

## **TESTIMONY OR BRAGGING?**

**“A true witness delivereth souls” [Prov. 14:25]**

**“And with many other words did he [Peter] testify and exhort, saying, save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” [Acts 2: 40-41]**

*It is testimony time. With fanfare, the pastor tells the eager congregation that a brother or sister has a testimony to give. With music and exhortation, the congregation is primed up to hear what the Lord has done, is doing or has promised to do for the said brother or sister. Then, with enthusiasm, they give their testimony. How do you feel after that? Is your spirit or faith lifted? Are you left with the impression that God is too partial?*

*Telling others what God has done or promises to do for us is an essential part of thanksgiving. Jesus told the man from whom numerous demons had been cast out, “return to thine own house and shew how great things God hath done unto thee” [Lk 8:37]. However, testifying is not quite easy! Most of us fear to tell it like it is because we don’t want to evoke envy or invite spiritual attacks. Joseph told of his dreams and his brothers sold him into slavery [Gen. 37:5-28]. The civil authorities sealed up Christ’s grave to “prevent” His resurrection from the dead as He had so testified He would [Matt. 27:62-64].*

*Sometimes, our testimony may wind up glorifying self rather than God. For example, instead of testifying about his miraculous healing, Hezekiah showed off his material affluence to his Babylonian visitors [Is. 39:2, 5-6]. Consequently, he lost his sons to exile and the miracle of 15 years’ extension of his life became a nightmare.*

*In today’s lesson, we shall study the subject of testimony and learn how to do it to glorify God instead of man.*

## 1. What is testimony?

The law court is a good place to understand the concept of testimony. Somebody is brought before a judge for trial for wrongdoing. With the help of a jury (a team of unbiased assessors), the judge listens to the arguments. The prosecutors (those who have brought the case to court) bring *evidence* to prove the guilt of the accused. They may produce *witnesses* (people who claim to know firsthand the *facts* of the case). The defence team (those who want to exonerate the accused) also bring evidence to destroy the prosecutors' case and to establish the innocence of the accused. In the end, the court rules in favour of the side that produces the more credible evidence in accordance with law.

In the court of human attention, the devil, “the accuser of our brethren” [**Rev. 12:10**] and the father of lies [**Jn 8:44**], is working overtime to counter the gospel of Jesus. But Jesus has commissioned us to preach the gospel, “every where, the Lord working with them and *confirming* the word with signs following” [**Mk 16:20**]. Christian testimony is the witness we bear on behalf of God and Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit [**Acts 28:33**]. *Testimony, therefore, is witnessing to others, by words and deeds, what God has done, is doing, or promises to do for those who do His will.* In general testimony should be motivated by the need to:

- a) bring sinners to repentance [**Acts 2:37-41; Acts 20:21**]
- b) strengthen the faith of those who already believe [**Jn 20:26-31**]; and
- c) establish the gospel [**Acts 4:32-33**].

## 2. Ways of giving testimony

We can testify through one or a combination of the following ways:

### a) In words

**Psalm 40:1** says, “I have not hid Thy righteousness within my heart; *I have declared* Thy faithfulness and Thy salvation. I have not concealed Thy lovingkindness and Thy truth from the congregation.” This is an important statement because it enjoins us to tell others the following things about God: His *faithfulness, salvation, lovingkindness and truth*. Twice, Paul had cause to testify before a Jerusalem crowd [**Acts 22:1-23**] and king Agrippa [**Acts 26:1-32**] of his encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus and the commission he had received therefrom.

It is easier for us to say it if the testimony is about what God has already done for us. However, we fear to sound flippant or bragging to tell of promises that are yet to be fulfilled. The Bible suggests otherwise. For example, Elijah's being taken to heaven in a whirlwind was general knowledge among the sons of the prophets

long before it happened [2 Kgs 2: 3, 5]. The strength of Jesus' testimony lies in the fact that everything about Him was revealed even before His birth [Lk 24: 44-45] and everything He said about Himself while He was alive has been or *will be* fulfilled [Matt. 24: 27-31]. We may say, "we are not Jesus!" but He has promised, "he that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and *greater works than these shall he do* because I go unto My Father" [Jn 14:12].

b) In action

Sometimes, it is not necessary or expedient to testify in words because "by their fruits ye shall know them" [Matt. 7:20].

David could not afford to go around testifying that God had anointed him king in place of Saul. That would have amounted to treason, deserving of instant death! But, by killing the giant Goliath in the name of the Lord, he demonstrated in action that he had the Spirit of God. Hear what king Saul said when the women started praising David, "they have ascribed unto David ten thousands and to me they have ascribed but thousands; and *what can he have more but the kingdom?*" [1 Sam. 18:8]. Can David's testimony be better said than that?

Solomon was given wisdom in a dream. How could he be sure it was not a projection of his heart's desire as a new king in succession to a popular father? Therefore, he could not go around telling his subjects; "I am now the wisest man in the whole world!" But, after he had judged the case of the two women fighting over one child, "*all Israel heard of the judgment which the king hath judged; and they feared the king for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment*" [1 Kgs 3:28]. Solomon rests his case!

c) Through a third party

Sometimes, it is even much better for other people to give your testimony. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "but when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, *He shall testify of Me.*" Then, of His disciples, Jesus added, "and *ye also shall bear witness because ye have been with Me from the beginning*" [Jn 15:26-27].

