

## 9. The Witness of the Church

The explanation of the death of the Messiah as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins in light of eschatological judgment certainly predominated the forty days of apostolic teaching (Acts 1:3; cf. Luke 24:45–51). At the end of this time, the apostles asked about the close of this age and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). Jesus confirmed the Father’s set time for the coming of the kingdom (v. 7) but then he commissioned them to *the task of this age*: “You will be *my witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (v. 8). The apostolic church consistently understood itself in terms of its commission to “testify” and “bear witness” (Gk. *marturia, martureō*).<sup>1</sup>

Our concern lies in the content of this commission. What does it mean to be a witness? To what are we testifying? What is involved in this testimony? And more importantly, what is *not* involved? These are the questions that have stirred diligent disciples of Jesus throughout the history of the church.

The clearest reference and explanation of Jesus’ commission in Acts 1:8 is given by Peter when he addresses Cornelius:

You know *the message* God sent to the people of Israel, telling *the good news of peace* through Jesus Christ, who is *Lord of all*. . . . He was not seen by all the people, but *by witnesses* whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed *as judge of the living and the dead*. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives *forgiveness of sins* through his name. (Acts 10:36–43, NIV)

This passage clarifies the basic *twofold purpose* of the church’s witness in this age: 1) testimony of the coming judgment by Jesus, and 2) testimony of the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Acts 1:22; 2:32, 40; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 8:25; 10:39, 41ff.; 13:31; 14:3; 18:5; 20:21–26; 22:15–20; 23:11; 26:16, 22; 28:23; Rom. 2:15f.; 3:21; 8:16; 9:1; 1 Cor. 1:6; 2:1; 15:15; 2 Cor. 1:12; Gal. 5:3; Eph. 4:17; 2 Thess. 1:10; 1 Tim. 2:6; 6:13; 2 Tim. 1:8; Heb. 2:4; 3:5; 12:1; 1 Peter 5:1; 1 John 1:2; 4:14; 5:6–11; Rev. 1:2, 9; 2:13; 6:9; 11:3, 7; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4; 22:20. See the classic overview by H. Strathmann, “μάρτυς,” *TDNT*, 4:474–508.

means of forgiveness through Jesus. This is how Peter summarizes “the message” — that is, “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (v. 36). God has given Jesus all authority and power to judge the earth at the day of the Lord, and God has ordained the sacrificial death of Jesus as the means of escaping divine judgment at the day of the Lord. These two events — the first coming and the second coming of the Messiah — are the two primary elements of the apostolic witness.

These two events are also inherent in the accounts of Jesus’ commission found in the Gospels (Mt. 28:18–20; Mk. 16:15–16; Lk. 24:46–49). Before the ascension, Matthew records,

Jesus came and said to them, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (28:18–20)

Jesus’ declaration of being endowed with all authority references the day of judgment, while the command to baptize and make disciples references the forgiveness and cleansing of sins, which is to be carried until the end of this age.<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel of Mark likewise concludes: “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever *believes and is baptized* will be *saved*, but whoever does not believe will be *condemned*” (16:15–16).<sup>3</sup> Again, baptism was understood in light of the purification rites of the law, and the day of the Lord would have been the assumed context for salvation and condemnation.

So also Jesus declares in Luke, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that *repentance and forgiveness of sins* should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are *witnesses* of these things” (24:46–48). The sufferings of Christ and the witness to the nations were understood in light of the redemption of Israel (v. 21) and the glory to come (v. 26).

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<sup>2</sup> The lack of reference in most modern commentaries to the apocalyptic framework of this passage is astonishing.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning the disputed ending of Mark, see chapter 4, n. 21.

When we consider the apostolic witness as a whole, therefore, its emphasis is generally upon both the cross and the day of the Lord. It can be characterized broadly as both *cruciform* and *apocalyptic*. This twofold focus on the first and second comings of the Messiah is also based upon a *creational* understanding. God created the heavens and the earth without sin and death, while Adam and his progeny are to blame for its fallen state. Via the cross God has worked for our reconciliation, which he will consummate when he makes a new heavens and new earth (cf. Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15; 2 Peter 3).

Moreover, this universal restoration assumes a *covenantal* framework. Both this age and the age to come are Israelocentric in their administration of the grace of God (cf. Rom. 1:16; 2:9; 3:5; 9:4–5). The covenants with the Jewish forbearers (Abraham, Moses, David, etc.) will never be revoked (Rom. 11:11–29), and the kingdom will indeed be restored to Israel (Luke 24:21–26; Acts 1:6–8). Concerning these things, God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to confirm his message (cf. Acts 2:33; 3:16; 4:30; etc.). Thus the apostolic witness is inherently *charismatic*. Without the active working of the Spirit of God, the church's proclamation lacks substantive confirmation. So we see the characteristic elements of the apostolic witness: *creational*, *covenantal*, *cruciform*, *charismatic*, and *apocalyptic* (see figure 9.1).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We could also say the apostles were *monistic* in their worldview of the heavens and the earth and *chiliastic* in their approach to the day of the Lord. However, these must be considered secondary in focus and emphasis. Chiliasm received much greater emphasis in the second century after the Revelation given to John.

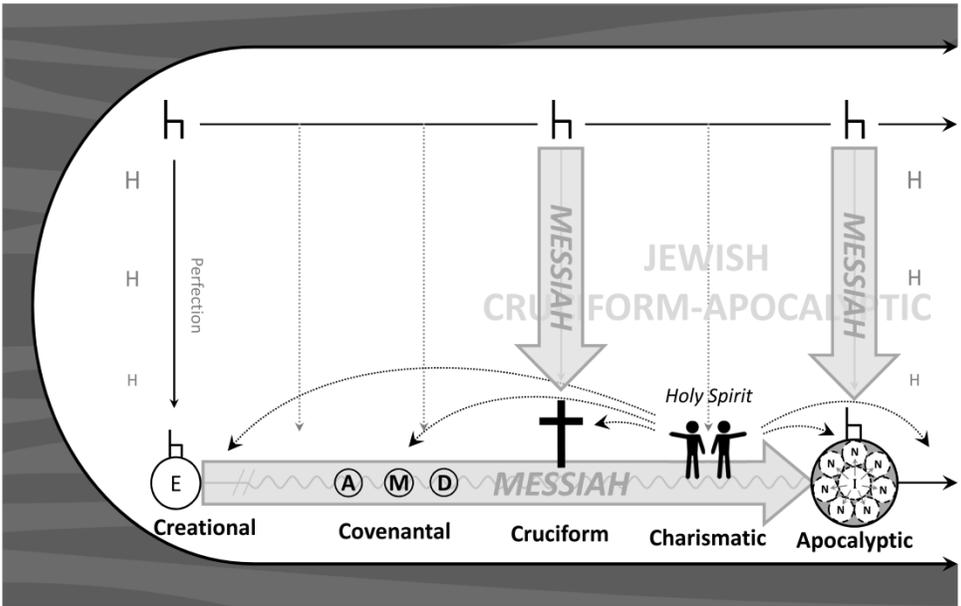


Figure 9.1 – The Characteristic Elements of the Apostolic Witness

The apostles held these elements together organically and holistically. Though involving infinite depth and mystery, they were easily apprehended by even the least educated. Hence the apostolic witness bears no resemblance to the abstract speculations of the Gnostics (1 Tim. 6:20) or the endless arguings of the philosophers (Acts 17:21). Rather, in light of the judgment to come (Acts 2:35; 10:42; 17:31; 24:25), the thrust of their message was ardently moral: “Repent!” (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). Those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ crucified will be saved from the wrath to come and will be rewarded in the resurrection in accordance with their deeds. Those who reject the message of Christ crucified will find their names blotted out of the book of life, and all their righteous deeds will be for naught.

