

Only Witnesses Can Witness

by David Hartsell

Today many sincere religious people talk about “witnessing for The Lord.” You might hear this expressed in different ways. “I was won to Jesus by witnessing.” Or “I must take the time to witness to others.” Or “I’m the only witness at my job.” Though the motives of such people are often pure, they misunderstand how the Bible uses the terms “witness or testify.” This might seem harmless. Yet, there are serious spiritual consequences when we misuse the idea of witnessing for Christ.

The Bible uses “witnessing” in a special way. Jesus once met a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. He asked her for some water and a conversation ensued. During their discussion, our Lord revealed to her secret things about her life. He convicted her of sin but she could tell he genuinely cared for her. She became thrilled with Jesus’ words, ran into the city, and persuaded many to hear Him. “And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, ‘He told me all that I ever did.’” (Jn.4:39) On another occasion those who watched Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead “bore witness” to it. (Jn.12:17-18) Witnessing was not describing how they felt but what they had seen and heard. John testified that he and the other apostles had seen, heard, and handled The Lord. (1 Jn.1:1-2)

God empowered certain people to witness by their words or through miracles they performed. John the Baptist was filled with The Spirit from birth. (Lk.1:13-17) After our Lord’s baptism, John saw The Spirit descending as a dove upon Him. This act identified Jesus as divine. “And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

(Jn.1:32-34) God, The Father, proclaimed Jesus’ deity through “miracles, wonders, and signs.” (Acts 2:22) Jesus even cast out demons by the Holy Spirit. (Matt.12:28) Special revelation can make one a witness of Jesus Christ.

What are the dangers of misusing “witnessing?” First, it can convince people that they can be saved in ways other than God’s way. Many today teach we must simply ask Jesus to “come into our hearts and make us Christians.” They then want to “witness” to others about their salvation “experience.” Peter preached that repentance and baptism will take away sins. (Acts 2:38) Salvation is not primarily about “feeling” but obedience. Next, it makes God look like the author of confusion. He is not! (1 Cor.14:33) Many religious people testify to false ideas. Faith only and present day possession of spiritual gifts are not supported by God’s Word. God isn’t the one confused; we are. Finally, the “witnessing” concept diverts us from the message to the experience. It is true that the Ethiopian eunuch went on his way rejoicing but that was after he had been taught and had obeyed the gospel. (Acts 8:30-39) Remember, only witnesses can witness.