

You Shall Be Of Me Witnesses--To The Jewish People

by Ron R. Ritchie

This past week, John Fischer and his wife Marti invited my wife Anne-Marie and I to go with them to the annual Christian Artists' Seminar, in Estes Park, Colorado. Into this beautiful setting high in the Rockies had come some 2,000 young people from all over the Western world, hoping to be taught how to minister through their music to the next generation by the professional artists, the recording studio personnel, the producers and the writers who were attending the seminar.

It was an incredible week. I have never experienced anything like it before. What was going on filled me with joy, but at the same time I was confused by the mixed messages of the various professional people there, some of whom were quite mature, but some of whom lacked maturity in spiritual things. My wife and I were invited to participate in the seminar by having lunch in a private cabin with artists who wanted to have fellowship. A family from Whitworth College served the artists by preparing meals for them through the week. The day began at 9 in the morning and lasted until 3 the next morning. I said to myself, "This is a strange group. Where I come from if you get up on Thursday you go to bed on Thursday, but they get up on Thursday and forget to go to bed. They sit around and jam and talk and laugh and sing. They're so happy to see one another and to be together they forget to go to bed. "

At these lunches we had an opportunity to teach the Word of God to these talented and gifted artists, their wives and families. One of the most exciting things happened on Tuesday afternoon. While I was sitting out on the porch of the log cabin, waiting to talk to people as they came by to eat, a young producer and writer from Nashville came by with a family and said to me, "I want you to meet Steve and his wife and baby." I greeted Steve and his family, and, thinking he was a producer, asked him, "What do you do?" He said "I'm an oil driller in Peru. I'm in charge of eight oil drilling operations in the Amazon River area, and I'm home on furlough." "How did you get up here?" I asked him. He said, "Well, the craziest thing happened to us. I got on a plane in Los Angeles, met this character from Nashville, and all he did was talk about Jesus Christ all the way to Denver. I was so taken by him and by his love and concern for me that when he invited me to forget my plans and come up here for the seminar, I put my family in the car and here we are. Since then these people are all just serving us and loving us. My wife, who is a Christian, loves it."

Noticing a cross and chain around his neck, I said, "Oh, are you a Christian too, or are you in the process of becoming one?" His wife spoke up and said, "I don't quite know how to say this, but I gave him that cross in hopes that God would guard him." Before I realized what I was doing I started to tell Steve of the love of Jesus Christ for him, about the fact that Jesus came to walk among us to forgive us our sins, to give us his life and thereby give us the joy, the hope and the wholeness we so desperately want. "Would you take your wife's Bible," I said to him, "and read the Gospel of John and find out exactly who Jesus Christ is?" He said he would do that. Then I asked him to stay for the concert that night. The last time I saw Steve he was sitting in a front row seat at the concert with this man Brown sitting next to him. I don't know how Steve's life story is going to end, but I do know that, prompted by the Holy Spirit, we had the joy of witnessing to him about Jesus Christ just as normally as if we were breathing. That is what God has called us to do.

This is what Jesus said to do (Acts 1). He was spending his last moments on earth talking to his disciples before he ascended to his Father in heaven on this, the fortieth day of his post-resurrection appearance. Here is what he told them:

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. "

"My kingdom is spiritual," Jesus says, "and it is international in scope. But as for you, you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. I am leaving you but I promise you that the Holy Spirit will come upon you in the age of the Spirit. He will dwell within you and accomplish through you works in the spiritual realm of the hearts of men and women. I will give you power to be bold, to be wise, to be courageous and confident through the Holy Spirit. You will have power to preach, to teach and to prophesy. You will have power to heal, to cast out demons and to raise the dead. You will have power through your spiritual gifts to accomplish good works created by God before the foundation of the world so that you might walk in them," Jesus told them, in effect. "You shall be my witnesses," he said. In the age of the Spirit the disciples would, as the Greek text puts it, "Be of me witnesses." Jesus is telling them, "Talk about me, not about everything else; talk about me--Jesus." That is how to witness.

A lifestyle of witnessing in the age of the Spirit

In the age of the Spirit the disciples were to have a lifestyle of witnessing, of telling about their relationship with Jesus Christ to everyone who was willing to listen. What a marvelous God we have! He is forever setting up for us opportunities to do this. To be a witness is to testify, to give evidence about a relationship, an individual, or a personal experience you have had. You witness about something you have seen, felt, or experienced. We are speaking here of witnessing to the Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrected Jesus Christ--not who he was, but who he is now in your life. When someone asks me why I believe my testimony is true, I reply, "My witness is my friends. They have witnessed that something happened to me after I accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They say I no longer seem to be the same person although I live in the same body. Something must have happened inside, they tell me."