Unfortunately, throughout the history of the church various movements and traditions have perverted and/or failed to hold together the primary elements of the apostolic witness. We trace such perversions to their Christoplatonic root. Rather than a simple historical witness from creation to consummation, the Christoplatonic witness tends to become metaphysical in nature—that is, *a testimony concerning the interplay between the material and immaterial*. The escapist witness etherealizes into “five principles” of this, or “three keys” to that—a *particularizing of ideals* before death and our release from the tyranny of the body.

Conversely, the dominionist witness degenerates the historical narrative into types and prefigurations of manifest sovereignty, unto the gratification of a temporal inheritance (see figure 9.2).<sup>5</sup>

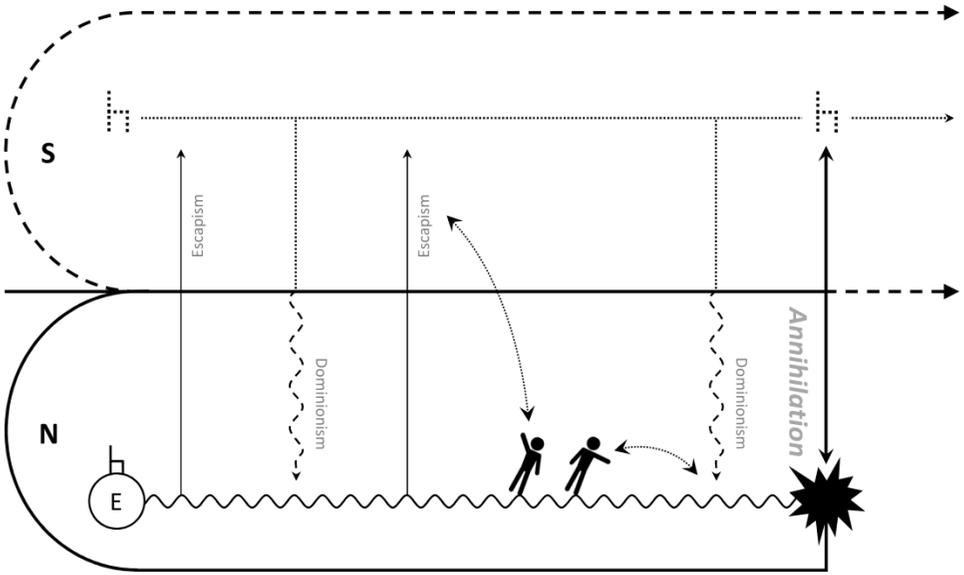


Figure 9.2 – The Perverted Witness of Christoplatonism

Instead, the biblical witness shows us how we come to know God—not by the gnostic revelation of an esoteric circle (whether cultic or academic), nor by the arm of the flesh in amassing power and wealth in the name of God. We come to know God, rather, simply by hearing and believing in his historical acts which culminate on his day. Paul demonstrates this most clearly when preaching to the pagans in Athens who worshiped an “unknown god” (Acts 17:23). That which is unknown Paul makes known by proclaiming creation (v. 24), Gentile history (vv. 25–28), Gentile depravity (v. 29), divine mercy (v. 30), and eschatological judgment (v. 31). Every recorded apostolic proclamation assumes such a timeline (cf. Acts 2:17–36; 3:17–26; 4:24–30; 5:30–32; 7:2–53; 10:34–43; 13:16–41,46–48; 14:15–17; 15:7–11; 16:31; 17:3; 20:25–35; 24:14–15,25; 26:19–23). In regard to this timeline, with its beginning, middle, and end points (creation, covenants, cross,

<sup>5</sup> The inaugural witness simply mitigates the dominionist approach with a temporal inheritance now unto an eternal, semi-supernaturalized inheritance to come. The dispensational witness (classical and revised) complicates things doubly: a heavenly inheritance for Gentiles and an earthly one for Jews. Both witnesses (like their historical predecessors) substantially undermine, in theology and practice, the church’s conformity to the cross in this age.

and consummation), the apostles repeatedly declared, “We are witnesses” (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39).

## THE FAITHFUL VERSUS FALSE WITNESS

Though being a witness involves the straightforward proclamation of historical facts and events, there is an underlying and assumed legal reality, which is based upon the Old Testament and the common secular usage of “witness/testimony.”<sup>6</sup> Before the pronouncement of a verdict, human trials demanded the testimony of two or three witnesses (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15), a practice assumed throughout the New Testament (Matt. 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28). When a second witness was unavailable, other things were used—for example, seven lambs (Gen. 21:30), a heap of stones (Gen. 31:48), or God himself (Gen. 31:50; cf. 1 Sam. 20:12). God used a song (Deut. 31:19) and the Book of the Law (Deut. 31:26) to testify against the deeds of Israel. Likewise, he called the heavens and the earth as witnesses against them (Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 31:28). And God himself often testified against their sin (cf. Jer. 29:23; 42:5; Mic. 1:2; Mal. 2:14; 3:5). Similarly, Israel was called to be a witness against the idolatry of the nations (Isa. 43:10; 44:8), and so also the prophetic tradition took up the theme of being a witness on behalf of God (cf. Isa. 6:8; Jer. 1:7; Ezek. 2:3).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the common usage in Roman courts of law in Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 4–15.

<sup>7</sup> Though inaugurational in assumption, Lesslie Newbigin articulates well the relationship between God and his witnesses:

When Israel is told “You are my witnesses” (e.g. Is. 44:8), it is plain that Israel is not being summoned to help God to cope with the otherwise unmanageable powers of the pagan empires, or to organize a movement which will carry out God’s purposes in contradistinction to the godless purposes of these empires. They are but a little thing in God’s hands. He raises them up and casts them down as he will. Israel’s role is to be—precisely—witness of his purpose to these pagan nations to whom it would be otherwise unintelligible. Israel knows what God is doing—or ought to know; the others do not. The revelation of his nature and will which God has given to Israel equips her to understand the meaning of what he is doing.

The New Testament carries the same teaching. Christians are not called upon to organize a movement to counter the powers of paganism. They are called upon to be witnesses to him who is sovereign over history, whose character and will have been revealed and who—in Christ—has done the deed which precipitates the final issue for all mankind. They are called upon to recognize the signs of the times—that is to say the signs of the last days which follow the coming of Jesus and point to his coming again. . . . In him

The LORD, the God of their fathers, *sent word to them through his messengers* again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked *God's messengers*, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. (2 Chron. 36:15–16, NIV)

So the word of the Lord came to the prophets again and again as a testimony concerning sin, righteousness, and divine judgment (cf. Isa. 1:1ff.; Jer. 2:1ff.; Ezek. 7:1ff.). Similarly, the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist calling Israel to repentance in light of the wrath to come (Luke 3:2–9), a theme often reiterated by Jesus (cf. Matt. 4:17; 11:20; 23:13) and summarized as “bearing witness” (cf. John 1:7; 3:11,32; 5:36; 8:14; 18:37).<sup>8</sup> The whole of their ministries was understood as a witness bringing forth *testimonial evidence* within the greater narrative of God's eschatological lawsuit.

