

Manifesting the light of Jesus to Jews involves showing that He is the Messiah revealed and promised in Israel's Scriptures. God determined to accomplish His purposes for the world through a particular man and his descendents, namely Abraham and the people of Israel. That design focused ultimately on a specific son of Abraham – God's messianic Servant, Deliverer and King in whom Israel would become Israel indeed and fulfill its election on behalf of the world. This was the uniform message of Israel's Scriptures, and the Israelite people were well aware of their unique status, privilege and calling. They knew, according to the Scriptures, who and what Messiah would be, and they weren't about to embrace any man as Messiah who didn't satisfy the messianic criteria in his person, mission and work. This is why Paul, Peter, Stephen, etc., rehearsed the scriptural storyline – with Israel at its center – when they testified to their Hebrew countrymen (ref. Acts 2:14-36, 3:12-26, 6:9-7:53, 13:14-41, 17:1-3, 10-11, 18:1-5, etc.).

For Jewish persons, faith in Jesus as the Messiah depended upon them coming to see that He fulfilled Israel's Scriptures in His life and work. But this way of "testifying to the light" would prove fruitless with Gentiles. It wasn't simply that they had no knowledge of the Jewish Scripture and its Israelite storyline; they had no knowledge of Israel's *God*. And, whatever they might have heard about Him, they formed a concept of Him through the lens of their own pagan worldview and religious understanding and practice. As far as Gentiles were concerned, Israel's God was just like all the other gods. As it is to this day, every people group in the ancient world had its own deities, and the first-century Gentiles saw that it was no different with the Jews. They were a peculiar people with strange practices who largely kept to themselves, but they were just like everyone else in worshipping a "god" uniquely committed to them (cf. Psalm 79:1-10; 2 Chronicles 32:1-17; Isaiah 10:5-11; Jeremiah 2:1-13; etc.).

The first-century Jews and Gentiles had a different conception of the Hebrew deity, and so also heard the "good news" of Jesus through different sets of ears. This truth was fundamental to Paul's commitment to "becoming all things to all men" (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). His goal was that people would come to know Jesus the Messiah *in truth*, and this obligated him to meet each person at the point of his own perspective and understanding. He approached his Jewish countrymen from the vantage point of their self-understanding derived from their Scriptures and history as God's covenant people, an approach that would have left Gentiles scratching their heads. In order to convey the truth of the Jewish Messiah and His gospel to non-Jews, Paul had to explain his God and His purposes in His Son in terms of pagan spiritual notions and practices; he had to show Gentiles that Israel's God is the God of all men and all creation, and what He's accomplished through Israel's Messiah pertains to the whole world (Acts 14:8-18, 17:16-31).

Paul needed to meet his Gentile audience at the point of their perspective and understanding, and so it is for Christians today. Every culture has its own assumptions and norms, and religious ideas and convictions are always at the center, even in predominantly secular cultures; atheists and humanists are just as religious as Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc. America is increasingly becoming a secular nation, but it still retains the vestiges of its Christian heritage. So, multitudes of Americans regard themselves as Christians, though they mean little more than that they are American and America is a "Christian" country (as Israelis are Jewish and Saudi Arabians are Muslim). This way of thinking has allowed the "Americanization" of the Christian Church, such that Christian faith and faithfulness are often associated with certain cultural values, "liberal" as well as "conservative" (home-schooling, social justice, patriotism, political action, etc.).

So America's unique history and form as a "melting pot" has nurtured certain perspectives and orientations. Americans are known for their independence and self-sufficiency, and this reflects the fact that the country was settled by religious separatists, social visionaries, entrepreneurs, pioneers and adventurers who were determined to make their own way in a new land. America's heritage is "rugged individualism," and this fierce, independent spirit is embedded in the nation's founding documents, its approach to government *and even its view of religion*.

