

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 21, [Nu 11](#) March 19, 2006GG

A Faithful Witness

Dear Friends,

With this week's study we move from the bedrock doctrine of human depravity—indeed total human depravity in the person whom God has not saved—to the practical side of Christianity. In our typical systematic theology texts all doctrines are examined with their associated proof texts in one section of the book, while practical Christian ethics and teachings are examined in another section. This segregation of doctrine from practice—of theology from discipleship—is the mirror opposite to the manner in which Scripture presents the wholly integrated gospel message. John quite comfortably and seamlessly transitions from his incredible beginning that teaches us about God as the divine originator of the universe to the Incarnation, to fallen man's conscious, rebellious, and "dumb" refusal to acknowledge the "Light" that appeared in the Incarnation, into the practical truths of the testimony of John the Baptist. In this week's study we examine the basic ideas of John as a witness, using him as a model for gospel "witnesses" to the truth of God's person and work today. A person who believes the truth of the doctrines of grace, but who fails to understand the ethics of grace, the moral implications of these doctrines, is an unfaithful witness to the integrity and truth of these doctrines. Paul will write regarding this point, "The love of Christ constraineth us," ([2Co 5:14](#)). It is the ethics of the love of Christ, not the fear of hell, that should serve to motivate every believer in Christ to every work of Christian service. In His service, Joe Holder

A Faithful Witness

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. ([Joh 1:6-9](#)) Being the sovereign that He is, God could have done everything that He did and leave humanity in total ignorance of it all. We should be profoundly grateful that God not only chose to enact amazing mercy toward His elect, but that He also chose to make His gracious work known to us. God's revelation does not force His truth upon us, but He rather provides the evidence sufficient for us to know it and live in the comfortable conviction of its truth. Whether we consider God's people in the Old Testament, during the Incarnation as with our passage, or now, God faithfully makes His truth available and commands us to put our minds and faith to work to gain the knowledge of it. Over the next few weeks we shall, God willing, examine John's role as a witness to the Incarnation, and, from John's function, draw some inferences regarding God's continuing revelation of His truth to His people throughout subsequent time till the Second Coming. John carefully describes John (the baptizer) as a witness, someone appointed to provide testimony to existing facts. Given the proclivity of contemporary news media moguls to create history, sometimes recreate it in their imaginative-but not always truthful-minds, it should be no wonder that preachers and sincere Christians are more than a little confused regarding the role of a faithful witness. The moment a news reporter begins thinking that the news is all about him and not about the people and events of which he reports, he has compromised his objectivity and his value as a faithful witness to the news. He should not attempt to influence events of which he reports, nor should he attempt to inject himself into the news story. The more he keeps himself in the background and allows the facts of the story to tell the story the more faithfully he performs his job. Basic requisites to anyone functioning as a credible witness are at least two fundamental facts. First, the person must be known as a person of honorable and honest character. If his

honesty is not clearly established, any testimony he gives will be viewed with suspicion. For this reason Paul in the Pastoral Epistles goes into great detail regarding the qualifications-both prerequisite and ongoing-of a minister of the gospel, and of a deacon for that matter. A man who claims to be a minister of the gospel, but who fails to live up to any of these qualifications de facto disqualifies himself for ministry. One might protest that at some time any particular man in ministry might fail one or more of the qualifications, so-according to their compromised reasoning-the qualifications are not at all binding, just merely good ideas, the ideal, but not the timeless prerequisite. My response is simple. I altogether agree that any preacher may in a given moment temporarily compromise one or more of his qualifications. The faithful minister will realize the failure, confront it, and take immediate and decisive steps to repent and correct his deficiency. The unfaithful minister will choose to perpetuate his failure permanently by various rationalizations. However, the inherent dishonesty in such a rationalization of his failure in itself reveals his disqualification. If he acknowledges a compromised honesty in this matter, how can people respect his testimony when he stands before them and claims to be a "faithful witness" to the truth of the gospel? A brief observance of a typical courtroom scene will underscore the essential importance of character in a minister of the gospel. If the opposing legal counsel cannot crack the witness's testimony of facts, he will go after the witness personally and attempt to prove the witness to be a person of questionable character whose testimony is not to be valued or believed. In a subtle but quite accurate sense every time a minister of the gospel walks into the pulpit he is taking the witness stand. Both his testimony and his character will be under scrutiny as people listen to his words. Even if his words are precise and correct, a compromised character will erode their acceptance of his testimony. Simply put, his words will fall unheeded and effectively unheard. He may question the congregation's failure to respond to what he believes to be truth, but he will not in honesty face the fact that their rejection is not of his words but of his character. The second essential of a reliable witness is that he has first-hand knowledge of the facts under consideration. Hear-say testimony is not allowed in a legal courtroom, nor should it be allowed in pulpits. Given that twenty-first century preachers did not live in the first century and witness the events of the New Testament record, their role is to faithfully report the testimony of men who did live then-and who were eyewitnesses of these events. Paul built his dynamic assertion for the resurrection on two foundational points, the testimony of Scripture and eyewitness testimony (**1Co 15:3-8**). Basic requisites to anyone functioning as a credible witness are at least two fundamental facts. First, the person must be known as a person of honorable and honest character... The second essential of a reliable witness is that he has first-hand knowledge of the facts under consideration. John never confused his role as a witness with the greater role of Jesus as God Incarnate. When some of his disciples tried to create jealousy or tension between John and Jesus, John rebuked them by reminding them that his role was that of a servant in Jesus' wedding feast. The servant is not the groom! He should not think of himself as the groom. His exclusive assignment is to do everything that he can to ensure that the wedding celebration is smoothly and efficiently conducted to the honor of the groom (**Joh 3:26-30**, perhaps to Verse 36). "He must increase, but I must decrease" (**Joh 3:30**) should be the theme of every preacher at every point in his ministry and work. When a preacher confuses his role as a servant with the Lord whom he is to serve in his ministry, he will begin to display attitudes and actions that lead observers to think that his ministry is designed for his personal aggrandizement, not for the exclusive glory of Christ. Every sermon, every hospital visitation, every evangelical work-indeed everything that a minister does in his work-should shine the spotlight on the Lord Jesus Christ, not on himself. No minister operates under a divine mandate that he can-or should attempt to-impose himself on the disciples where he ministers. He is called to serve, not be served. If his ministry edifies others, he is performing his assignment. The moment he begins to think of his ministry as satisfying his personal ambition or desires, he will cease to edify others, and he will cease to follow John's noble example. Whether a man serving in ministry, serving as deacon, or the believer who sits faithfully in the pew on Sunday morning, service to God, not what we can gain, is the objective of every Biblical ministry. God didn't call any of us to "make the news" by injecting ourselves

