with thankfulness for all that God has already given to us then it will never occur to him to say anything else to the world than this one thing. The chief question is then whether we are sufficiently thankful for all that we have received. In this thankfulness for the witness which has come to us we should show our thankfulness for God's own witness.

4. *A human being is witness of God through reverence in which he subordinates his own word to the witness of God.*

How does it happen that a man actually witnesses of God? The answer is in the word *reverence*. Reverence is the attitude of the servant, of one who does not carry out his own plans but waits for a commandment. Reverence is closely akin to respect and *respicere* means "to look toward". In other words witness is given where men look toward all that God commands, where their autonomy is called in question and where they are no longer their own lords. We may again think of John the Baptist who was "a burning and a shining light", a man sent by God, but who did not present his own message, or some truth which he had found by himself. His message was rather the message of another message. "He that has the bride is the bridegroom". John points to another one, to Jesus Christ. "Behold the lamb of God". He is like a sign-post without importance of its own. His greatness is that he points away from himself to the other one: "He must increase, but I must decrease". In him we see that to be a witness cannot mean that man has a hobby of his own which fills and enthuses him, that we dare not speak with the pretention: *I have something special to say to you*. Of course, he has something to say, but it is all a reminder of the fact that God has said something and that He will again say something.

This brings us to a further central point. The Church does not confront the world with a message consisting of certain ideas and conceptions about the situation of the world, but really only with a book in its hand and has no other possibility than to witness to this book and to explain it. If we are asked, what have you to say? we can only answer: let us listen to what is said *here*. As soon as our own ideas become our main theme, our witness becomes impure. Instead of saying: "He must increase but I must decrease", we become little philosophers, little theologians who may have deep and real concerns, who may be full of goodwill, but who are no longer real witnesses. For a witness, according to the Bible, is one who explains what the prophets and apostles have said. Man, of course, has his own ideas and convictions, for he stands in life in a particular concrete situation, but these he must subordinate in order that it may become clear:

He is the Lord and I am the servant. We cannot avoid that we express *also* our own ideas and convictions, but all these must be sifted through the Bible. We must not want to become masters in addition to the One master. And we are not only asked to subordinate ourselves to God in heaven, but also to make our reverence concrete on earth. That is why the Bible enters into the situation, giving us the standard of our speaking and living.

5. *A human being remains witness of God in the hope that God will give him again His own witness.*

We hear in the Bible not only of people who *are* witnesses but also of those who *remain* witnesses. We hear not only of witness which is like a lightening from heaven (which all real witness will always be) but we hear also of the existence of people who have the task throughout their life to go on witnessing. And we must therefore ask, how it is possible that there are men from whom we can expect witness again and again, men who can enter into the ranks of which the apostles and prophets form the beginning, men who can continue to remind others of God's sovereignty, grace and judgment. Here again we must say that this can only be so because of the miracle of God's mercy. For God is not bound to men, not even to His prophets and His apostles. They are rather bound to Him. And it is not the personal, not even the religious or moral qualities of these men which have made them into prophets and apostles, nor can these constitute a guarantee that they will remain so throughout their lives. No, if these men are not only sometimes witnesses but remain so, this can only be true because they are constantly living in *hope* that the same God Who has witnessed through them will again use their witness. If I am unfaithful (and every real witness knows that he *is* unfaithful), God remains nevertheless faithful and does not withdraw His promise. Thus a witness of Jesus remains witness by constantly praying: *Veni creator spiritus!* He is not like a man who sits in front of a source and who knows that the water will be flowing on without interruption. No, if he can continue in his Christian life, this is only possible because God *creates*. When we asked the question, how one becomes a witness, we were re-

minded of baptism. We must now remind ourselves of the other Christian sacrament, namely Holy Communion, for it says precisely this, that Christ gives Himself for us, that He nourishes us with His own life. Thus Holy Communion is the sacrament of hope, the sacrament of the future. Christian life is not life between birth and death but rather between Baptism and Holy Communion, which proclaims continually the presence of Christ Who sets in order all that we can never set in order again. Our hope consists in having Jesus Christ before us as the One Who makes good what we have spoiled. The man who walks on this road, who goes to Holy Communion, who has this future, will remain a witness. For he does not take his stand on his own goodness or piety but on the knowledge that God is right, for He has been right in Jesus Christ against all men, for all men.

