

“The Witnessing Church”

Rev. 11:1-14

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We return to our series of morning sermons in the book of Revelation this morning. I might have chosen to preach a sermon from some other text apropos the New Year, but it seemed to me that the next paragraph to consider in Revelation served that purpose beautifully.

The interpretation of the paragraph we are about to read is controversial. To help you cut through the thick welter of interpretations, let me begin by telling you what I think is a fair summary of the fourteen verses we are now to read. The Lord will protect his people as they bear witness to him. That witness, inevitably both a message of salvation to those who believe and of coming judgment to those who do not, provokes the opposition of the unbelieving world. That opposition in turn leads at the end to the apparent defeat of the church. But, in fact, the Lord will reward his faithful people with final and total victory. [Cf. Beale, 556] In other words, what we have in these verses is another version of the main message of the book: trouble and tribulation await the church but so does eventual triumph. The Lord will preserve his faithful people to ensure their vindication at the end. The paragraph is thus a summons to the church to remain faithful in bearing witness to the world, no matter the opposition.

Text Comment

v.2 Measuring the temple has nothing to do with determining its area. It is a metaphor for setting an area aside for either preservation or destruction. You find the same metaphor used in both ways in the OT prophets and measuring the temple or the city of Jerusalem as a metaphor of divine protection in Ezekiel and Zechariah, two prophets that are very important for the imagery of the book of Revelation. In the context it appears that we have here a metaphorical promise of protection for the faithful who are here described as “the worshippers.” The “measuring,” in other words, is equivalent to “the sealing” of believers of which we read in 7:3 and 9:4. The believers – no matter what the world does to them – dwell in an invisible sanctuary where God himself is present to protect and keep them.

As you may imagine, there are many different interpretations of the temple and the outer court. 1) Dispensationalists have taken the reference to the temple to refer to a restored temple and Jewish worship during the tribulation, after the rapture or evacuation of the church from the world. So those worshipping there would be believing ethnic Jews. 2) Others take the reference to the literal Jewish temple of the first century and consider what follows in chapter 11 as describing events leading up to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In other words, here Revelation is describing ancient history, not the present or the future. This interpretation is often called the “preterist” interpretation, from the Latin word for “past,” because it takes much of biblical prophecy in the NT to refer to events that for us today now lie far in the past. It would seem to require a date for writing of Revelation prior to A.D. 70. Neither that date for the book nor this interpretation of these metaphors seems very likely to me. 3) Others who reject

the dispensational scheme nevertheless also understand the reference to the temple as a reference to the salvation of the Jews *en masse* at the end of the age, as seems elsewhere to be predicted in the New Testament most famously by the apostle Paul in Romans 11. A chief problem with this interpretation, in my view, is that so far in the book the tribes of Israel, the altar of incense, and even the temple (3:12) have seemed clearly to refer to the Christian church in general and not believing Jews in particular. The “Holy City,” for example is a metaphor for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Revelation. 4) A fourth interpretation takes the references to the temple and altar and Jerusalem as references to the church amidst a hostile world. The temple is often a metaphor for the church in the New Testament. The danger is spiritual, not physical and, by measuring the temple the Lord is guaranteeing the church’s protection. This interpretation is then divided in two: some take the outer court to represent the apostate church which will align itself with the unbelieving world in its persecution of the believing people of God; others take the outer court as a metaphor for the danger, the trouble, and the persecution that the faithful church must suffer in this world. In either case, the sense of the imagery of the first two verses is that the church must face great difficulty but she will be preserved by God from any spiritual or lasting harm.

The 42 months, or three and a half years, half of seven years, seven being a number of completeness, is taken from Daniel and is both there and in John’s usage here a numeric symbol for a limited period of time in which evil will be allowed free rein and in which the church will suffer tribulation. The description of the same period as 1260 days in v. 3 – remember theirs was a lunar not a solar year – is simply a literary variation as is the description of the same period as “time, times, and half a time” in 12:14.