On the last day, not only the words of Jesus and the prophets will bear witness (John 12:48). Moses himself will bear witness (John 5:45); careless words will bear witness (Matt. 12:36–37; cf. Luke 19:22); dust shaken in protest will bear witness (Luke 9:5; cf. Matt. 10:14–15); one's own conscience (Rom. 2:15–16) and judgmental pronouncements (Matt. 7:2) will bear witness; the blood of the righteous will bear witness (Matt. 23:35–36); even the people of Nineveh and the queen of the South will bear witness (Matt. 12:41–42). And the acquitted will

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God presents every man, and the whole of mankind, with the possibility of receiving or rejecting the end for which he created all things. The whole of human history, after the coming of Christ until his coming again, is the pressing of this choice to the final issue. And the Church is the body which understands this, which is called to bear witness among the nations to the real meaning of the events amid which we live, and thereby to present to all men and nations the concrete alternatives of acceptance or rejection. (*Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission* [Richmond: John Knox, 1964], 24–25)

<sup>8</sup> Note esp. the language of prophetic witness in John's Gospel:

The Fourth Gospel, like Isaiah 40–55, is of particular importance for it presents a sustained use of the juridical metaphor. . . .

The Fourth Gospel presents a controversy very similar to the one found in Isaiah 40–55. There the controversy between Yahweh and the false gods turns out to be a lawsuit between God and the world. God is represented by Israel and the world by the pagan nations. Similarly, in the Fourth Gospel God incarnate has a lawsuit with the world. His witnesses include John the Baptist, the scriptures, the words and works of Christ, and later the witness of the apostles and the Holy Spirit. . . .

The idea of witness in John's Gospel is both very prominent and thoroughly juridical, and is to be understood in terms of Old Testament language. (*Trites, New Testament Concept of Witness*, 78–80; see 78–127)

inherit eternal life, while the guilty will be “sentenced to hell” (Matt. 23:33). On the day of judgment, those who are forgiven will be eternally vindicated, while those who remain guilty will be eternally condemned, *substantiated* by the testimony of multiple witnesses. God is building his case, so to speak, for the eschatological verdict, since such a “condemnation” (Gk. *krima*, *krinō*) assumes a law-court context (cf. Luke 24:20; Rom. 5:16).<sup>9</sup>

Thus Jesus is the ultimate and “faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5)—that is, “the faithful and *true* witness” (Rev. 3:14)—concerning the righteousness of God, the depravity of humanity, the coming judgment, eternal life, etc. “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to *bear witness to the truth*” (John 18:37). The antithesis of the faithful and true witness, however, is the *false witness* who gives untrue and inaccurate testimony (cf. Matt. 26:60) based upon unrighteous motivations (cf. Matt. 15:19). According to the Old Testament, false witnesses destroyed the integrity of the law (cf. Ex. 23:1–7; Deut. 19:16–21), and false prophets spoke lies that deluded their hearers (cf. Isa. 9:15–16; Jer. 14:14; 23:14; Ezek. 22:28).

God has appointed Jesus as Judge in the eschatological lawsuit against humanity, and Jesus has called his disciples to testify as true witnesses in anticipation of that day—“He commanded us to preach to the people and to *testify* that he is the one appointed by God to *be judge* of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). So Allison A. Trites incisively summarizes, “Jesus has a lawsuit with the world. His witnesses include John the Baptist, the Scriptures, the words and works of Christ, and later the witness of the apostles and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

The dichotomy between true and false witnesses in the New Testament is stark. Not only are there some who pervert the reality of the judgment to come—that is, the Gnostics (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12; 2 Thess. 2:2; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:18), but there are also some who pervert the means of forgiveness in the judgment to come—that is, the circumcision group (cf. Acts 11:2; Gal. 2:12; Eph. 2:11; Titus 1:10). The former say the day of the Lord and the resurrection have already been realized. The latter set aside the grace of God by boasting in the flesh. *Both are equally false witnesses because they delude their hearers concerning the reality of who*

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<sup>9</sup> See “κρίμα, κρίνω,” BDAG, 567–69.

<sup>10</sup> “Witness, Testimony,” NIDNTT, 3:1048.

*God is, who we are, and how the future will play out.*<sup>11</sup> The apostolic message radically condemns all forms of false witness (cf. Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:16–19; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1), because the eternal destiny of human beings is at stake — “Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others” (2 Cor. 5:11).

Therefore, the apostolic witness is received as “the testimony of God” (1 Cor. 2:1)—that is, “the testimony about Christ” (1 Cor. 1:6) or “the testimony about our Lord” (2 Tim. 1:8). Note the common theme of “*testifying* to the kingdom of God” (Acts 28:23), “*testifying* to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24, NIV), “*testifying* . . . that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:5), “giving their *testimony* to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33), etc. So Paul summarized the purpose of his calling:

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men *to be saved* and to come to a knowledge of *the truth*. For there is one God and *one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself *as a ransom* for all men—the *testimony* given in its proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed *a herald and an apostle*—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles. (1 Tim. 2:3–7, NIV)

Here again we see “the truth” comprised of a few elements in the context of a simple redemptive timeline: the holiness of God, the depravity of humanity, salvation from the wrath to come, and the atonement of the cross (note 1 Tim. 1:15–17).<sup>12</sup> These elements in proper relation (chronological and apocalyptic) comprise “the testimony” heralded by the true and faithful apostolic witness — “I am telling the *truth*, I am not *lying*.”

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<sup>11</sup> “Witnesses are held accountable for the truthfulness of their testimony. Perjury was, and still is, a serious offense punishable by heavy penalties. This solemn sense of being responsible under God for speaking truthfully appears in Paul, who four times declares, ‘God is my witness.’ Applied to preachers, this means that they are driven back to the Scriptures as the standard whereby their witness is to be judged” (Ibid., 3:1049–50).

<sup>12</sup> The same kind of summarization with the same elements is found in 2 Tim. 1:8–11 and Titus 3:3–8. So also Peter summarizes his calling: “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and *a witness* of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed” (1 Peter 5:1). And John: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and *testify to it* and proclaim to you the eternal life” (1 John 1:1–2).

Similarly, Paul exhorts Timothy: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, *who is to judge* the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: *preach the word*; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:1–2). This charge is then followed by a warning concerning the temptations of the false witness: “For the time is coming when people will not endure *sound teaching*, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers *to suit their own passions*, and will turn away from listening to *the truth* and wander off into *myths*” (vv. 3–4). The “truth” and “sound teaching” are here equated with a patient and zealous witness to the coming kingdom and salvation from its judgment (cf. also 2 Tim. 2:10; 3:15). The false witness negates both for the sake of ungodly ambition and desire.

The conflict between the true and false witness will culminate at the end of the age when God’s restraint of human wickedness is removed (cf. Zech. 5:8; 2 Thess. 2:7). The Antichrist will come forth (Dan. 7:20; 2 Thess. 2:3), and the testimony of God’s holiness, humanity’s sin, coming judgment, and present mercy will come to a climax.<sup>13</sup> Though the divine testimony will be clearer and louder than at any other point in human history, people still will not repent of their wickedness (Rev. 9:20; 16:9–11). Thus God will finish building his case against the progeny of Adam, which will then be presented before all on the last day.