into the story, or to make news by becoming the object of focus ourselves, but to report His good news, while covering self fully and constantly. "We preach not ourselves..." ([2Co 4:5](#)) is the motto of every faithful man in ministry, regardless of the ministry to which he devotes his life. "...sent from God" distinguishes the faithful witness from the self-serving. Ministry is a divine calling, a job description written by God for each individual and given to that individual. God never calls a person to an assignment which that person is not capable of performing. In fifty years of ministry I have encountered a number of men who claimed to be ministers, to be called of God, but they seemed to be about the only person who agreed with their divine calling. Others who observed them in their ministry reported little or no evidence of edification under the man's ministry. The confusion brought about by men attempting to insert themselves into ministry apart from God's calling leaves many people uncertain about what God has called them to do and how they may know with reasonable assurance that they are fulfilling their calling. In any arena of human conduct performance proves ability. In this case performance in ministry, effective performance that those on the receiving side of the ministry affirm, is a primary evidence of a man's calling. How does a man know if God has called him to preach the gospel? Can he preach? It is just that simple! Don't ask him if he thinks he can preach. Ask those who hear him and who live under his ministry the question. If they affirm edification-true spiritual blessing and spiritual growth-under his ministry, you have proof of his calling. If he affirms his calling, but few others agree, there is no evidence of his calling. Only the servant who serves up a plate with food on it can satisfy the hungry. Our calling comes from God, but the specific evidence of our calling comes from satisfied hearts in those who hear and observe us in ministry. There is a delightful sense in which the man whom God has called-and the man who honors his calling in both conduct and faithfulness in teaching-experiences the amazing mystery of "open doors" where he thought none existed, as well as the incredible closing of doors where a man presumes to minister without either the calling or the qualifications. Paul reminds us of the role of ministers, even apostles included, as being "in" the church and intended for the edification of the church, not over it, aloof from it, or immune to its supervision ([1Co 12:28](#)). Thus ordination or the paper that certifies our ordination, is not like a degree earned from a college by a faithful student, a testimony of personal accomplishment. The Biblical validity of any man's ministry appears, not in the paper that says he was ordained, but in the leather on his feet that testifies to his lifestyle and ministry as a "faithful witness" to the truth of the gospel, both in word and deed. His credibility appears "in the church," not apart from it. His life is under the supervision and governance of the church, not aloof from it. "God, not man, called and ordained me" is not the attitude of a faithful minister, but of a rebel. "...sent from God," "faithful witness," and related terms clearly define the role of both John's unique ministry and the role of every faithful minister since that time. We must first assess the character of a man who professes ministry before we consider his message. If his character permits him to compromise his personal conduct, or the faithful message of Scripture, he cannot serve beneficially in ministry to God or to God's people. How faithful was John? How consistent was his personal character to his calling? He was sufficiently faithful that he lost his life-literally-rather than compromise either his personal integrity and conduct or his message. Interestingly it appears that John's whole ministry covered around eighteen months, not a very long time as most of us count ministry in terms of decades, not months. However, a brief time faithfully spent under God's hand can be far more influential than lifetimes spent in compromise of either personal conduct or of the message that God calls us to preach. In coming studies we will examine John's character and message to see the image of faithfulness that he exhibited. He served as a worthy and honorable witness to the glory of his Lord. He lived with no other purpose. He died with no other desire. John sets a noble example for each of us who by profession, calling, or circumstance discover opportunities to serve as faithful witnesses to others of our Lord's person and work. May we honor his example faithfully and fully.

Elder Joe Holder