

Witnesses to All Men



The First Church (Part 1)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again at the beginning of a new week, sharing with you Keys to Successful Living which God has placed in my hand through many years of personal experience and Christian ministry.

My theme for this week is: "The First Church." We'll be taking a quick trip back in time to have a look at our spiritual roots.

In our cities today, we're used to seeing signs which say: the First Baptist Church, or the First Presbyterian Church, or the First Assembly of God Church. But I'm not talking about the first church in that sense, I'm talking about the first church without any other qualification, not even the first Protestant church, or the first Catholic church, but the first church before there was anything but the first church, the church of the New Testament, the church that's described in the Book of Acts. Right at the beginning, let me establish an important principle: When God initiates something, He does it right the first time.

For an example, let's look at the ark built by Noah. The materials, the dimensions, the method of construction—all were directed by God—and all were right first time. The Ark never needed a "trial run," it was never "recalled for modification." It did all it was designed to do, it succeeded first time.

In many ways the Ark was a preview of the church. Each was the only place where God offered salvation. Each had to be built. Each was built by a carpenter. Noah was a carpenter; Jesus was a carpenter. But the ark was built of timber, the church is built of living men and women.

The first church—the church described in the New Testament (primarily in the Book of Acts)—remains our God-given standard, or pattern. It was never superseded, it was never modified, just like the Ark, it was right the first time. So let's ask ourselves, what was it like? How could we identify it? How would we look for it, if we were searching for it today?

Well, let me give you a very simple sort of down-to-earth example. It so happens that I spent five years of my life in Kenya, in East Africa, the country where in relative proportion to the area of the country, I suppose there are more

elephants than anywhere else in the world. So let me give as an example, the task of describing an elephant to somebody so that that person can recognize an elephant when he sees one. We wouldn't have to give a scientific analysis, we just have to give some main distinctive features. For instance, in regard to an elephant I would pick out, probably, four distinctive features: a trunk at the end of its nose, if I may put it that way; then ivory tusks on either side of the trunk, those are very characteristic because no other animal has them the same way; then very large flappy ears; and fourth, a relatively small tail at the other end. Now that's not a scientific analysis, but it's sufficient to identify an elephant.

In my talks this week, I'll do something analogous in relation to the first church—I'll point out four conspicuous features which serve to identify it.

The first distinctive feature that I want to focus on in my talk today, is that the early church was a church of people who were witnesses to all men. That was something very primary, very distinctive about them. We may go back, to start with, to the last words of Jesus on earth. In a sense those were the words with which He gave the Ark a push and set it out to sail. The last words He spoke to His disciples on earth are recorded in Acts 1:8. He said to them:

> "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

One thing we need to notice, first of all, is that the church had a source of supernatural power and this power was needed to make them effective witnesses, and that was their first assignment, to be witnesses. And this was the basic program for spreading the gospel through the earth: Christians were to be witnesses. We need to understand what a witness is. A witness is not necessarily a preacher, a preacher expounds general truth, but a witness speaks from personal experience, of something that's actually happened to him.

Now, not all Christians are called to be preachers, but I do believe all Christians are expected to be witnesses. We're expected to have a personal experience that we can talk about and tell others about, and this is how Jesus ordained that the gospel should be spread: one person talking out of a personal experience to another, until the testimony had extended to the ends of the earth. Particularly, the primary responsibility of the apostles was to be witnesses, not preachers, and, first and foremost, witnesses of one great historical event, the resurrection of Jesus. Listen to what the writer of Acts says in Acts 4, verse 33:

> "And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all."

Notice, it was the apostles speaking out of first-hand experience; they'd been eye-witnesses of what they were talking about and, above all, they were talking about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we see that they took their assignment so seriously that no threats could silence their witness. Later on, the religious leaders in Jerusalem summoned them and said, "We told you never to speak anymore in this name, and yet you filled Jerusalem with your doctrine." This is how Peter, on behalf of the apostles, answered, in Acts 5:29 through verse 32:

> "Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.'"