The eschatological climax of the divine witness spoken through his saints and prophets is outlined in the Olivet Discourse (esp. Matt. 24:9–14 and parallels). In accord with Daniel 7:21–25, the saints will be handed over and “hated by all nations” (Matt. 24:9). The ultimate reason for this persecution, however, will be “to *bear witness* before them” (Mark 13:9) so that “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world *as a testimony* to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). Though commonly interpreted as a positive testimony,<sup>14</sup> context suggests that this gospel is *an indictment* upon the “all nations” (v. 9) who are hating and persecuting the

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<sup>13</sup> On the Antichrist, see esp. Joel Richardson, *Mideast Beast* (Washington, DC: WND Books, 2012); and Richardson, *The Islamic Antichrist* (Los Angeles: WND Books, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> For example, R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 907–10; and Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1998), 695–96.

saints.<sup>15</sup> Akin to John the Baptist's preaching of "the gospel" (Luke 3:18, NASB), the proclamation of the kingdom of God is often characterized by the punishment of the wicked (cf. Matt. 13:42; 1 Cor. 15:24; Rev. 11:15–18), which of course is good news to the poor, broken, and persecuted (cf. Matt. 5:10; Luke 6:20; 2 Thess. 1:5; James 2:5).

This indicting witness is expounded upon throughout the book of Revelation, which is meant to be viewed as "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1) given to his servant John, "who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2).<sup>16</sup> The book of Revelation accords with a predominantly negative interpretation of Matthew 24:9–14. The testimony of the saints, accompanied by divine temporal judgments, will escalate in anticipation of the day of the Lord. Hence the persecution and martyrdom of the saints is one of the dominant themes of the book (cf. 2:9,13; 3:9; 6:9; 7:14; 11:7; 11:18; 12:11,17; 13:7; 14:12,16; 15:2; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20; 19:2; 20:4).

The multitude of martyrs "who come out of the great tribulation" (7:14, NASB) are those "who had been slain for the word of God and for *the witness they had borne*" (6:9). The "two witnesses" (11:3) typify the church as a whole, for "when they have finished *their testimony*, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them" (11:7). Indeed the dragon makes war "on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to *the testimony of Jesus*" (Rev. 12:17). Yet "they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of *their testimony*, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (12:11). Like Antipas, who died as a "faithful witness" (2:13), the church is called to testify with "patient endurance" (1:9; cf. 2:2,19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). Those who are killed "for *the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God*" (20:4)—even all who suffer "on account of the word of God and *the testimony of*

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<sup>15</sup> Mark places the proclamation of "the gospel" (13:10) in the middle of testifying before governors and kings (v. 9) and being brought to trial (v. 11). Furthermore, the passage is closely paralleled in Matt. 10:16–23, which is similarly incriminatory in tone. Craig Blomberg articulates clearly the negative context of Matt. 24:14 (though strangely concluding with a positive interpretation): "Separated from the previous eight negative signs that do not herald the end is the promise of yet one more preliminary event: (9) the extensive preaching of the gospel (v. 14). Here is the fulfillment of the Great Commission Jesus will give in 28:18–20. Probably it is separated from the other eight items because it is a more positive development" (*Matthew*, NAC [Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1992], 356). This "separation" is imposed (nonexistent in Mark) and does not align with the verses preceding and following.

<sup>16</sup> Note the law-court images throughout (cf. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 154–74).

Jesus" (1:9)—will receive their reward in the age to come. Thus God will conclude his case against humanity by speaking through his saints and prophets, "who hold to *the testimony* of Jesus" (19:10). "For the essence of prophecy is to give a *clear witness* for Jesus" (19:10, NLT). This is the witness that Jesus initiated (Acts 1:8), and when it is finished he will descend from heaven and judge the earth.

## THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH IN WORD AND DEED

Though God seeks to warn the world of impending judgment, his ultimate desire is to communicate his love for humankind (cf. John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4). The true testimony of the church always involves the judgment of God and the love of God—that is, "the kindness and the severity of God" (Rom. 11:22). But in order to be understood rightly these must be placed on the timeline of redemptive history, *typified in the cross and the day of the Lord*. Otherwise they become theological jargon, detached from reality and irrelevant to human experience. God actually showed mercy to human beings in the cross in order to save them from the wrath and judgment due them on the day of the Lord.

The apostolic church consecrated itself wholeheartedly to this simple witness. Many liberals and academicians view such evangelical zeal as naïve—and indeed the apostolic witness was markedly *unsophisticated*. As Jesus said, though, "Wisdom is justified by her deeds" (Matt. 11:19). Of course when Jesus said this he had in mind "the day of judgment" (v. 22), and it is precisely this evangelical conviction that drove the apostolic church: *That which will matter most on the day of judgment is the salvation of human beings from the wrath of God through faith in the cross*. To this end God has commissioned the church (cf. Acts 10:42–43; 1 Tim. 1:15–16; 2 Peter 3:9), and those who reject such a commission reject God and the totality of his purpose for this age.

The primary means of this evangelical witness is the proclamation of truth *by words*. This is seen throughout the Gospels and the book of Acts. The spoken word is presumed to be the principal medium by which individuals are informed of redemptive history.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, after relating to the salvation of his

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<sup>17</sup> "How, then, should evangelism be defined? The New Testament answer is very simple. According to the New Testament, evangelism is just preaching the gospel, the evangel. It is a work of communication in which Christians make themselves mouthpieces for God's message of mercy to sinners. Anyone who faithfully delivers that message, under whatever circumstances, in a large

own people, the people of Israel, in Romans 10:1–13, Paul questions, “But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? *And how are they to hear without someone preaching?* And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (vv. 14–15).

The engine behind the apostolic witness was public preaching and teaching.<sup>18</sup> As seen in other movements throughout history—the Irish *peregrini*, the Franciscan mendicants, the Wesleyan revivalists, etc.—the Word of God bears upon societal consciousness by sustained, zealous public proclamation.<sup>19</sup>

Paul fully consecrated his life to this end, likening his life to an athletic race (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24–27) and seeking to “become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (v. 22). Paul’s apostleship was inherently tied to preaching (cf. Acts 26:16–18; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11), so that rejection of the latter implied rejection of the former: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). Thus his apostolic calling was to be “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1), which involved his wholehearted service “in preaching the gospel of his Son” (v. 9, NIV). Paul’s ministry reflects the heart of the apostolic church, signified in Peter and John’s declaration, “*We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard*” (Acts 4:20).

To empower the ministry of public proclamation God promised “the gift” (Acts 1:4) of the Holy Spirit: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses” (v. 8). The relationship between preaching and the Holy Spirit is most evident in Jesus’ commission recorded in Luke:

This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins *will be preached* in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. *You are witnesses* of these things. I am

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meeting, in a small meeting, from a pulpit, or in a private conversation, is evangelizing” (J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1961], 41).

<sup>18</sup> On preaching and teaching in the early church, see esp. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 300–317.

<sup>19</sup> See David L. Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate: Recovering the Centrality of Gospel Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 45–66. See a modern example in Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been *clothed with power from on high*. (24:46–49, NIV)

The event of Pentecost was then understood as the divine seal upon the public proclamation of Christ crucified, symbolically represented in the loosing of the tongue for divine utterance (Acts 2:4) and tangibly represented in Peter’s proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in light of the day of the Lord (Acts 2:17–40). So the early church prayed, “Grant to your servants to continue *to speak* your word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29). And so God answered: “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued *to speak* the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31). Put simply, *the Holy Spirit is given to embolden the proclamation of the gospel*, a pattern seen throughout the book of Acts (cf. 4:13; 9:27; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31).

