Inspiring And Maintaining Our Personal Witness

By Peter Masters

How can we encourage and inspire one another to witness? Here are some of the biblical themes which should always challenge us.

A Matter of Conviction

Personal witness must be a matter of *conviction* with us. All the personal witness texts, with all their commissioning force, must speak to our hearts again. No congregation of the Lord's people will ever get down to serious witness unless it is a matter of deep conviction that God has given it this work. The hardest duties of the Christian life are only performed diligently and continually *when we are absolutely convinced that God requires us to keep to them.*

We cannot imagine a church without worship services, but in the Lord's mind, a non-witnessing Christian is just as unthinkable. Our basic calling must become an essential conviction once again.

It is always very hard to sustain any work if conviction is lacking. So we must have conviction. We need to take to heart the words of the apostle that God has committed to all of us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). We have been commissioned and we are trusted by the Lord to obey Him.

We need to emphasize the term of the apostle that we are all *fellow-laborers*. We need to remind ourselves that the Pentecostal tongues as of fire rested on each disciple: everyone was to be a light-bearer, a witness-bearer.

Each local church in its entirety is symbolized as a lampstand in the book of *Revelation*, and we see the example worked out in the book of Acts. Peter exhorts everyone to be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in him. Every believer is to be a living epistle, seen and read of all men.

This is our starting point--that we set out to make it a matter of conviction, and to bring in a new generation of believers who are biblically convinced that it is the vital duty and the glory of all believers to be engaged in relentless personal witness.

A Matter of Fervent Desire

Added to this, the ministry of personal witness must be a matter of *fervent desire.* The apostle Paul tells us that he was prepared to go through all kinds of difficulties *for the elect's sake* (2 Timothy 2:10). In his imagination he could see future believers, those who would be humbled and brought to love Christ, and for their sakes he would endure anything to proclaim the Gospel.

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To endure the unique difficulties of personal witness we need great feeling and fervent desire. We must *want* to be used by God. We must long to be a blessing to another soul. We must have a deep desire to please the Lord in this matter and to make a stand for Him.

The Saviour sets us our example. He was so concerned about the people that He lamented over the daughters of Jerusalem while He was on the way to Calvary (Luke 23:27-29). So whenever our feelings let us down and we grow cold toward soul winning, we have an urgent duty to pray that the Lord will invigorate us again and restore within us that essential concern for souls.

A Matter of Duty

We must not only seek to make personal witness a matter of conviction and a matter of fervent desire, but we must also see it as a matter of *duty* and *conscience*. We know that a sense of *duty* adds further strength to *conviction*. If we have a *conviction* that the Bible commands us to witness, and we also have a real *desire* to engage in it, a strong sense of *duty* will add the final help which we need.

In Romans 12 we are taught--*present your bodies a living sacrifice*, and this applies to witness as much as it does to other duties of the Christian life. Here is the difference between conviction and duty. There are times when the mother in the household does not feel like getting the dinner. She is perfectly well convinced intellectually that nourishment is necessary, but conviction alone will not always get the job done. An awareness of duty and responsibility motivates when other emotions fail. We *must* do it!

It is our *duty* to get up and go to work. It is our *responsibility* to keep up our Christian service when the soul is not in the enthusiastic condition which it should be in.

We have a duty to be continually asking ourselves, "What have I done this week? What have I said for the Lord? Have I prayed for opportunities? Have I been a profitable servant or a completely unprofitable servant?"

Are we troubled in our consciences if we leave off personal witness? Can we be comfortable as non-witnessers? Does our church allow us to feel at ease while we retire indefinitely from any personal effort at reaching the unsaved?

When Paul wrote to the Philippians he told them how much he valued their prayers for him--particularly that he would maintain a good witness during his impending trial and possible execution (Philippians 1:19-20). Above all else he did not want to let the Lord down in the moment of testing. He coveted their prayers that he would be given boldness and Christian character. It was a matter of *conscience* with him that he did not fail the Lord.

Can we not teach ourselves and other believers to feel and to think like this? *Woe is unto me*, says the apostle, *if I preach not the gospel* (1 Cor. 9:16).