Peter illustrates in Acts 2 what the content of our witnessing should be. To the "devout Jews from every nation under heaven," Peter explained that Pentecost was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that in the last days the Holy Spirit would come upon all mankind. Then Peter went on to talk about Jesus in his humanity, about Jesus' death, resurrection, and glorification. He preached that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah, and that in the age of the Spirit this resurrected Lord would forgive sins and give the gifts of the Holy Spirit to all who believed. Then they would repent of their sins and be baptized. Three thousand people heard Peter's witness that day, and all were baptized and received the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We are not only to witness about Jesus Christ, but we are to know of whom we are witnessing. We are to speak of his humanity, of his death and resurrection, and of his glorification. We are to speak of how he functions now today in our lives. We are to speak and speak and speak of Jesus! That is what witnessing is. That is what the Book of Acts says to do. We are to witness of the activity of the Holy Spirit in and through our lives to every generation until he comes again. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit we are to witness about Jesus.

In this context I have chosen a number of stories from the history of the early church to encourage us that we are still in the age of the Spirit, that we still have the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit enabling us to face all that life throws at us, that we are still called "to be of Me witnesses" so that God can call out a people for his namesake. These stories are examples of normal, authentic, everyday Christianity in every generation until Jesus comes again. I will not be talking about history, but about life. We will learn together of the joy, the thrill, the fulfillment, the excitement, the pain, the sorrow and the fear of normal, everyday Christian living. That is what the Lord wants all of us to experience _how to live a normal Christian life. There is no other life worth living. And we can have it now! Don't settle for anything less.

1. An Exciting Adventure In the Temple Area Acts 3:1-4

Our first story is an exciting adventure from the Book of Acts, which took place in the temple area. "And you shall be of Me witnesses"--in this case to the Jewish people.

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. And a certain man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. And when he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms. And Peter,

along with John, fixed his gaze upon him and said, "Look at us! And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!" And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. And with a leap, he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God; and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. And while he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.

What I love about this passage is its everyday atmosphere. It's just a normal day, and Peter and John are walking to the temple to pray. At a gate to the temple they see sitting there a Jewish beggar who has been lame since the day he was born. It's just a normal day, but as the story develops we will see that the Holy Spirit pulls back the curtain of eternity to show that there is no such thing as a normal day. We will see that the Holy Spirit is doing things in the eternal sphere that are expressed in normal daily activity. He is about to use a lame beggar because there are 5,000 people whom he wants to bring to Jesus Christ as Messiah. So just show up, the Holy Spirit tells Peter and John, and be available to his prompting and his work of witnessing to the Messiah.

I also love the fact that there is no indication here that either Peter or John made plans to go to the temple and heal a lame man. Nor did they make plans to preach to the nation of Israel while they were there. They made no plans to get arrested, or to be thrown in jail. And they did not plan that 5,000 people would come to the Lord while they were in jail, and they had no plans to appear before the Sanhedrin and have another opportunity to testify when they got out of jail because they had no plans to be released. All they did was make plans to go to the temple and pray. Jesus Christ tells us that all we have to do is show up and be available to the Holy Spirit. In this story we learn that we are to be alert because there are other things going on in this life than meet the eye. We are not merely thrown into a sea of uncertainty; we are not here to waste our time and our lives. We are men and women containing the very resurrected Jesus Christ! He wants to use us for his honor and glory day in and day out, even while we are occupied in the most mundane pursuits.

Look at this incident. Peter and John are going to the temple to pray, and at that very time the Lord is placing in the hearts of some friends of a lame beggar the idea of taking him to the Gate Beautiful, the busiest gate of the temple area. What a tragic commentary on the Jewish system of the day! There were all kinds of provisions in the law for Jews to give alms to the poor. This was an embarrassment to the Jewish system because there were so many provisions made to care for this man who was "lame from his mother's womb." What a graphic picture of the spiritual condition of Israel! They were so close and yet so far from the temple of God.

Suddenly there is eye contact between this lame man and the two apostles. Of all the people who are going in and out of the temple, there is eye contact between these three. Isn't it interesting that Jesus never healed this beggar? The text says that the man was there every day. Jesus and the disciples must have seen him during the Lord's three-year ministry. But suddenly the Spirit says, "Now is the time. I want you to get involved in this beggar's life. Now is the time because I have a plan, and this is what is going to kick it off." There was eye contact made. Of all the people in the temple area, the merchants, the priests, the rabbis, the ordinary people going to and fro, with all the hustle and bustle of the camels, the donkeys, the sacrificial animals, etc., Peter and John suddenly see this lame beggar. And he sees them too, because God is at work.