Unfortunately, the misuse of the gift of the Holy Spirit for purposes other than the proclamation of the gospel is a universal phenomenon. As often found in modern charismatic and Pentecostal movements, the apostolic church encountered gross perversions of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Simon sought to buy the gift with money (Acts 8:20). Itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to cast out demons in Jesus’ name (Acts 19:13–14). Some in the circumcision group boasted of angelic visitations (Gal. 1:8; Col. 2:18). Others preached the gospel out of selfish ambition (Phil. 1:15–17), peddling the word of God for profit (2 Cor. 2:17). And it was not uncommon for miracles to be used for selfish ends (cf. Matt. 7:22; 1 Cor. 13:2). This is the very point of *the false prophet* (cf. Deut. 13:1–5)—his miracles are real, yet in the end they lead to destruction (cf. Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9).

Thus the words of the gospel, even right words anointed by the Holy Spirit, *must be substantiated and demonstrated by righteous deeds produced by righteous intentions*. Those who proclaim the hope of the age to come must actually live for the age to come. Believers are repeatedly exhorted to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1; cf. Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12). If we proclaim that the saints will rule the earth in the age to come, then what happens when unbelievers see us squabbling over the trivial things of this age (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1–6)? When we proclaim that the age to come will be full of righteousness, peace, and love, and yet we tear one another down with our words, then we “grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom [we] were sealed for

the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). When we tell people that Jesus is the Messiah—that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9)—and yet we follow after human personalities (cf. 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4), what becomes of our witness? When we condemn greed yet show favoritism to the rich, we deceive ourselves (James 1:22), for “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:5). Those who say they live for the age to come yet truly live for this age “bring the way of truth into disrepute” (2 Peter 2:2, NIV). They will be assigned a place with the unbelievers (Luke 12:46) and the hypocrites (Matt. 24:51).

Similarly, those who proclaim the cross must actually *live out* the cross. To preach the cross without actually taking up your cross (cf. Luke 9:23 and parallels) results in the message of the cross being “emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17).<sup>20</sup> Those who say they follow Christ crucified yet lord it over those they lead (Luke 22:25; cf. 1 Peter 5:3), masquerading as kings (1 Cor. 4:8), will be “revealed” by fire, “for the Day will disclose it” (1 Cor. 3:13). What becomes of the message of the cross if we set aside the grace of God (Gal. 2:21) and impose a harsh asceticism on others (Col. 2:16–23)? Instead of “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread,”<sup>21</sup> we become bankers passing by beggars, scolding them for their lack of a work ethic. Rather, our words must be *demonstrated* by our lives.<sup>22</sup> In this way the church witnesses to Christ Jesus, concerning both his first and second coming, by *word and deed*.

## THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH TYPIFIED IN MARTYRDOM

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<sup>20</sup> Like parents who say to their children, “I love you,” yet beat them incessantly, so also is the church that speaks a cruciform message of the love of God yet continually abuses and exploits its members for money and power. The words begin to lose their import. Such was the condition of the Corinthian church (cf. 1 Cor. 1–4).

<sup>21</sup> A well-known statement made by Sri Lankan missiologist D. T. Niles, cited in Ashish Amos, *The Preaching of Daniel Thambirajah Niles: Homiletical Criticism* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2009), 57.

<sup>22</sup> A truth incisively spoken by Arthur Katz and Paul Volk, *The Spirit of Truth* (Charlotte: Morningstar, 1992).

One of the defining features of the early church was its embracing of martyrdom.<sup>23</sup> According to tradition, all of the apostles, except John, were martyred.<sup>24</sup> As Tertullian is known for saying, “The blood of Christians is the seed of the Church.”<sup>25</sup> Even unbelievers recognize the centrality of martyrdom in the rise of early Christianity, for in it “a person sets the highest imaginable value upon a religion and communicates that value to others.”<sup>26</sup> This is not the biblical reasoning behind martyrdom, though.

The Greek terms for “martyr” and “witness” are one and the same (Gk. *martus*). The martyr is simply one who *witnesses unto death*. Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples as “witnesses” (Acts 1:8) would have thus carried the edge of death, especially in light of his previous statements concerning martyrdom: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and *take up his cross* and follow me” (Matt. 16:24; cf. Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). And even more categorically: “Whoever does not *bear his own cross* and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27).

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<sup>23</sup> See a compilation of early accounts in Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> See *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs*, ed. Mark Water (Alresford, Hampshire, England: John Hunt, 2001), 22–44; cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1–2 (NPNF2, 1:132–33).

<sup>25</sup> See ANF, 3:36, n. 1. Tertullian thus concludes his *Apology*,

The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed*. Many of your writers exhort to the courageous bearing of pain and death . . . and yet their words do not find so many disciples as Christians do, teachers not by words, but by their deeds. That very obstinacy you rail against is the preceptress. For who that contemplates it, is not excited to inquire what is at the bottom of it? Who, after inquiry, does not embrace our doctrines? And when he has embraced them, desires not to suffer that he may become partaker of the fulness of God’s grace. . . . As the divine and human are ever opposed to each other, when we are condemned by you, we are acquitted by the Highest. (Ch. 50 [ANF, 3:55]; italics in the original)

<sup>26</sup> “*Martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom*. By voluntarily accepting torture and death rather than defecting, a person sets the highest imaginable value upon a religion and communicates that value to others. . . . Christian martyrs typically had the opportunity to display their steadfastness to large numbers of other Christians, and the value of Christianity they thereby communicated often deeply impressed pagan observers as well” (Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996], 174; italics in the original).

Unfortunately, at a popular level the “cross” has come to mean anything unpleasant in a believer’s life.<sup>27</sup> Jesus’ hearers, however, would have understood the cross to refer to crucifixion, the Roman means of execution—which in the post-Maccabean era signified Jewish revolt and *martyrdom*.<sup>28</sup> Jesus’ call to take up the cross is a simple and bald command to embrace martyrdom.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly it follows: “Whoever would *save his life* will lose it, but whoever *loses his life* for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25).

This call to martyrdom is seen throughout Jesus’ ministry. He taught his disciples that the suffering of the prophets—which included martyrdom—was an example to be followed (Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:23). The prophets had been beaten and stoned (cf. Matt. 21:35 and parallels). They had been mistreated and killed (Matt. 22:6). They had been rejected and murdered (Matt. 23:31,37). And all of this for the witness they maintained (cf. Luke 11:49; Acts 7:52).

Likewise, Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that he would suffer persecution and be killed (Mark 8:31; 9:12,31; 10:33). He accepted a bloody “cup” and a “baptism” of death (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50), which in turn he extended to his disciples: “The cup that I drink *you will drink*, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, *you will be baptized*” (Mark 10:39). Thus he sent his disciples out to preach “as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10:16), warning them,

A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be *like his teacher*, and the servant *like his master*. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household. . . .

Do not fear those who *kill the body* but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. . . .

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<sup>27</sup> Or asceticism, as perverted in early monasticism; see Edward E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950).

<sup>28</sup> On the intertestamental background of martyrdom, see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); and Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 47–61. See esp. 1 Maccabees 2:37f.,50ff.; 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees passim; Wisdom of Solomon 2:19f.; 3:1ff.; 1 Enoch 47.1ff.; *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5.10ff. (cf. Heb. 11:37); and Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 2.151ff.

<sup>29</sup> Those who spiritualize this passage fail at every level hermeneutically; see Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards*, 81–83.

Whoever does not *take his cross and follow me* is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever *loses his life* for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10:24–25,28,38–39)

Martyrdom was the clear implication of what it meant to be a follower and witness of Jesus.<sup>30</sup> Those who want to be “like their teacher” will relinquish their life in this age, while those who seek to keep their life will lose it in the resurrection. So Jesus made clear elsewhere:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and *dies*, it remains alone; but *if it dies*, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever *hates his life* in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone *serves me*, he must *follow me*; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. (John 12:24–26)

In this way Jesus equates service to God with hating life in this age and being led unto martyrdom—these the Father will honor with eternal life.