Can we not be more like the apostle when he went to Athens? There his spirit stirred within him because he felt so strongly his duty to witness to the idolaters of that place.

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A Matter of Effort and Zeal

If our personal witness is to be anything more than a five-minute wonder, and if it is to cut through the apathy of those around us, then it must be undergirded with *zeal.*

The epistles are full of stirring, martial language and exhortations to *zeal*. The Christian's armor (Ephesians 6:10-20) is designed for a great struggle. We are commanded to be--*fervent in spirit; serving the Lord--striving together for the faith of the gospel. Quit you like men*, says Paul, *be strong! It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing.* Adds Jude--*Earnestly contend for the faith* (Romans 12:11; Philippians 1:27; 1 Corinthians 16:13; Galatians 4:18; Jude 3).

The nature and necessity of true zeal must be emphasized today because the complexity and bustle of life exhausts and preoccupies us to the point that we become relatively tame and insipid in our Christian service. Pastors everywhere are finding that today's society leaves Christian people worn out and intimidated. The result is that every thing which is done in the churches has to be organized and hustled along, and without this kind of stimulation little is ever accomplished.

Clearly, vigorous church leadership can organize the Sunday school, the young people's work, the visitation and all the other "corporate" ministries of the local church. But what about personal witness? What is to happen when the individual church member goes into his place of business or his college? The church leadership cannot help or stimulate him there. The friendly pressure or the rhythm of local church life will not help him there, for there he is alone and outside the sway of the local church's organized activities.

It is the lonely, unaided ministry of personal witness that *Christian zeal* is needed most of all to carry us through.

Then there is another reason why zeal is so necessary. In the case of many Christians the work of personal witness is out of step with their personalities. They are shy and reserved, and making spiritual conversation is very difficult. For many others, their business circumstances give them surprisingly few natural opportunities.

We must therefore face up to the fact that witness is a matter of creating or "setting up" opportunities and being determined to attempt the work. Witness requires a very definite effort *against the general run of personality; against our love of ease and the quiet life; against the difficult circumstances; even against our natural cowardice.*

Often we know that we shall stir a hornet's nest. We know we shall create untold difficulties for ourselves.

Such an application of initiative and energy, regardless of circumstances or consequences, is true Christian zeal. This may seem all very obvious, but we need to teach it afresh in these days. Every one of us must realize that here is a ministry which will never flourish unless there is considerable investment of effort.

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A Matter of Prayer

Personal witness is, of course, a matter of *prayer*--not only prayer for courage, feeling and ability, vital as these are, but also prayer for *opportunities.* If we would only pray for opportunities we would surely be given them. The words of James must apply to witness as well as to other matters--*You have not, because you ask not.* Even an apostle appealed for prayer that he would open his mouth boldly and speak as he ought to speak (Eph. 6:18-19). He had found that his courage rose in answer to earnest prayer.

If we find ourselves working in a situation or place where there seems to be very little opportunity to get alongside other people, then earnest prayer will sooner or later bring us face to face with someone who will listen. Perhaps we may even experience a dramatic change of circumstances as the result of which our opportunities will increase.

Someone once said to this writer that after three days of praying for opportunity he suddenly found himself face to face with an unexpected opportunity for witness, but he was unprepared and completely tongue-tied. We need to pray very specifically for opportunities to arise, and then we must be ready for them.

A Matter of Planning

This leads us to realize that effective witness is definitely a matter of *forethought.* Some friends seem to think that witness, in order to be genuine, must be entirely natural in the sense of being unprepared. We have all heard of people who preach like that. They imagine that a sermon, to be blessed of the Spirit, must be entirely unpremeditated! Happily, most preachers recognize the folly of such a policy and so should all believers engaged in personal witness.

Our great proof-text for this is 1 Peter 3:15: *Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.* Another is Colossians 4:6, where Paul exhorts us to *know how ye ought to answer* (lit: *respond to*) *every man.*

This work certainly requires pre-thinking. How are we going to open a discussion? How shall we answer the various questions which may come up? Do we have any plan, and do we have an *alternative* plan ready for those times when we are thrown off track by the usual diversions? Do we have any kind of strategy?

We are engaged in a battle. We must know the prejudices which defend the minds of men from receiving the Truth of God and we must have very clear ideas about how we shall challenge them.