- v.6 Over a hundred years ago Henry Alford, the great Anglican hymn-writer and biblical scholar wrote that “no solution has ever been given” [to the prophesy of the two witnesses]. [Alford, iv, 655] He was referring to the fact that even the most judicious and reliable scholars of Revelation cannot agree as to whether we have here a prophecy of two actual individuals who will appear at the end of history or a metaphor for the church as a whole and her work of bearing witness to the world. But, in my view, the scholarship of the last century or so has demonstrated that there is much more to commend the view that the two witnesses are in fact a metaphor for the witnessing church throughout history to its end.

The two witnesses are clearly modeled after Moses and Elijah, the two greatest and most representative prophets of the ancient epoch. Elijah shut up the sky so that it did not rain and Moses brought the plagues upon Egypt and turned the Nile to blood. However, the time of the ministry of the two witnesses, as we read in v. 3, is the same as the time of the church’s tribulation, 3 and ½ years or 1260 days. However, *that* period began, we are told in 12:5-6, with the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to heaven. In other words, the ministry of the two witnesses spans the entire length of this age *as does the persecution of the church*. That is, in my view, a strong argument in favor of taking the two witnesses as a metaphor for the witnessing church rather than as a prophecy of two individuals still to come. The church as a whole takes over the task of bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ and the truth of God, a task that used to be primarily the responsibility of God’s

prophets. Just as John the Baptist was not himself Elijah but came *in the spirit and power of Elijah* (even though John worked no miracles!), so the church carries on the prophetic task of those great men. All her sons and daughters have become prophets *in this sense* as Joel prophesied they would and as Peter said they had on the day of Pentecost.

This is confirmed then by the identification of the two witnesses with the two lampstands and the two olive trees: here two not seven lampstands as before in chapter 1 and 2, but in all likelihood here as there representing the church as bearing light to the world. If lampstands symbolized the church in chapter 1 it is likely that they symbolize the church here in chapter 11, the only other use of lampstand in Revelation. Two lampstands make particular sense here as a metaphor for the witnessing church, the church that bears light to the world because, as you may remember, in the OT two witnesses were required to prove a point and secure a conviction in court. So two witnesses represent the fact that the church's witness is authoritative and ought to be believed in the world.

The fact that the witnesses were clothed in sackcloth seems to suggest both that the church is calling the world to repentance and that it mourns over the fact that the world largely responds in unbelief and so makes the church's message one of judgment rather than salvation. Paul, remember, admits in 2 Cor. 2 that he was both a preacher of life and a preacher of death. When people *believed* he was a preacher of life. When they *refused to believe* his proclamation of the truth and of salvation in Jesus Christ amounted to a ringing of the funeral bell of eternal loss. The fire coming out of the mouths of the two witnesses and the plagues they bring upon the earth are likewise images of divine judgment.

The two olive trees are an image John takes from Zechariah 4. There too the message is one of encouragement for the faithful in the face of opposition and persecution. The olive trees supply the oil that burns in the lamps. Likely we are to see the two trees as an image of the Holy Spirit's empowerment of the church's witness.

- v.10 Vv. 7-10 give us an account, again in highly figurative language drawn especially from Daniel, as to what will occur at the end of history, after the time of the church's trouble and of her witness to the world. This is the great tribulation, the time of unprecedented woe for the church, the days so terrible that Jesus said they would have to be cut short for the sake of the elect (Matt. 24:22). We will hear more of this beast who came from the abyss as we proceed through the book. The great city of v. 8 is Babylon, Jerusalem has become Babylon, a favorite image in Revelation for the unbelieving world; more of Babylon as we proceed further into the book.
- v.11 Remember, Jesus was in the tomb for 3 days. Again a figure for a short period of time when it appears that evil has triumphed but in fact it has not.
- v.13 The final salvation of the church is paralleled by the final judgment of the world. It is possible that the people who give glory to God as the intimations of the final judgment befall the world represent the very last to be saved before the return of Christ. But it is also possible that this giving glory to God is the sort of temporary expedient employed by

those without faith who find themselves face to face with God's judgment: the so-called "fox-hole" Christian who never really intends to love and serve the Lord to whom he cries out in his moment of terror. The larger context of Revelation seems to support the latter interpretation. These are not the last believers but unbelievers making a last-ditch effort to save their skins.

v.14 The parenthesis of 10:1-11:13 is ended and we pick up the narrative again where we left off at 9:21.