Hence the relationship between witnessing and martyrdom is simply this: Those who would follow Jesus and proclaim him as judge of the living and the dead must be prepared to die for their faith. Not all will die as martyrs, of course, but *all must embrace martyrdom at a heart level*.<sup>31</sup> This is the “cost” of being a disciple (cf. Luke 14:25–35). The completion of the tower (v. 28) and the winning of the war (v. 31) are analogous to the inheriting of eternal life (cf. vv. 14–24). Unless you “count the cost” (v. 28) on the front end, you will fail to accomplish

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<sup>30</sup> “One of the repeated emphases of the entire New Testament is that it is the very nature of the church to be a martyr people. When Jesus taught that a man to be his disciple must deny himself and take up his cross (Matt. 10:38; 16:24), he was not speaking of self-denial or the bearing of heavy burdens; he was speaking of willingness to suffer martyrdom. The cross is nothing else than an instrument of death. Every disciple of Jesus is in essence a martyr” (G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 104).

<sup>31</sup> As Craig Hovey states,

The virtues necessary to be a martyr are no different from the virtues necessary to be a faithful Christian. This means that martyrdom is not a special calling for a select few, but the commitment of every Christian and the responsibility of every church. Even though not every individual Christian will be killed, there is no way to distinguish those who will be killed from those who will not. Even though not every Christian will be remembered as a martyr, every church that locates its identity in the cross is obligated to cultivate the virtues necessary to enable all of its members to die for the cause of Christ. Every Christian is a member of a martyr-church. (*To Share in the Body: A Theology of Martyrdom for Today's Church* [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008], 60)

your goal. The cost of eternal life is bearing the cross (v. 27), which is then interpreted, “Any one of you who does not *renounce all that he has* cannot be my disciple” (v. 33). At the heart of all Christian discipleship lies this forsaking of all for the sake of following and witnessing to Jesus unto death.

At this point it should be clear that Jesus called his disciples to martyrdom. But why? Did Jesus simply seek to test the fidelity of his followers? Or was there a greater meaning to be conveyed through martyrdom? The Maccabees had bravely faced martyrdom, seeking “to die nobly” (2 Maccabees 7:5, NRSV)—but unto what? A cursory reading reveals the message being conveyed: God hates his enemies and will vindicate the righteous by punishing them eternally:

And when he [the second son] was at his last breath, he said, “*You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.*” (2 Maccabees 7:9, NRSV)

When he [the fourth son] was near death, he said, “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you *there will be no resurrection to life!*” (2 Maccabees 7:14, NRSV)

But he [the fifth son] looked at the king, and said, “Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. . . . Keep on, and *see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!*” (2 Maccabees 7:16–17, NRSV)

And when he [the sixth son] was about to die, he said, “Do not deceive yourself in vain. . . . *Do not think that you will go unpunished* for having tried to fight against God!” (2 Maccabees 7:18–19, NRSV)

The young man [the seventh son] said, “What are you waiting for? . . . But you, *unholy wretch, you most defiled of all mortals*, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. You have not yet escaped *the judgment* of the almighty, all-seeing God. For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, *will receive just punishment* for your arrogance. (2 Maccabees 7:30,34–36, NRSV)

Indeed such a message is true. It is spoken throughout the New Testament (cf. Matt. 25:31–46; Rom. 2:5–11; 2 Thess. 1:6–10; 2 Peter 2:9), and it is a valid motivation for martyrdom in itself.<sup>32</sup> The cause of justice, however, is not what Jesus ultimately wanted to communicate through his own martyrdom and that of his disciples. Jesus’ martyrdom was meant to convey *the love and mercy of God toward his enemies*. Thus Jesus, in marked contrast to the Maccabees, prayed before his death: “Father, *forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34).

In line with his teaching concerning the enemies of God—for example, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44), and “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:28)—Jesus did not seek to call down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54), nor did he call upon the twelve legions of angels at his disposal (Matt. 26:53). Rather, “When he was reviled, *he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten*, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). All of this was done to demonstrate his love for the world (Eph. 2:4–7), his kindness toward sinners (Rom. 5:8–11), and his mercy to his enemies (Col. 1:20–22).

The call to be “like his master” (Matt. 10:25) was taken up by Stephen, the first Christian “martyr” (Acts 22:20, NIV). When facing death, he mimicked his Lord: “Falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’” (Acts 7:60). This heart to see the forgiveness and salvation of the enemies of God sets Christian martyrdom apart from every other kind of martyrdom. It is death *for the sake of love* that makes a disciple like Jesus. Without love martyrdom is worthless, as Paul makes clear: “If I give away all I have, and *if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing*” (1 Cor. 13:3). Therefore martyrdom is only Christian if it communicates the love and mercy of God.

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<sup>32</sup> So David Wright observes,

The making of a Christian preceded the making of a martyr, for the latter needed a strong sense of his or her Christian identity, of the exclusive distinctiveness of the Christian people to which he or she belonged, of the priority of loyalty to Christ over all other calls on his or her fidelity—to parents, for example, or to children—and *a strong faith in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come*. Many a martyr was fired by a vision of heaven ahead. For martyrdom stood for nothing so much as *the other-worldly, future-worldly orientation of early Christianity*. (“The Testimony of Blood: The Charisma of Martyrdom,” *BSac* 160 [2003]: 397; italics added)

God has chosen martyrdom as the ultimate means of demonstrating his love. “For God so loved the world, that *he gave* his only Son” (John 3:16). God has ordained voluntary self-sacrifice for the sake of others as the greatest proof of divine intentions. “God *proves his love* for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8, NRSV). There is no greater vehicle for such communication. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone *lay down his life* for his friends” (John 15:13; cf. 10:11). Because of the character of God, this is how he has chosen to make himself *known* (cf. 1 John 3:16; 4:8–10). Those who have not embraced the cross simply do not know God, and they cannot make him known.

For this reason Jesus commissioned his disciples as “martyr-witnesses.” They were sent for the *same purpose* that he was sent, and they were sent in the *same manner* that he was sent. “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). Similarly, Jesus prayed, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). As the Father handed over his Son out of mercy, so also has he chosen to hand over the saints as a testimony of his mercy (see figure 9.3).