Since the moment when Jesus said "It is finished", our future and the future of the world has become clear and the way for the witness of Jesus Christ has been opened up. He lives under the sign: "Thy Kingdom come".

6. *"The Christian as witness" is the human being who is fleeing from the wisdom and foolishness of his own human word to the witness of God. In this flight always and nowhere else the Church becomes visible.*

This last thesis is the summary of the preceding theses. The Christian as witness is a disciple of the biblical witnesses. Now in this connection it is much easier to be a master than to be a disciple; for we would all like to become masters and to feel that we have really come to understand the Bible and the biblical witness sufficiently to go beyond them. In this school, however, we must remain disciples all our life. In fact, we must become increasingly disciples and give up our little excursions in our private balloons.

What can we learn in this school? I have tried to express it through the image of a flight. This means in any case a most dynamic movement. It does mean that something happens and no one should therefore complain that this does not leave room for sufficient human activity. But this activity is a movement in a very particular direction. Man

escapes from the wisdom and foolishness of His own word, for from both of these he must hurry to the witness of the biblical word. If I had merely said that we have to escape from the foolishness of our human word, you would find it easier to understand me and agree with me. But the real enemy from whom we must flee comes only then in sight when we consider that we are also to escape from the wisdom of our own words. For only if we take these two together : our stupidity and our lucidity, our errors and our insights can we understand what is the true barrier for man to come to God and to become His witness. It is against this mixture of wisdom and foolishness which we are, that God has to represent His case. Against this creature God's case must be defended, this creature God loves, this creature He would save and in order to do so to him must be given God's witness.

We must, therefore, see very clearly that we have to do with two different realities, on the one hand this creature with its wisdom and foolishness, on the other hand God's witness. And the road leads from the second to the first. The two come together but only so that God comes to man, for God is right and I am wrong. God loves me and I live by the strength of His love. The relation is comparable to a conversation in which the one has to speak and the other to listen.

It is essential to understand that we must escape from ourselves, including our own wisdom. When I say wisdom I do not mean merely our secular wisdom but very specially our Christian wisdom, the wisdom of theology for instance. Last night a story was told of an Asiatic professor who believed that he had found the climax of wisdom in using Karl Barth for his inner and Karl Marx for his outward life. This is a classical example of a person who, instead of escaping from his wisdom, tries to save himself by it. In his case the great question is whether he is willing to leave both Karls beyond to make a sharp turn and go as quickly as possible in the other direction.

Do we really know that we must flee ? Or do we still expect something from ourselves ? If so we are not yet able to become witnesses of God. Man is the starting-point, but nothing more than the starting-point. St. Paul says

therefore that he forgets those things which are behind and reaches forth unto those things which are before. The point of arrival is the witness of God. There is not only a word of human wisdom and foolishness but also a word of the wisdom and foolishness of God.

Have we got it ? Do we know it ? We do not want to escape in order to deny the world. No, those who understand this will make their change of direction joyfully because they know that it is a positive thing and that there is a goal to which they are travelling : the witness of God. Have we already discovered that our wisdom and foolishness are things which we must leave behind and that God's wisdom and foolishness are the fortress to which we must flee ? At this point the decision is taken whether we ourselves will be witness of God. I can only remind you of the prophets and apostles who have actually taken the decision. If we are their disciples we must do what disciples have always to do, namely to learn. The whole burden of my address is therefore that I call you to enter the school in which this flight is being taught. It is in this place and nowhere else that the Church becomes visible. For the Church is there where this master is the only master and where the disciples want to learn from Him alone.