

# For the Life of the World

## Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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**We Are His Witnesses.**

**The Saints of Salem Lutheran Church, Taylorsville, North Carolina**

**Pastor: Rev. Ray R. Ohlendorf**

# CONTENTS

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## FEATURES

### 4 “You are Witnesses” Confessing Christ Crucified with the Early Christians

By Dr. James G. Bushur

For the early Christians, witnessing is not an activity performed from time to time; it is an identity rooted in the disciple’s relation to Christ. From this perspective, the title “witness” signifies the greatest intimacy. A witness is not merely a spectator, but a participant—a member of Christ’s body and a son within the family. This intimacy adds a depth of meaning to the early Christian understanding of witness.

### 8 Witness in the Book of Revelation: Living as Faithful and True Martyrs

By Dr. Charles A. Gieschen

Against all forms of idolatry that surround and tempt us, the Book of Revelation sets before us the most powerful witness that we can give to the world: gathering together on earth with the saints of heaven to worship the one true God who alone is worthy to be worshiped because with His blood He “has purchased people for God from every tribe, language, people and nation” (5:9).

### 10 Witness

By Prof. Roland F. Ziegler

Therefore, for us today, to be a witness means: to speak the truth about God in the ongoing debate about who God is and what His will is. The task is not to convince a jury, for there is none, but that through this witness to the truth God Himself convinces man of the truth. To be a faithful witness means that in our testimony we say nothing beyond Scripture and let Scripture be the judge in all discussions.

### Also in this issue:

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| <b>Library Expansion Update</b> . . . . .        | <b>p. 7</b>  |
| <b>What Does This Mean?</b> . . . . .            | <b>p. 13</b> |
| <b>In the Field</b> . . . . .                    | <b>p. 14</b> |
| <b>Technology Is Our Friend</b> . . . . .        | <b>p. 17</b> |
| <b>Dr. Wenthe Announces Retirement</b> . . . . . | <b>p. 19</b> |
| <b>Christ Academy—High School 2011</b> . . . . . | <b>p. 22</b> |
| <b>Alumni News</b> . . . . .                     | <b>p. 25</b> |
| <b>Profiles in Giving</b> . . . . .              | <b>p. 29</b> |
| <b>In the Word</b> . . . . .                     | <b>p. 30</b> |

# “You are Witnesses”

## Confessing Christ Crucified with the Early Christians

By Dr. James G. Bushur



Crucifixion and saints, from the Fieschi-Morgan Reliquary, early 9th century. Cloisonné enamel; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

### Witnessing to What We Have Seen

“You are witnesses...” (Luke 24:48). With this declaration, Luke brings his Gospel to a close. The narrative of Christ seeks to transform sinners into witnesses. In Luke’s Gospel, a witness is one whose eyes have been opened to recognize Jesus. For Luke, the opening of the eyes is the great reversal of the first sin. In the garden, the devil offers fruit that would open the eyes of Adam and Eve. Yet, the opening of the eyes toward the temporal world inspires a lust for material things, a lust that enslaves Adam and his children. This enlightenment of humanity results in a blindness to the spiritual realm. Throughout the Old Testament, sinful humanity relates to God only by the hearing of the ear. “For man shall not see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20). For Luke, Jesus comes to remove the scales from the eyes of His people—to turn them into witnesses. At Jesus’ birth, the shepherds are not content to hear the angels but are determined to “see the thing that has happened” (Luke 2:15). Simeon rejoices that his “eyes have seen the Lord’s salvation” (Luke 2:30). Finally, the eyes of the Emmaus disciples are opened in the breaking of the bread—a meal that reverses the original sin. In the breaking of the bread, the disciples become eyewitnesses of Christ. “You are witnesses of these things,” says our Lord. The people of God are defined no longer by prophets who merely speak what they have heard but by witnesses who testify to what they have seen.

From its origins, Christianity has depended upon the sense of sight. The church's Gospel consists in the testimony of those who have seen, experienced and followed Jesus. The apostle John describes the movement from the prophetic era to the apostolic age in terms of seeing. "The Word became flesh... and we have beheld His glory" (John 1:14). This fundamental change in the Word's relationship to humanity becomes the foundation for the apostolic witness. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes... we proclaim also to you" (1 John 1:1, 3). This apostolic emphasis on the sense of sight continues among the early Christians. In the second century (180 A.D.), Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, describes the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as the movement from hearing to seeing. "Thus, one and the same Lord has granted, by means of his advent, a greater gift of grace to those of a later period.... For they (O.T. believers) used to hear by means of servants that the King would come... but those, who have seen him actually present, have obtained liberty..." (*Against Heresies IV, 11, 3*). For Irenaeus, the New Testament possesses a profound intimacy as God is embraced in the flesh.