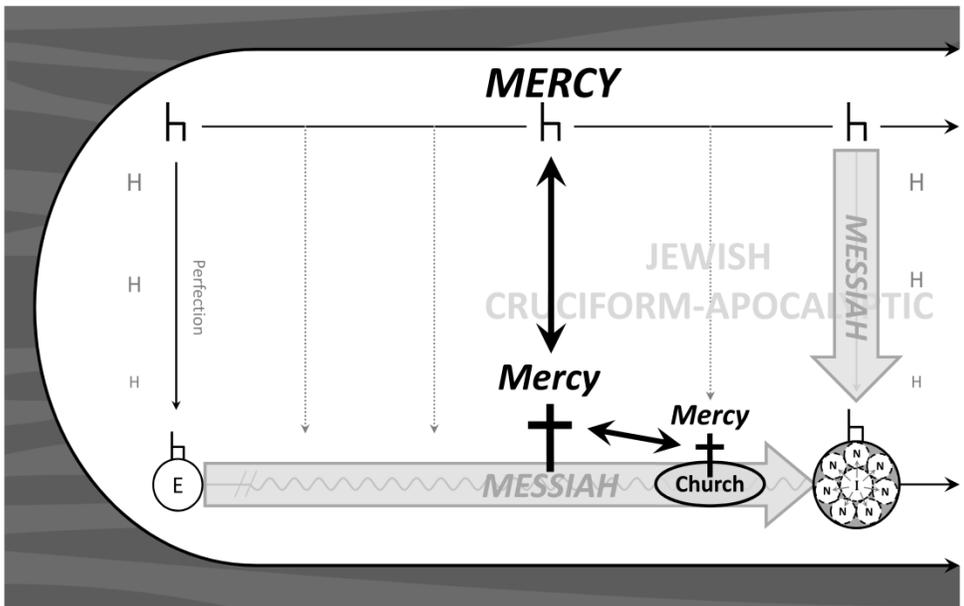


Figure 9.3 – The Biblical Witness Typified in Martyrdom

As the church seeks to testify to the mercy of God in light of the judgment to come, its words and actions must align, and the ultimate action that demonstrates the message of mercy is loving martyrdom: “For it has been granted to you that *for the sake of Christ* you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). It is for the sake of a witness to Christ Jesus and to the cross that we welcome “the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10, NRSV). Indeed we “share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings” (2 Cor. 1:5), “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10). So we should not be “surprised at the fiery trial” (1 Peter 4:12), but rather “rejoice insofar as [we] share Christ’s sufferings” (v. 13).

As Jesus suffered “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10), so also the church embraces suffering. We seek to honor Christ Jesus and his cross so that as many people as possible might come to know him and be found *in him* at the judgment. Thus Paul summarized his apostolic commissioning:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings *for your sake*, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions *for the sake of his body*, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, *to make the word of God fully known*, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. (Col. 1:24–26)

In his preaching of the gospel, Paul accepted and even rejoiced in his afflictions, because they were for the sake of Christ and his body, the church. Paul’s “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” is by the command of the Father, who is “filling up” the divine testimony, so to speak, through the self-sacrifice of both his Son and his church.<sup>33</sup> By imitating Christ, Paul is the

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<sup>33</sup> Reflecting on this passage, John Piper writes,

The most amazing thing about Colossians 1:24 is *how* Paul fills up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. He says that it is *his own sufferings* that fill up Christ’s afflictions. “I rejoice in *my sufferings* for your sake, and *in my flesh* I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” This means, then, that Paul exhibits the sufferings of Christ by suffering *himself* for those he is trying to win. In *his* sufferings they see Christ’s sufferings. Here is the astounding upshot: *God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people.* God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the suffering he experienced so that when we proclaim the cross as the way to life, people will see the marks of the cross in us and feel the love of the cross from us. Our calling is to make the afflictions of Christ real for people by the afflictions we experience in bringing them the message of salvation. (*Desiring God*:

*prototypical martyr-witness*. In his desire to follow Jesus and “make the word of God fully known,” he offers his very life for the sake of those to whom he preaches.

Such self-sacrifice defined Paul’s apostolic ministry. He would give his own life for the sake of others, that they might be saved from divine wrath: “Therefore I endure everything [cf. “suffering, bound with chains,” v. 9] *for the sake of the elect*, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). He would even take upon himself the divine wrath to see others saved: “For I could wish that *I myself were accursed* and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3; cf. 10:1). Such “unceasing anguish” (Rom. 9:2) over the salvation of others is only created by the Holy Spirit, who imparts to us the love of Christ, which in turn compels us to lay down our lives for the gospel and for those to whom we preach (2 Cor. 5:14–20). Paul provides a shining example of someone who takes up their cross daily (Luke 9:23); that is, he daily consecrated himself to God and the divine mission—making the gospel of Christ Jesus, his cross, and his return known to the ends of the earth unto death. “And as for us, why do we *endanger ourselves* every hour? *I die every day*—I mean that, brothers—just as surely as *I glory over you* in Christ Jesus our Lord” (1 Cor. 15:30–31).

As noted earlier, the divine witness will culminate at the end of this age, which will also be in accord with a culmination of martyrdom. God will make his final plea with humanity, and the church will have a final opportunity to display Christ crucified to the world. As God handed over his Son to death to prove his great love for his enemies, so also will he hand over his church as a faithful witness of his mercy. As wicked men were given authority from above (cf. John 19:11) to deliver up Jesus “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23), so also will the Antichrist be given authority (cf. Dan. 7:21; Rev. 13:7), and the saints will be delivered over to him (cf. Dan. 7:25; Matt. 24:9). As Jesus endured the cross (Heb. 12:2), so also must the saints patiently endure (Rev. 1:9; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). As the blood of Jesus was shed (Matt. 26:28), so too will the blood of the saints be spilled (Rev. 16:6; 17:6; 18:24). As Jesus was offered as a sacrifice (Heb. 9:12; 10:12), the saints are likewise pictured as a slain offering

under the heavenly altar (Rev. 6:9; cf. Rom. 12:1; Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6).<sup>34</sup> The similarities are striking, because God designed them both to be part of a greater testimony concerning his mercy and judgment in redemptive history.

Being the ultimate expression of this testimony, martyrdom is one of the main themes—if not *the primary theme*—of the book of Revelation.<sup>35</sup> Because this age will conclude when the testimony of God is complete, the culmination of martyrdom will be the primary *timing indicator* for its conclusion. This is stated explicitly in God’s interaction with the slain souls under the altar:

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, *how long* before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, *until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete*, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Rev. 6:9–11)

Of course, martyrdom is not the *only* timing indicator. God will testify of himself by many other means (e.g., wars, calamities, true versus false miracles, etc.), which will likewise culminate eschatologically. Martyrdom, however, seems to be the primary sign. The saints will be handed over for “time, times, and half a time” (Dan. 7:25; 12:7; cf. Rev. 11:2; 12:14; 13:5), and when this time is complete they will receive the kingdom (Dan. 7:27; Rev. 20:4). God will testify

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<sup>34</sup> “The fact that John saw the souls of the martyrs *under the altar* has nothing to do with the state of the dead or their situation in the intermediate state; it is merely a vivid way of picturing the fact that they had been martyred in the name of their God. In the Old Testament ritual blood of sacrificial victims was poured out at the base of the altar (Lev. 4:7). The souls of martyrs are seen under the altar as though they had been sacrificed upon the altar and their blood poured out at its base” (Ladd, *Revelation*, 103).

<sup>35</sup> Note the persecution of the churches (2:9,13; 3:9), the slain souls under the altar (6:9), the great multitude of martyrs from every nation (7:14), the two witnesses (11:7), the judgment of the wicked who destroyed the righteous (11:18), those who “loved not their lives even unto death” (12:11), the dragon making war upon those who hold to the testimony of Jesus (12:17), the beast being “allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (13:7), the patient endurance and blessing of the saints in light of the image and mark of the beast (14:1ff.), the harvesting of the earth’s righteous (14:16), those beside the sea of glass “who had conquered the beast and its image” (15:2), the shedding of the blood of the saints causing the bowls of wrath to be poured out (16:6), the Harlot Babylon being drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6), the judgment of Harlot Babylon to avenge the blood of the saints (18:20), the rejoicing of the multitude in heaven for the avenging of the saints (19:2), and the vindication of the martyrs in the millennium (20:4).

about himself through his saints and through their treatment. They are mistreated in this age, while the wicked prosper—*because* God is mercifully refraining from righteous judgment, desiring all to be saved. In such light he has chosen his saints to display his merciful, kind, and patient character through martyrdom.