In obedience to Elisha's word, the Shunammite woman left her country because of famine to live among the Philistines for seven years. On her return, she had lost her property. She then went to the king to plead her case. Just then, the king had asked Gehazi, Elisha's servant, to tell him of the great things that the prophet had done. "And it came to pass, as he was telling the king how he had restored a dead body to life, that, behold the woman whose son he had restored to life, cried to the king for her house and for her land. *And Gehazi said, my lord, O king, this is the woman and this is her son, whom Elisha restored to life*" [2 Kgs 8:5].

### 3. Danger: testimony to glory self

As indicated earlier, there is always the temptation to veer off the path of glorifying God and wind up glorifying ourselves. At the height of his success, David was tempted to take a census of Israel, presumably as a testimony of how God had multiplied the people. In the process, it became self-aggrandizement because God had not approved of his action and He punished David for it [**1 Chron. 21: 1-13**].

Take the case of Nebuchadnezzar. God had blessed him mightily, even to the extent of giving him victory over His chosen people, Israel. But, what was his testimony?

*At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spake and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty? [Dan. 4: 29-30]*

For not giving God the glory, he became insane and was driven away from his throne by his people. He lived like an animal for seven years and by the time he recovered, he knew how to testify the proper way!

*Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and His ways judgment; and those that walk in pride He is able to abase [Dan. 4:37]*

Take the children of Israel that God had promised a land flowing with milk and honey over 500 years earlier through their great ancestor, Abraham [**Gen. 15:18-21**]. To make it easy for them, He gave them the Holy Spirit in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide their every step [**Ex. 13: 21-22**]. But what was their testimony? Moses succeeded in taking them out of Egypt but he could not take Egypt out of them. In the end, they succumbed to idolatry by the golden calf [**Ex. 32:1-6**], rebellion, disobedience and unbelief [**Num. 14:1-10**]. They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and the unbelieving generation missed the Promised Land [**Num. 14: 23-34**].

### 4. The blessing: testimony to glorify God

In the words of Jesus, “whosoever therefore shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My Father which is in Heaven” [**Matt. 10:32**]. So, if our testimony is made with the motive to glorify God, the cause of the gospel can be greatly advanced.

Take the case of blind Bartimaeus. After his sight had been miraculously restored, he followed Jesus, “glorifying God and all the people when they saw it, gave praise unto God” [**Lk 18:43**]. The lame man at the temple gate who was healed through Peter and John “entered with them into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God” [**Acts 3:8-9**].

Paul was a prisoner being led to Rome for trial before Caesar. Much earlier, the Lord had told him, “be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou has testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome” [Acts 23:11]. As the ship was about to set sail, Paul perceived that there was danger ahead [Acts 27:10] and he told the crew so. Nobody believed him. But as soon as they left, a storm called *Euroclydon*, caught the vessel and tossed it about like a toy. Out of fear and depression, the crew and passengers went without food for several days and the hope of their rescue was dim.

In the midst of that gloom, Paul, a prisoner in chains, stood up and said:

*Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me and not have loosed from Crete and to have gained this harm and loss. And now I exhort you to be of good cheer; for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve saying, fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar; and lo, God had given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer; for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me [Acts 27:21-25]*

From that point on, Paul took charge of the ship. He radiated confidence. He took bread and “gave thanks to God in the presence of them all, and when he had broken it, he began to eat. *Then were they all of good cheer, and they also took some meat*” [Acts 27: 33-36]. In the end, after an ordeal of over two weeks, all the 276 people on board escaped death but the ship was completely destroyed, just as Paul had testified. The gospel of Christ had been established among more Gentiles. Can we do the same today among non-believers? That is the challenge.

## 5. Lessons

- a) We need to continue to focus on the main motives of testimony, namely, to win converts to Christ, to strengthen the faith of believers and to establish the gospel. Any other purpose amounts to bragging.
- b) Believers are to walk by faith, not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7]. Therefore, testimonies that report God’s promises to us or to the church tend to influence people more strongly than those based on what He has done. In other words, people study both the promises and the processes of their fulfillment to guide their own walk. Jesus commands respect among believers and non-believers alike because He told us what would happen to Him, He taught the world how to face the challenges and frustrations of satanic forces, and we have seen His triumphs which remain a source of motivation for *all generations, past, present and future*.
- c) We need to be careful not to attract envy to ourselves while testifying. Nevertheless, we need not fear what man can do to us [Ps. 118:6] because it is better to fear God than man [Acts 4:19]. God is not a man that He should lie. “Hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?” [Num. 23:19]. “Shall I bring to birth, and not cause to bring forth? saith the Lord’ [Is. 66:9].

- d) However, we should watch and pray to avoid Satan's traps, such as playing to TV gallery and razzmatazz, so that our testimony does not become bragging.

## 6. Conclusion

There are no hard and fast rules on the matter. But, each time you find yourself in a situation requiring testimony, pray for God's guidance because He alone knows how He wants your testimony to glorify Him. Here are a few examples:

- a) Of Paul, Jesus told Ananias, "he is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for My name's sake" [Acts 9:15-16]
- b) To the man out of whom He cast out a legion of unclean spirits, Jesus said, "return to thine own house and shew how great things God hath done unto thee" [Lk 8:39]
- c) To the leper that was cleansed, Jesus said, "see thou tell no man; but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them" [Matt. 8:4]
- d) The risen Christ told Paul in a trance, "make haste and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem for they will not receive thy testimony concerning Me. Depart for I will send thee far thence unto the Gentiles" [Acts 22: 13, 21]

Therefore, only God can choose for us how we should testify and may He show us the place, time, utterance and purpose when it is our turn to do so