A Matter of Skill

We must appreciate the fact that personal witness is also a matter of *skill*. Forethought and preparation must rapidly become augmented by *skill*. We must gain craftsmanship in rightly dividing the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15). Obviously we are not to become crafty or to depend upon skill or techniques of argument. But we are to teach every man *in all wisdom* and to *walk in wisdom toward them that are without* (Colossians 1:28 and 4:5). The word

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translated *wisdom* has reference to practical skill or acumen. The old English word *wisedom* conveys the sense well. Thus, while skill can never win souls, there must be an element of skill to make a diligent and worthy presentation of the Gospel.

Everywhere people follow hobbies which have become their passion. They read everything written on the subject and bestow money and time to the limit of their ability. As Christians our all-absorbing passion should be to develop a worthy skill in witness for Christ.

The writer remembers hearing a group of veteran, inner city, Sunday school teachers talking about their experiences with large and difficult groups of children. These teachers, both men and women, had truly learned the arts (and crafts) of getting on top of children. With them it was a matter of honor to know how to win and subdue a turbulent sea of youngsters. Each one had built up a memory store of anecdotes and approaches which would quell a riot and capture attention.

In the same way there is a "craft" which can be learned for personal witness, and it should be our great passion to be learning and mastering such skills.

Every believer is *qualified* to witness for Christ. Every true Christian is commissioned and appointed by the Lord. But we all need to get on board and log some "flying hours" if we are to acquire skill and fluency. With a little time on our side we shall handle our case with increasing ability; so the sooner we begin the better. Effective witness is definitely a matter of practice!

Above all, it is certainly a matter of the blessing of the Spirit of God, but as far as human instrumentality is concerned, practice is invaluable.

A Matter of Courage

Witnessing is frequently a matter of *courage*, and even the apostle Paul, as we have noted already, though accustomed to all forms of hardships, asks for prayer so that he may speak boldly. Unfortunately there is not much of a courageous example being set in the ministry these days. How can the Lord's people be expected to show courage when the first and worst compromisers and cowards in some churches are the pastors?

Today there is very little separation for conscience sake, and no courageous stand is taken on many vital matters. Sometimes ministers are afraid of a few compromising and vociferous church members and so discipline goes to the wall. Nothing is said about certain activities upon which the ministry of rebuke or warning should be brought to bear.

How can believers be exhorted to have courage in personal witness, when the ministers fall to timid and cowardly policies? It is when we repent of our faint-heartedness and take our stand for the rule of the Word of God in our churches that an example of holy boldness begins to influence every sincere member.

How can we increase our courage for personal witness? Surely by taking seriously the matters already mentioned. If personal witness is a matter of *conviction* and *duty* with us, and we therefore give ourselves no choice in the matter, this in itself helps to "overrule" our lack of

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courage. Then, if we really do pray for a great *desire* to win souls, we shall be given a level of feeling which will serve as a driving emotion to help silence the protests of cowardice.

If it is a matter of *conscience* with us to witness, then a hammer blow will be aimed at our natural reticence. If, at the same time, we truly grasp that it is our duty to take the *initiative*, we shall be less inclined to shiver at the brink, nervously waiting for the *perfect* opportunity which involves no embarrassment or difficulty.

If we pray for *courage*, we shall also be greatly helped. And if we *pre-think our strategy*, much of our nervousness will be dispelled because so much of it is associated with the uncertainty about how we shall fare.

It is worth noting that nervousness is often aggravated by us because we embark upon witness of the most difficult kind. We launch into a difficult encounter without there having been any previous introduction to spiritual things of a more gentle or gradual kind.

It is rather like plunging into the cold sea. Some people rush straight in. Others cannot bring themselves to do that, so they do not go in at all. But there is a center policy of gentle entry.

So with personal witness, we may quite successfully enter the witness one foot at a time, little by little, taking matters gradually. We need not tax our nervousness to the limit and place ourselves under unnecessary pressure, because the subject may be broached in progressive stages.

We may offer people an item of Christian literature as an "icebreaker," so that they know where we stand and may half expect some further discussion. It is comparatively easy to proceed in this way and it delivers the witnesser from all the tensions associated with hurling himself into the deep end of immediate testimony.