Not only is martyrdom a timing indicator, but it is also the primary *mechanism* for the culmination of God’s activity at the end of the age. As his saints are persecuted (cf. Rev. 7:14; 13:7; 16:6; 17:6), temporal judgments escalate (cf. Rev. 8:5; 14:7; 16:7; 18:2). The progression of the book can be seen in the climax of the declaration of fallen Babylon: “Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, *for God has given judgment for you against her!*” (18:20).

More specifically, it is the intercession of the saints in tribulation that causes God to pour out his judgments—a theme seen throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Gen. 18:20; Ex. 3:7; Ps. 9:12; Isa. 5:7). This is vividly portrayed when the angel stands at the altar with a golden censer (Rev. 8:3), which is then filled with incense and the prayers of the saints (assumedly the saints under the same altar and those who have come out of the great tribulation; cf. 6:9; 7:14). The incense and prayers rise before God (8:4), and then they are filled with fire and hurled upon the earth (8:5). This same pattern of intercession resulting in temporal judgment is seen throughout the book (cf. 6:10–14; 11:15–19; 15:2–8; 16:7–9; 19:1–16).

God will avenge all unrighteousness, but the greatest evil is the murdering of the righteous. The image of God is of the highest value in all creation, and the destroying of the *righteous image* will incur the greatest of divine wrath. Even the blood of the righteous cries out from the ground (Gen. 4:10; cf. Matt. 23:35). Therefore the intercession of the martyrs triggers the temporal judgments, which are themselves a sign of the ultimate punishment of the wicked on the day of judgment. Martyrdom, intercession, and temporal judgments all come to a crescendo in the opening of the heavens and the descent of Jesus, who “judges and makes war” (Rev. 19:11).

Since human history is progressing toward this end, one would think martyrdom would be foremost in the modern church’s consciousness and seen as

its highest honor—as it was in the early church,<sup>36</sup> which had a clearly developed “theology of martyrdom.”<sup>37</sup> However, discussions about martyrdom are almost nonexistent in the church today (except in some frontier-missions circles, but even then its significance is rarely considered). A “theology of martyrdom” is difficult to come by, and when it is presented it is usually marred by inaugurationalism.<sup>38</sup> The age to come and the new creation were not inaugurated by the suffering and death of Jesus, nor are they furthered by the pacifistic suffering of the church.<sup>39</sup> Such theology is painfully counterproductive.

The church must have a *future* eternal weight of glory in order to embrace a *present* light and momentary affliction (2 Cor. 4:17).<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it must have a theology of the cross that dictates its self-sacrificial mission in this age. Our practice of taking up the cross must be driven by a theology that tells us that this

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<sup>36</sup> See Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards*, 325–78.

<sup>37</sup> As German theologian Ethelbert Stauffer noted,

The early church meditated upon these thoughts further. The first Clemens epistle contains a martyrs’ summary in the style of the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The *Shepherd of Hermas* looks at martyrdom as the most powerful testimony to the hostility between God and the “world,” and for that reason it is the fulfillment of the Christian life. Next, the idea of the “imitation of Christ” [*Mimesis*] becomes dominant in the martyr book of Polycarp (d. 155): the passion of Christ becomes the prototype for the path of suffering of all loyal disciples, even to the smallest detail. And thus teach all those early books of the developing Christianity. The church of the first centuries interpreted the work of Christ by means of the concept of the “Theology of Martyrdom,” and vice versa understood the fate of the martyrs through the fate of the Master. (“The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom,” *Memnonite Quarterly Review* 19, no. 3 [1945]: 181; cf. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Marsh [London: SCM Press, 1955], 185–88 and 331–34)

<sup>38</sup> For example, Craig Hovey: “I have stressed repeatedly that the cross is the height of glory. Rather than dashing hopes for the coming kingdom, the cross is already itself the kingdom to come” (*To Share in the Body*, 99). Hovey also states,

Those who bear crosses do so in the confidence that a new world has been created in which, despite appearances, the peace of Christ is a more sure reality than the violence of human agonism. The latter is a depleted shadow world that exists solely by reference to the cross. The church, therefore, does not simply witness to facts but displays the new life made possible by life in a new world set in motion by Christ himself. Its offer to the old world is animated only by its promise to persuade without coercion, in which martyrdom signals just how new the new world is since it does not rely on the abortive and evacuated promises of peace enshrined in the strategies of the old world. (p. 62)

<sup>39</sup> As seen generally in the Anabaptist tradition (cf. Stauffer, “Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom”).

<sup>40</sup> Though etherealizing the future reward and sometimes realizing the new creation through present suffering, this is substantially accomplished by Josef Ton in *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*.

is what God is doing. God is thus *extending the cross*—that is, preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins in light of the day of the Lord (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; etc.). In other words, the theology and practice of the church needs to be both cruciform and apocalyptic. Otherwise its sharp witness is blunted and its holy ambition is compromised.

When the mission of God in this age (and thereby the mission of the church) becomes the inauguration of the kingdom and the age to come, the cross ceases to be the standard of this age. Instead it serves only a subsidiary role unto the saints' present inheritance. In such a light, is there any reason to wonder why martyrdom is so overlooked in the contemporary church? At best, inaugurationalism views martyrdom as a *waste*; more realistically, it views martyrdom as a *failure*.

I would argue that there is a direct correlation between the rise of inaugurationalism in the modern church and its neglect of martyrdom, because the former inherently militates against the latter. In real life, those who are already inheriting the hope of the kingdom will never voluntarily lay down their lives. The theology of present glory will always be justification for rejecting anything negative in this life. In this way, martyrdom is the great measuring rod of theological truth. In the days to come inaugurationalism will be tested, and *it will be found wanting*. And here lies the catastrophe of today's theology: In its greatest hour of need, on the eve of global persecution, it has robbed the church of its most necessary theological training. The prospect of martyrdom is the first thing the Chinese church teaches its disciples,<sup>41</sup> and it is "the issue of utmost importance" for any church under persecution.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Brother Yun describes the practice of believers in China:

Each Back to Jerusalem missionary receives training in several main subjects. These include:

1. How to suffer and die for the Lord. . . .
2. How to witness for the Lord. . . .
3. How to escape for the Lord. . . .

If you ever visit one of the places where we are training our Back to Jerusalem missionaries, you will see how serious we are to fulfill our destiny in God. You may see people with their hands handcuffed behind their backs, leaping from second-story windows! (Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man: The Remarkable True Story of Chinese Christian Brother Yun* [Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2002], 276)

<sup>42</sup> Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards*, xii.

The measure of the church throughout history is its production of true and faithful martyrs.<sup>43</sup> The Christian witness is a martyr-witness, and the Christian church is a martyr-church. To this church God has given the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). But those who will not receive martyrdom as a distinct possibility of God's will and leadership over their lives cannot be Jesus' disciples (cf. Luke 14:27-33; John 12:25-26), and thus they are not part of the true church which will inherit eternal life.

It does not matter if *we think* we are Christians. Jesus only considers someone his disciple if that person is willing to lay down his or her life for the same reason he laid down his own life. Saving people from the wrath to come is worth dying for. Jesus is fully committed to it. Are we?

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<sup>43</sup> As William Bramley-Moore wrote in his introduction to *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, "The history of Christian martyrdom is, in fact, the history of Christianity itself; for it is in the arena, at the stake, and in the dungeon that the religion of Christ has won its most glorious triumphs" (quoted in Water, *New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs*, viii-ix).