The first arrivals were Puritan "separatists" who risked everything and sailed to an unknown land because of their unwillingness to comply with the prevailing religious order in England. Four centuries later, Americans are even more independent in their religious orientation. The Puritan pilgrims resisted the English Church, but they formed their own "compact" which bound them together in a shared faith. Today, Christianity in America has become radically individualized, evident in the countless denominations and splinter groups that take the label "Christian." Even the gospel itself has been redefined as a formula for personal "salvation." And this religious transformation reflects changes in the larger culture; American individualism has evolved into narcissism – radical self-preoccupation that now drives the culture and its concerns and orientation. This is the "sea" in which America's churches "swim," and they've found themselves getting wet. Some have done so enthusiastically, insisting that this is how the Church remains "relevant" and reaches the culture; others have succumbed in order to survive. Still others have unwittingly and gradually accommodated cultural patterns, like the swimmer whose wetsuit develops tiny tears until it no longer provides a barrier.

This is the darkness which the sons of light must confront. American Christians are obligated to bring the light of Christ into the darkness of America's *religious* culture as much as its secular and popular culture. This confrontation has many dimensions, but three are foundational.

- 1) The first is the *radical individualism* that pervades the culture and, increasingly, Christian doctrine and practice. As noted above, the gospel itself has been refashioned into a formula of individual salvation, which only reinforces the conviction that Christianity is a private, personal religion that pertains to one's present status and future destiny. People are told that Jesus wants to give them "abundant life" and that He'd have died for them even if they were the only human being. Not only is Christianity about *us*, it's about us as *individuals*. This is an attractive message in a narcissistic culture, and churches and "Christian" ministries have employed it to great success.
- 2) A second issue related to the previous one is the *privatization* of Christian faith. It is a short step from Christianity being a personal religion to it becoming a *personalized* one. And a personalized religion is a private one; it is unique to each individual. Just as each person has his own "life journey," so it's argued that every Christian has his own personal experience of God and unique approach to the Christian life. There is some truth in this, for being a Christian involves one's personal share in Christ's life. But individual participation doesn't imply *individualization* – i.e., the privatization of the Christian faith and life that allows personal autonomy. This perspective underlies the notion that Christians must only affirm and encourage one another, even as they must not impose their views on non-Christians. From chaplain ministry to church pulpits, from worship services to small group meetings, the sovereignty of the individual reigns supreme.

- 3) A third issue isn't specifically American, but it reflects the effect of American culture on other parts of the world. This is the *corporatizing* of the church. This is a twentieth-century phenomenon traceable to several factors. The most obvious is the issue of taxation. Taxation implies a defined and mutually-recognized relationship between the taxing power and those subject to it. Governments determine who and how they tax, and so they set the prescription for exemption from taxation (where it exists). And because governments only recognize individuals and corporations, churches must configure themselves as corporations for governing powers to interact with them. If churches would be exempt from taxation, they must meet a formal standard of incorporation.

Churches have long been *legally* structured as corporations, but they've increasingly adopted this structure in their internal configuration and operation. Pastors are now CEOs rather than shepherds and churches have organizational charts that mirror secular corporations. So, the implementation of well-crafted, proven programs now constitutes "ministry," strategic planning has replaced prayer, and faithfulness is evidenced by success metrics. Church consultants fill the land and have made fortunes selling their services to churches and denominations hoping to gain an advantage over the competition. Corporatization has made the Christian Church recognizable in the modern corporate world, but left it distinguished from its secular counterparts only in the product it's marketing. Nevertheless, the Christian "product" must still compete with all the others promising personal gratification, enhancement and fulfillment.

What does it mean, then, to testify to the light in these current conditions of darkness? As it is with testifying to Jewish individuals, this witness involves knowing and proclaiming the *gospel of the kingdom*. This was the "good news" Jesus preached to his Hebrew countrymen, and Paul carried that same gospel into the Gentile world under Jesus' commission (cf. Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 4:23, 9:35; Acts 9:1-16; Galatians 1:1-12). It's precisely at this point that many Christians fail to testify to the true light, for they neither understand the true nature and present form of the kingdom of God, nor what it means to be citizens of it.

First and foremost, this kingdom is the one promised in the Jews' Scriptures, *which implies that it's impossible to "preach the gospel" apart from a sound knowledge of the Old Testament*. When Jesus went about Israel proclaiming the "gospel of the kingdom," His hearers knew exactly what He was talking about. They and their fathers had been waiting for six hundred years for their God to fulfill what He'd promised through His prophets, namely His return to Zion to accomplish His great work of judgment, deliverance, forgiveness, reconciliation and renewal. When Jesus announced that the "time is fulfilled" and "the kingdom of God is at hand," they understood that their long-standing hope was now being realized. This was the "good news," not of a personal salvation leading to eternity in heaven, but of the dawning messianic age; Yahweh was at last returning to Zion to establish His kingdom over all the earth.