I know that the complexities of the interpretation of the Apocalypse can leave your head spinning. They do mine. Sorting out the various possibilities and choosing between them is no simple matter. But leaving the details aside, let's cut to the chase. *The church bears its witness to the world – it communicates by word and deed what it has come to know of God and of the way of obtaining eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ God's Son – and the world either accepts or rejects that testimony; and much of the world has rejected and will reject it.* Because human sin carries within itself a principle of rebellion against God, the unbelieving world remains not only unconvinced by the witness of the church but offended by it. No wonder: the church's witness amounts to a declaration that the world in its unbelief and its refusal to submit to Christ the king is both evil and foolish. Proud human hearts are rarely willing to take such a verdict lying down. And so the story of this world becomes in John's account the story of the church's witness and the world's ferocious counter-attack.

I happen to be reading again John Keegan's magnificent history of the Second World War. Keegan combines two things that are rarely combined, the research and the learning of a great scholar and the magnificent writing of the English language. It is a brilliant account of the progress of the war from its beginning to its end, the great movement of armies across the landscape of Europe and Asia, the pivotal battles, the turning points, and the horrific consequences for the peoples and nations that fought the greatest war in human history. But, of course, in Keegan's telling so much must be left out. The experience of the individual soldier, his boredom and his terror, his letters home, the heartbreak of loved ones receiving news of a son's death in battle, the civilians who suffered so terribly in a war they did not themselves decide to fight, the destruction of the hopes of so many human beings, the million upon million private tragedies, the daily heroism, the lives never to be the same again. That too is the story of the Second World War, but no one can account for all of that in a single volume. Well so it is with John's Revelation. We get the great sweep of history, not its details. We get the progress of the conflict, the great crises that represent the fatal turning points, and the triumph and catastrophe that marks the end. That is what we get in Revelation. We get the forest, not the trees. We do not get the individual's story, either that of the Christian or the non-Christian. Revelation is a big-picture account of the progress of history to its end. Its interest is large scale, the great issues not the experience of the individual human being.

There is, of course, so much more that could be added to this story of the world. The Bible itself has so much more to say about the experience of the individual human being, the course of an individual's life, believer and unbeliever alike. There is joy and happiness and achievement in human life, even in unbelieving human life. Christians suffer sorrows that are not directly related to the world's rejection of their witness. There are other obligations that are laid upon Christians

in Holy Scripture than that of bearing witness to the world. Our heavenly Father has an interest in developing holiness in all of his children and uses many means to foster that development. All of that is undoubtedly true. The Bible says a great deal about such things.

But we must face the fact that, so fundamental to the meaning of life and of world history is the church's bearing of the light and the world's rejecting of that light and of the opposition between the church and the world that results, John can summarize all of human history in these terms. *This* is the story of the world. *This* is the great struggle that is taking place in human history. *This* is the story of the church in the world: a story of a faithful witness borne to the world and of the world's hostility and opposition on account of that witness. John means, of course, that we find ourselves in this story! He expects his readers to have firsthand experience both of bearing witness and suffering opposition and to take comfort from being reminded that it only what is to be expected and that the Lord Christ will not fail to vindicate those who faithfully bear witness to the truth. There is more to our lives than this, to be sure, but our lives are part of this great story of light and darkness vying for control of this world. And, at last, that is the most important thing we can say about our lives: that we find ourselves in one army or the other, belonging to the kingdom of light or of darkness, taking up one side of the struggle or the other. This is a principal difference between you Christians and the non-Christians in your neighborhood, at work, in our American society. In our culture, in our day, and I think generally speaking in human history, the unbeliever does not see his life as part of something much larger and more significant. He or she does not find the meaning of life in the meaning of human history. But this is precisely how a Christian thinks about his or her life. His or her individual life and experience are part of something much larger, grander. When we live in obedience to the Lord and serve him and his kingdom we are moving history forward to its appointed end!