Notice, the apostles first assignment was to be witnesses; was to speak out of personal experience what they had seen and heard and, above all, to bear witness that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And then they said; "As we bear witness, the Holy Spirit also supernaturally bears witness to our witness." But the whole emphasis is on the word "witness." What was true of the first twelve apostles was equally true of the apostle Paul, who, of course, came later to a knowledge of Jesus, through a revelation on the Damascus Road. Much later in his life, Paul was on trial for his faith in Jesus Christ, and in Acts 26, verses 22 and 23, we read his testimony in the court. I use the word "testimony" advisedly. It was testimony in a spiritual sense, it was also testimony in a legal sense. This is what he said:

> "And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying [or witnessing] to both small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

Notice, Paul's first responsibility was to be a witness, and he was a witness to everybody, small and great, their social position made no difference. He bore testimony to what the

Scripture said; he said, “the Prophets and Moses.” And he bore testimony to what the Scripture said, particularly in regard to Jesus Christ, and particularly in regard to His resurrection. That’s the theme all the way through, witnesses to the truth of the Scripture concerning Jesus Christ and particularly concerning His resurrection.

Now in closing, I just want to point out to you the amazing impact of the combined testimony of the early Christians on the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was the strongest Empire that was known in the earth in that day and in a sense it took a stand against the early church. And yet, the impact of the witnesses of the early Christians brought the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor to his knees. Within less than three centuries, the Roman Emperor himself bowed his knees at the name of a Jew who had been crucified by a Roman governor. And I want you, in closing, to picture the impact of this witness on the Roman Empire. People from different races, cultures, social levels, occupations—Jews, Greeks, Barbarians—nobles, rulers, officials in Caesar’s households, slaves—merchants, soldiers, scholars—men, women, and even children—all with one simple testimony: “Jesus Christ is alive.”

I know, I’ve experienced Him in my own life. You see, that’s the thing that everybody has the right to know: that the Man who hung on the cross and died, rose from the dead. He is alive today. That’s our responsibility: to be His witnesses. There’s a hymn that closes with these words: “May the Book of Life never close, till the whole world knows, He arose.” That was the Spirit of the early church.

Our time is up for today. I’ll be back with you again tomorrow at this same time. Tomorrow I’ll be focusing on the second distinctive mark of the first church.

Radio Program

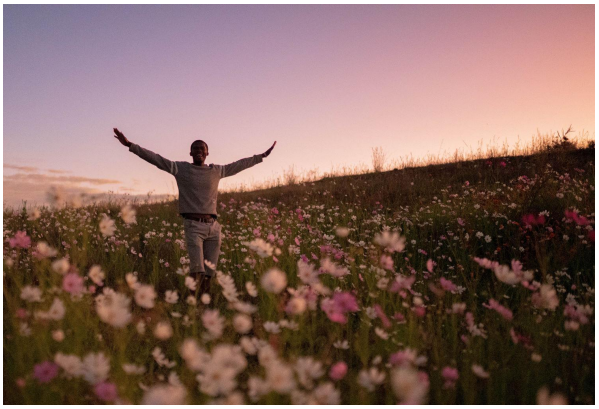
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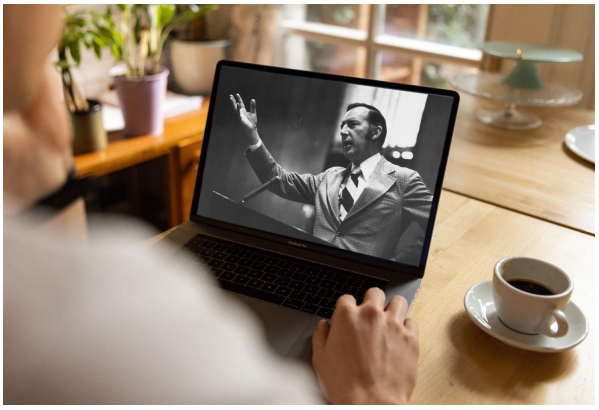
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