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**At its core, Christianity is comprised of those who have encountered their Lord in the flesh. Whatever their previous identities may have been—slave or free, Greek, Jew or barbarian—Christians of the first few centuries believed that they had been transformed into witnesses.**

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### **Spectators vs. Participants**

For the early Christians, witnessing is an identity given to the church by virtue of her relation to Jesus. At its core, Christianity is comprised of those who have encountered their Lord in the flesh. Whatever their previous identities may have been—slave or free, Greek, Jew or barbarian—Christians of the first few centuries believed that they had been transformed into witnesses. However, as is well known, the Greek word for witness also refers to the martyr. The church's identity as an eyewitness of Christ reaches its ideal perfection in the martyr who testifies to Christ with his life.

This development of the word "witness" into a title reserved for those who suffer death for Jesus' name was natural and perhaps inevitable. In the ancient church, to "see" Jesus meant much more than merely an outward seeing—the observation of a spectator. Rather, to "see" Jesus in the manner of the apostles entailed a spiritual insight into Jesus' true identity as the Son of God. To see Jesus in this way could only be given by the Spirit; it made the disciple more than a spectator; it made him a participant in Jesus' life. Jesus speaks of this kind of seeing in Luke's Gospel. "Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light" (Luke 11:34). Interpreting this text, Irenaeus writes, "For as those who see the light are within the light and partake of its brilliancy; even so, those who see God are in God and receive of

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**A witness is not merely a spectator but a participant—a member of Christ's body and a son within the family. This intimacy adds a depth of meaning to the early Christian understanding of witness. A witness is not only one who sees Jesus and participates in His passion but also one who becomes an imitator of Jesus.**

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His splendor; but His splendor vivifies them; those, therefore, who see God, receive life" (*Against Heresies IV, 20, 5*). To see is not merely to observe an object externally but to live, move and participate in its light. The apostles are witnesses precisely because they have participated in Jesus' life; they followed in His path to Jerusalem. "You are those who have remained with Me in My trials," Jesus says (Luke 22:28). The difference between spectators and participants involves the matter of risk. The spectator refuses to risk his personal involvement; therefore, he only observes Jesus' life from the outside as a nameless member of the crowd. The participant risks everything; he knows Jesus from the inside as a member of his own family. In the Gospels, there are many spectators but few participants; there are great crowds who wonder at Jesus' works but few witnesses who will take up their cross.

### **The Imitation of Christ**

"You are witnesses" (Luke 24:48). For the early Christians, witnessing is not an activity performed from time to time; it is an identity rooted in the disciple's relation to Christ. From this perspective, the title

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**The early Christians would remind us that witnessing is, above all else, an identity that originates in Jesus Himself. Jesus is “the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead” (Revelation 1:5). His witness to His Father’s love, embodied in His passion, now lives in us as members of His body.**


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“witness” signifies the greatest intimacy. A witness is not merely a spectator but a participant—a member of Christ’s body and a son within the family. This intimacy adds a depth of meaning to the early Christian understanding of witness. A witness is not only one who sees Jesus and participates in His passion but also one who becomes an imitator of Jesus.

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The language of imitation does not signify an arbitrary mimicking of another’s actions. The imitation of Christ is not like a teenager adopting the dress of a popular actor. Rather, the martyr’s imitation of Christ is rooted in the very core of his humanity. The witness imitates Christ in the same way that a son imitates his father. Sons imitate fathers, not simply by choice, but by the intimacy of their familial bond. A son is flesh of his father’s flesh. This organic communion manifests itself in the son’s character. He shares the attributes of his father whether he chooses them or not. For the early Christians, a witness, by virtue of his own fleshly communion with Christ, manifests Jesus’ character and identity in his own life. It is no longer the witness who lives, but Christ who lives within him (Galatians 2:20).

Thus, early Christian literature typically portrays martyrs as imitators of Christ. The martyr does not merely preach Christ crucified; he makes Him manifest in his own body. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna during the second century, is described as one who “shows forth a martyrdom which is in accord with the Gospel” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1:1). Blandina, a victim of the cruel martyrdom at Lyons (177 A.D.), is “hung on a tree... as bait for the wild animals.” The account says that her fellow martyrs “saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them.”<sup>1</sup> Finally, in a fifth century sermon, Stephen’s martyrdom is compared favorably with David’s triumph over Goliath. While David may have conquered with “the stones he threw,” Stephen conquered “with the stones he endured.”<sup>2</sup> For this preacher, Stephen’s victory was a true imitation of Christ’s triumph on the cross.

“You are witnesses...” (Luke 24:48). President Matthew Harrison’s emphasis on witnessing as a foundational pillar of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is truly welcome. We are indeed “surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). Yet, the early Christians would remind us that witnessing is, above all else, an identity that originates in Jesus Himself. Jesus is “the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead” (Revelation 1:5). His witness to His Father’s love, embodied in His passion, now lives in us as members of His body. Let us embrace the title of witnesses with

the joy and courage of the noble army of martyrs in whose company it is our privilege to give praise to our Father in heaven. **To Christ be all the glory now and forever!** 

*Dr. James G. Bushur serves as Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.*



- 1 Herbert Musurillo, trans., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 75.
- 2 Johan Leemans, Wendy Mayer, Pauline Allen & Boudewijn Dehandschutter, eds., *Let Us Die that We May Live: Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. A.D. 350-A.D. 450)* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 179.