Now, John does not say how the two witnesses bear their witness to the world or how the church proclaims the truth or sheds light in the world. That is a detail that doesn't feature in his big-picture account. But we know, of course, from Holy Scripture and from the history of the church since apostolic times that this witness is borne to the world in every conceivable manner. It is borne silently, by the impression made by the lives of Christians. Jesus was not the only one who taught us to let our light shine before men that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven. Paul urged us to make the teaching about God our Savior attractive by the way we treat others. Peter reminds us that people who love others in Christ's name, people who are faithful, honest, and brave, stand out and are very likely to be asked to give a reason for the hope that they have. Christians very often underestimate the power of the witness made by a person who is not afraid of death, or who does not treat vengefully people who have mistreated him or her, or who is consistently kind, faithful and generous. In the NT slaves, women at home, even children were called upon to bear witness to Christ in this way. When one cannot speak to others one can always live the truth before them.

Ordinary people also bear witness by explaining the good news to people that they meet. Every Christian, in this way also, is to be an evangelist, a bearer of the light of the Good News. When Jesus, immediately before his ascension to heaven, told the apostles that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and to the ends of the earth, he meant those eleven men in the first place; but no doubt he also was speaking to them as representative Christians and intended that all Christians would understand that they were likewise called to be his witnesses. And from the

beginning it was so: from Celsus' women gossiping Christ at the laundry, to the unnamed second century man who pointed Justin, later to become Justin Martyr, to Christ when the two men met by happenstance on a beach, to those who nowadays inhabit internet chat-rooms and give their testimony there.

And then there have been from the beginning public men – itinerant evangelists, settled preachers, missionaries, and the writers of books – who have, sometimes with great gifts and tremendous effect and sometimes with less proclaimed the truth as it is in Jesus Christ to the people of this world. Such testimony has been given to great assemblies and to an individual alone in a bark hut or a modern hospital room. Every day the testimony is given; every day the world responds in faith in some cases and responds in irritated unbelief in many more.

It has often been pointed out, perhaps because it is not what we might have expected, that the Bible does not very often actually say that all Christians are to be bearing witness to the world. The most famous statements of such a calling – such as the Great Commission itself – were specifically addressed to Christian ministers, to the apostles, not to Christian laymen. There is, in fact, no place in the New Testament where it is said explicitly that every Christian is to consider it his or her duty to speak of Jesus Christ to others. We might well have expected *that* obligation to lie face up on virtually every page of the New Testament. But only in a few instances are Christians even implicitly told to share their faith with their neighbors and to seize opportunities to make Christ and his salvation known to others. There are certainly texts that seem to imply this, but there is not a one that states it directly.

However, that may be due to the fact that the logic of the church's calling as the Lord's witness to be the light to a dark world is so irresistible that it hardly *needs* to be said. The Bible also never commands us to eat a sufficient amount of food. Some things do not need to be said! We have the truth the world does not. It is the most valuable thing we possess and, as Christians, we are certainly to be a generous people, sharing what we have with those who have not. The world needs this truth because it is the truth that sets men free. It would be wrong by every principle of the Christian life to withhold from the desperately needy what we have to give them. The Lord has made the church's witness the instrument of the world's salvation. We know that. To have the means in our hands to bring others to heaven and not to employ those means is surely something no Christian could ever justify. And what of the motivations of gratitude and love? Love for God and even for our enemies; to show the same love both to God and to the unbeliever that has been shown to us when *we* were God's enemies and *we* were unbelievers, when the life-giving light was made to shine upon us; certainly no Christian can sit comfortably by and watch the world slip into hell when he or she can illuminate the way that leads to heaven. It is this inescapable logic that justified the great early Christian preacher, John Chrysostom, in saying "that there is nothing chillier than a Christian who is not trying to save others." Indeed, the great preacher goes on: it is *an insult to God* for a believer to live in the world, to bask in his light, and not to reflect that light to others. [*Hom. Acts*, 20]