My son Ron picked me up at San Francisco Airport last year following a trip I made to Westmont College. "I don't know how to tell you this," he said to me, "but this airport is so confusing I don't remember where I put the car." So we started going from airline to airline, just feeling our way to see if we could find the car. Suddenly I looked down to my right and saw a young pregnant woman sitting on a suitcase, crying in the midst of this crowded, busy airport. I said, "Son, hold it." She looked at me and I looked at her and I ran right over and knelt down next to her and said, "Are you OK?" She said, "No, I'm not." Here, amongst all the departures and destinations, the things to do and the people to see, the hugs and kisses of welcome and goodbye, was a spiritually dying girl, sitting on a suitcase. She said, "I was on my way to Portland to share my pregnancy with my mother when I was called to the courtesy phone. It was my father on the line, calling to

tell me that she had just died." Well, I just died inside too at this news. I said to her, "All I can do, if you will allow me, is to pray for you. Can I do that?" So I knelt there in the middle of the airport and prayed that God would comfort her broken heart. When you are walking in the power and the presence of the resurrected Jesus Christ he makes you sensitive to people whom no one else sees, in situations designed just for you to get involved in. I don't know the end of this story because I'm not to be involved in the end. My part was to bring a word of comfort, a word of witness of Jesus Christ.

Peter turned to the lame man and said to him, "Look at us!" That was just what Jesus did. He wanted people to get involved with him so that they understood who they were dealing with before he healed them, that there was hope and salvation in him. This is what Paul did later when he healed the lame man in Lystra. "Look at us!" said Peter. "I want you to know something. I don't have any silver and gold. Silver and gold won't change your life physically, or spiritually. All it will do is buy you one more day's bread. But I do have something that I do want to give you. I have the power and the authority of the resurrected Jesus, your crucified Messiah, working through me to bring you physical and spiritual healing and to bring you proof of his resurrection: Walk!" Trusting by faith in that word, and trusting by faith in that name, the name of Jesus, the beggar jumped up. "His feet and his ankles were strengthened," the text says. He was completely healed physically. There was no therapy session on how to walk. Not only did he get up and walk, he went into the Temple leaping and praising God. The result was that the people "were filled with wonder and amazement." They all ran to Solomon's porch because they wanted to know what in the world was going on.

The healings which our Lord performed in the days of his earthly ministry were to authenticate his Messianic ministry and also to demonstrate God's mercy. Then the healings by the apostles were to authenticate the sign of a true apostle. Today, in the age of the Spirit, some physical healings still occur. But it seems that in these twenty centuries of the age of the Spirit that God is involved in healing people spiritually. You and I are called to a ministry of healing in the lives of people who are spiritually bankrupt. You and I have the opportunity to witness to the fact that God is very concerned from a spiritual point of view with the brokenness of this world. He uses physical disabilities to show us the spiritual condition of people and their need of healing. When we see blind people we are immediately reminded of the spiritually blind world we live in. When we see beggars we are to be reminded of spiritual beggars. When we see lame people we are to see the spiritually lame, the dumb, the deaf and the downtrodden. We have a wonderful ministry of walking in obedience to the Lord and so to bring forth spiritual healing in a broken and lame world.

We are to live our lives sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit

The key to this section is the way God gets us to witness for him. We are going about our daily business, doing the normal things of life, and then we begin to realize that God is in a process of using us in unique ways. As Ephesians says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Good works create interest and curiosity and the resulting questions give us an opportunity to witness to Jesus Christ. We're not to go around throwing tracts at people. We are to live our lives sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who enables us to get involved in good works. Such good works create the atmosphere so that in our conversations we can "be of Me witnesses." If you evaluate your life you will recognize how many good works you did before you witnessed.

2. An Exciting ; Witness In The Temple Area Acts 3: 12-20

Now we come to an exciting witness in the temple area, Acts 3:12-20:

But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk, The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His Servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered up, and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence

of you all. And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you.

What a teachable moment! Peter asked them two questions. First, he asked, "Why do you marvel at this?" He says, in effect, "My goodness, you're Jews. God has always done things like this all through our history. The God I am speaking of is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so why are you marveling at this?" The second question he asked them was, "Why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we made this man walk? You know that that's not true. All through our history you never find that any godly man ever did anything in his own strength. Don't you understand what's going on? Can't you see? We didn't do this." In 2 Corinthians Paul says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves." Peter was speaking to them in terms they were familiar with.