Equally we may talk about interesting events, experiences and people connected with our church, not necessarily as an introduction to *immediate* witness, but as a means of getting people accustomed to where our interests lie.

A Matter of Persistence

Furthermore, witness is a matter for great *patience* and stickability. Every renewed burst of personal witness is like to run down and fizzle out within a few weeks. We therefore have to prepare ourselves to accept that it is a lifelong pursuit, and a matter of patiently pursuing every opportunity.

From Moses to Paul the Bible shows us how God's spokesmen have often waited long for their greatest seasons of ministry and usefulness. Christian work is always a matter of continuous effort and great patience. *In due season we shall reap if we faint not!* (Gal. 6:9).

Witness is bound to be hard because of the stubbornness and resistance of the human heart. We should also remember that much of our witness has a *negative* purpose. While we have the privilege of gathering in the elect of God and seeing souls won, it is also our task to prepare the

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ground for the Day of Judgment, that everyone may be warned and that God may be righteous and just when He judges those who would never turn to Him.

A Matter of Simplicity

We need to remember that personal witness must never be complex, jargon-ridden or conducted at too great length. The biblical example is to be seen in the discourses of the Lord Jesus, as we seek to demonstrate in these pages. The Lord's evangelistic messages were always simple and direct.

The understanding of unconverted people for spiritual things is very limited and our natural tendency is to say too much at once. If we really believe the truth of Paul's words that--*the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him* (1 Cor. 2:14)--then we will not use too many persuasive arguments and appeals at once.

Similarly, if we really believe that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, we will be prepared to wait for any reasonable statement of Truth to be applied to the heart during the hours and days following our witness (or following any Gospel service).

When the rich young ruler turned away from the Lord, our Saviour did not overrule him with a further cluster of arguments and expostulations. If we believe in the Truth which we declare, we must leave it to do its work in the heart. We do not want to become complacent, nor to neglect souls, but we must not take away from the Holy Spirit His deep work in the heart.

A Matter of a Sound Aim

Personal witness involves having a very definite and lofty aim--that of being used by God to bring rebel men and women to the place of true repentance. Such an aim will deliver us from being satisfied with any form of witness which consists merely of a few vaguely Christian sentiments. Some believers convince themselves that they are taking a great stand when all they do is "make a little point" now and then.

While we aim at conviction of sin and true repentance we know that this is very difficult to achieve by personal witness alone. It is only rarely that the opportunity arises in personal witness to speak in such a way that a person's heart and conscience are pierced and troubled.

We therefore realize that our witness must go hand in hand with preaching. Preaching, after all, has been designed by God to be more useful than any other form of communication to bring human souls under conviction of sin. It is certainly not the Lord's *exclusive* agency for this work, but it is His *chief* agency, according to the Bible. (The special significance of preaching is emphasized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

Generally speaking we may find that our personal witness will consist mostly of spiritual testimony and basic truth, coupled with invitations to services at which the person will come under the sound of Gospel preaching.

Preaching is relatively powerless to attract a congregation. It depends upon personal witness

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to bring the unconverted hearers in. Personal witness, on the other hand, is relatively powerless to bring souls under real conviction (though there are many exceptions to this). God has made and molded these two agencies to fit together in harmonious soul-winning labor.

Therefore, in order to realize our aim of bringing people to a *deep* sense of need, we shall try to bring them under the sound of Gospel preaching as soon as possible.

A Matter of Character

Lastly but not least, witness is a matter of *spirituality* and *behavior*. John 15 is but one of very many passages of Scripture which make obedience to Christ a condition of fruitfulness in this work. Our relationship with God must be right, and our conduct toward those around us must be sound. We need to ask ourselves--What sort of temperament do I have? Am I diligent in my work, or do I have a bad reputation? Am I a cold person? Do I come across as being somewhat vain or pompous?

Am I seen as a rather flippant person? Or am I ill-tempered? I must take seriously the duties of kindness and good works which are the essential foundations of effective witness.

– From *The Gospel Witness,* transcription of a lecture presented at Toronto Baptist Seminary in March, 1984, by Dr. Peter Masters, then Pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, England.

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