And then there is the weight of the Bible's theology of witness. God called one family, Abraham's to bless all the nations of the earth. From the very beginning the church existed *for* the world. The prophets of the OT were constantly talking about the nations of the world and how they would someday be brought to faith and salvation. But it was always said that the

nations would come *to Jerusalem*. The church would be the means of the salvation of the world. And Jesus made the same point. His message was to be taken to the nations of the world for the sake of the world's salvation. He prepared his followers to be missionaries and that is what they became. Paul spent himself taking the truth to the world. He wore himself out as the Lord's witness and then told us to be like him. As the Anglican archbishop William Temple put it, the church "is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members"!

The Christ of the Gospels is a missionary Christ, a witness-bearing Christ, the light of the world. The Spirit of the Book of Acts is a missionary spirit, reaching out to the world and bearing witness to it. The whole burden of the Bible's understanding of history is that of the progress of the gospel and the kingdom of God in the world and the summoning of the nations through the witness of the church. The greatest purpose of human history – whatever else is accomplished in it and through it – is the populating of eternal heaven by the salvation of the elect through the witness of the church.

And the believing church has always understood this. Its great business is bearing witness to the world. That is why Great Britain in the 19th century produced as many missionaries as it did accountants or architects. And through that witness what changes have come. In 1900 75% of the world's Christians were white and Western. In 2000 75% of the world's far greater number of Christians were non-white and non-Western. And all of that happened because the church continued to be the church of the two witnesses, the double witness! And, as the persecution and eventual murder of the two witnesses demonstrate, the church has understood as well that this work is so important that it must continue no matter the trouble that occurs as a result of it, no matter the loss, no matter the sacrifice. Adlai Stephenson, the sometime presidential candidate in the 1950s, visiting Africa years ago, remarked on the graveyards that he saw. He said that he had no idea so many missionaries had died bringing the Christian faith there. And no doubt the same story will be written of missionaries from Korea and from China taking the gospel to other parts of the world, indeed, that history is already being written.

To suffer for the sake of bringing salvation – as the church is said to suffer here in Rev. 11 – is, must be the purest form of identification with Jesus Christ. When we suffer on account of the salvation of the lost, to bear light to the dark world, however we suffer (from mild reproach to a martyr's death) we are doing precisely what Jesus did, we are doing what he came into the world to do. He brought light from heaven and died for that light; he died to make believers out of unbelievers, he died to be the savior of the world. And, of course, the witness borne in the teeth of suffering and persecution is the most powerful form of witness there is. The blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church. It was true in Tertullian's day and it is true in our own.

This great story of the church's witness to the world will be what is remembered through eternity to come, both in heaven and in hell. It will be remembered when everything else human beings did is long forgotten. In heaven the stories will never cease to be told of how it was that a man or woman first saw the light, who it was who illuminated the path before them, who drew them to source of that light, Jesus Christ himself. And, as today, we talk of parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, of our family history, there we will talk of the first convert, and his spiritual children and grandchildren. We will trace the tree of life back through the generations.

And in hell, alas, it will be the same. What does it mean to gnash your teeth but futilely to obsess over lost and wasted opportunities? The light was seen but not followed. The testimony was given but ignored. The witness was made but he refused to believe it because he didn't want it to be true.

In this coming year we will have many experiences, we will be called to do many things in obedience to the Lord. We will have our joys and our sorrows no doubt. Life goes on. But in and through it all there is this greater thing. We are part of the great struggle of human history. We are caught up in the war between light and darkness and we are soldiers in that war. That we must never forget. Our place in the line of battle is the most important thing that can be said about us. The individual soldiers' experience is not a matter of indifference to God – how grateful we are for that – but at the last we are soldiers in the line of battle. Our personal experience is not as important as the part we play in the fight. The life of the soldier is wartime is not his own. His individual experiences are not of the first importance. He exists for higher purposes. He lives to accomplish higher purposes. And for us that higher purpose, that highest purpose, is witness, testimony, and bearing the light.