I was on an airplane last month with Ed Woodhall and Barrett Anderson and a girl came up to me and said, "What does that pendant which you are wearing mean?" I told her that the pendant was made up of the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega, and that that was one of the names which the Bible gives to Jesus, meaning that he was the beginning and the end, the summary of all life." She replied, "Oh!" Later she brought me a copy of an advertisement for a false messiah and said that a friend had told her, "Watch out for this" I said, "Is your friend a Christian?" She said, "Well, he is a 'born' Christian." I asked her, "Are you a 'born' Christian?" She replied, "I'm a Christian, but I don't think I'm a 'born' Christian." I said, "Do you know what a 'born' Christian is?" She said, "No, tell me." I explained to her about the love of Jesus Christ, his willingness to come among us in the flesh to teach us about himself and of our need of him, how we needed to be forgiven of our sins and how he was willing to go to the cross and die to pay for them so that we might live now and in eternity. Her face just lit up and she said, "Oh, then I'm a 'born' Christian too." I said, "Let me just add one word to that description: From now on, know in your heart that you are 'born again'." We need to use familiar terms when we witness to people and not begin by telling them immediately what is wrong with their terminology. Start at their level and work with that.

By the way, you dolls always have' open hearts waiting for tiff gospel. Last week I got on a plane and sat next to a Stanford University professor "Hi, how. are you," I said. "I want to read " he replied You can't win them all! The funny part is that, having spent a week in Colorado, I got back on another plane to fly home I had to change seats twice, am even had to sit apart from my wife. When I finally got my seat there I was, sitting beside the same man again. I sat down and said "Hi professor. Do you want to read!" Don't tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor.

That is what Peter did. He responded to the amazement of the people at the Temple and said, "Why do you gaze at us and why do you wonder? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, you know, our Father. . ." Then the people could relate to what had happened to the lame man. Peter now goes on to tell the people about Jesus . Peter said, "As a servant of God, Jesus came to accomplish the work of redemption. Thus Jesus, the Servant, was your Messiah. This Jesus is the Holy and Righteous One. Moses and Isaiah spoke of him, your long awaited Messiah. Jesus is the Prince, the Author of life, the One who perfects our faith, the first fruits of the resurrection. But you delivered him up to the authorities, you disowned him in the presence of Pilate when he had decided to release him. You exchanged the innocent One for a convicted murderer. You put to death the only One who could give you life. But God raised his Messiah, Jesus, from the dead, and made us witnesses of the presence and power of the resurrected Messiah. God is demonstrating that this resurrected Jesus is still alive and is still willing to bring physical, emotional and spiritual healing to his people; and this healing will come by faith in his name. This lame man who is now healed is proof of what we say."

Then Peter said, "I know you acted in ignorance just as your rulers did, but the things which God announced beforehand by the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he has thus fulfilled. In response, you are to do two things. One, you are to repent of who you thought Jesus was; and two, you are to return to him as your Messiah." By now the people were filled with guilt. "You mean we killed the long-awaited Messiah?" they said. "Yes," replied Peter, "but God raised him from the dead. Jesus is alive, he is pulsating through us by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the proof is this lame man who is now leaping and jumping and praising God.

God loves you. If you accept him as your Messiah he will wipe out your sins, free you from the guilt and the shame of them, and he will bring times of refreshment, peace and rest in your life right now. When you accept him in this way it will hasten his coming again. He will find us in a time of refreshment, a time of revival.'

Yes, we are living in the age of the Spirit today. We have been en in the age of the Spirit since the Day of Pentecost and we will continue to be in that age until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. Do you know how he wants us to live in this age? he \\\ants us to "be of M' witnesses," through the power of the Holy Spirit. He wants us to be sensitive to his Spirit on a day--to--day, moment--by--moment basis so that he can,

hrough us, heal spritually lame, blind, dumb and downtrodden people. That is our ministry. Would you want to live any other way? Is there any other way to live? Why would you want to choose anything else! Why would you want to leave here this morning and go to breakfast and think that is all there is? Why not leave this morning understanding who you are and who the Holy Spirit is, and how he desires us to witness in this community to the power of the resurrected Jesus? Why don't you leave filled with anticipation that you may have an opportunity to witness to your whole neighborhood and have people come to know Jesus Christ--and maybe even be thrown into jail in the process? Is there any other way to live? Would you want to live any other way? Let us go with a sense that God is going to use us today to, "Be of Me witnesses."

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Acts 1:1 -20
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