In the person of His messianic Servant, Yahweh was arising to defeat His enemies and resolve the covenant unfaithfulness and transgression that had provoked His departure from Israel and the nation's exile six centuries earlier. Forgiveness, reconciliation and covenant renewal were at hand, and Israel's restoration as the Abrahamic "seed" suggested that now, at long last, Israel might begin to fulfill its Abrahamic identity and calling on behalf of the nations.

The reconciliation of covenant Father and son would see the ingathering of the nations and “the knowledge of the Lord covering the earth as the waters cover the sea.” The time had come for the covenant Husband to remove Zion’s humiliation and barrenness, take her to Himself, and give her an abundance of children drawn from every tribe, tongue, nation and people (ref. Isaiah 11:1-12, 51:1-55:5; cf. also Hosea 1:1-3:5). This is the way the people of Israel understood Jesus’ proclamation of “good news,” and they interpreted His words and deeds through this lens. This is profoundly different from the perspective of so many Christians who read the gospel accounts as Jesus biding His time, teaching theological and moral truths and doing miracles, until He could finally get to the work of atonement. They miss the important truth that Jesus’ words and works were intentional and crucial witness to the kingdom He was inaugurating, not random teachings and miracles that filled the time until Calvary. In their own way, they were as necessary to the messianic mission as His atoning death, for they provided the interpretive grid for understanding what took place at Calvary. This testimony of word and work continued right up until the end, reaching its climax with the Passover observance in the Upper Room.

Jesus heralded the messianic “kingdom of God” revealed and promised in Israel’s Scriptures, but His words and works, climaxing with His death and resurrection, demonstrated to Israel that the kingdom was coming in a manner and form they didn’t expect. In His Messiah, Yahweh was fulfilling all that He’d promised, but this fulfillment wasn’t going to look the way the Israelite people anticipated. Judgment, liberation, regathering and renewal wouldn’t see Rome’s overthrow and David’s kingdom restored to its prior form, but a new sort of kingdom ruled by David’s messianic son, not from Jerusalem, but from God’s right hand with a new form of power (Acts 2:22-36; Ephesians 1:18-21; cf. also Zechariah 6:12-13 with Romans 8:31-34).

Yahweh’s kingdom had indeed arrived as His theocratic rule over the world through His royal Messiah, and Jesus’ witnesses announced this truth with the proclamation, “*Jesus is Lord.*” Caesar was the uncontested ruler of the vast Roman Empire, but there was now another king to whom even Caesar was accountable (cf. Matthew 28:18-20 with Acts 2:36, 10:1-37, 17:1-7). The prevailing powers felt threatened by the idea of a rival king and kingdom, but Jesus’ challenge came in a form they’d never known. For He didn’t enlarge His kingdom and reign by military might, but by the indomitable and transforming power of sacrificial love. King Jesus didn’t threaten Caesar’s throne, but Caesar’s heart and mind. He conquers men by transforming them.

The kingdom Jesus established is an other-worldly kingdom defined by *new creation* – not a second *ex nihilo* creative act, but renewal that consists in the restoration of the creation’s relationship with its Creator through the true Image-Son (Colossians 1:19-20). So Jesus’ reign isn’t an improvement on “the procedure of the king” (1 Samuel 8:1-18), but kingship according to an entirely different principle (cf. Luke 22:24-27; John 13:1-17, 18:33-36). It is kingship consistent with a renewed creation under the dominion of man, the image-son, as God intended him – man as he is truly human in Jesus, the Last Adam. Thus testifying to the light is proclaiming that Jesus is Lord, and that the one God of all creation has, in Him, established His everlasting, all encompassing rule over the world He loves. The gospel proclaims *theocracy*, but not as men imagine it. God rules as supreme Father-Lord, forming a new human family in Himself by His Spirit – a new humanity in which He administers His lordship in self-giving love. It is by being such a community in the world that the true light confronts the darkness; in this way the children of light proclaim the “gospel of the kingdom” (John 13:31-35, 17:20-23).