

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**

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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.

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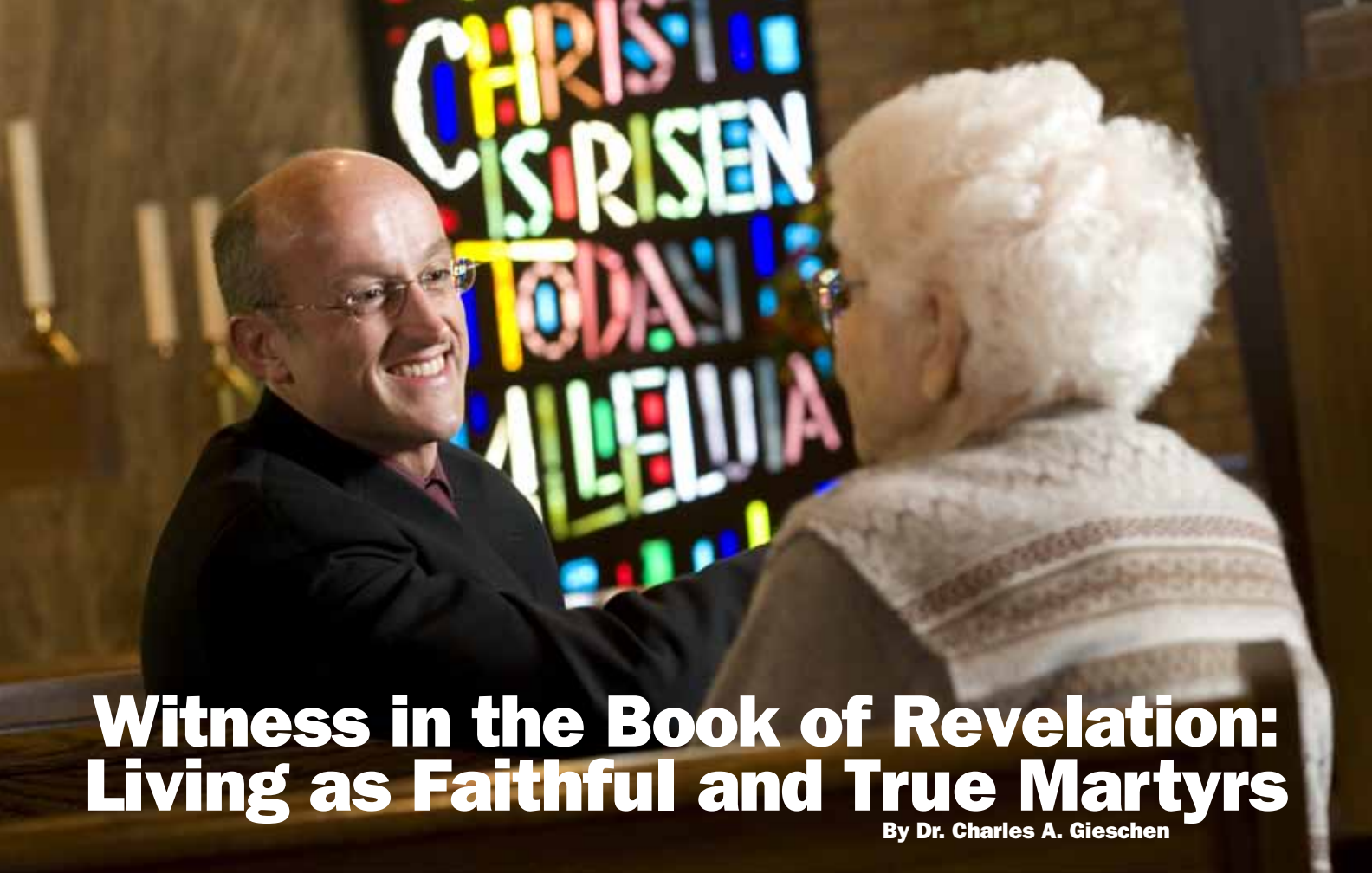
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Therefore, for us today, to be a witness means: to speak the truth about God in the ongoing debate about who God is and what His will is. The task is not to convince a jury, for there is none, but that through this witness to the truth God Himself 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.

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

By Dr. Charles A. Gieschen

It is noteworthy that the various occurrences of witness language in Revelation do not primarily describe the witness that Christians gave as they were put to death, but the witness given during their lives on earth. Faithful Christians who testified to Jesus with their lips and lives and then died of sickness or old age, rather than being killed on account of their confession, are also known as martyrs.

As the approximately 1,000 Christians who were worshipping at Saints Church in Alexandria, Egypt, were exiting the sanctuary after their New Year's Mass concluded at about 12:30 a.m. on January 1, 2011, a bomb suddenly exploded. Some 32 worshipers were killed and 97 others were wounded. These Christians were the victims of an apparent radical Islamic suicide bomber. Those who were killed are now known as martyrs or witnesses whose confession of the Triune God ultimately resulted in their tragic deaths. Even though we often think of the first few centuries of Christianity as the time in which Christians were put to death on account of their confession, it is widely acknowledged that more Christians were martyred in the 20th Century than in the previous 19 combined. And this trend does not appear to be changing in the 21st Century.

Is being a Christian martyr about how one dies? One of the books of the New Testament that is often associated with inspiring martyrdom in the early centuries of Christianity is the Book of Revelation. We think of promises like the one given by the risen Christ at the end

of his letter to the church at Symrna, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). There is a clear connection between witness and death in Revelation. The Greek noun *martus*, usually translated witness, and its related forms occur several times. First

and foremost, Jesus is set forth as the preeminent example of a witness; Jesus' prophetic witness led, in part, to His death (1:5; 3:14). Secondly, Revelation also tells of other witnesses who were put to death, such as Antipas from the church in Pergamum (2:13) and "the ones killed on account of their witness" whom John sees under the altar calling for judgment (6:9). The two witnesses of Revelation 11, who symbolize the prophetic Office of the Holy Ministry in the church, are put to death but rise again to bear witness. The whore of Babylon is described as one who is "drunk with the blood . . . of those who bore witness to Jesus" (17:6). Towards the end of this visionary experience, John sees "the souls of those beheaded on account of their witness for Jesus" (20:4). Certainly, Revelation tells of a relationship between witness and being put to death.

It is noteworthy, however, that the various occurrences of witness language in Revelation do not primarily describe the witness that Christians gave as they were put to death, but the witness given *during their lives* on earth. Faithful Christians who testified to Jesus with their lips and lives and then died of sickness or old age, rather than being killed on account of their confession, are also known as martyrs. Simply put, a martyr or witness in the Book of Revelation is one who gives testimony (the Greek noun *marturia*) or testifies (the Greek verb *martureō*). The testimony to which one testifies is all about Jesus (1:2; 12:17; 19:10): *who* Jesus is as God incarnate and *what* He has done by "freeing us from our sins by His blood" (1:5). The importance of this testimony in the life of Jesus and His followers can hardly be overstated. Jesus' own testimony in Revelation is paired and on par with "the word of God" (1:2, 9; 20:4; cf. 12:11). These texts are stark evidence, within a few decades of Jesus' own ministry, of the weighty regard given by early Christians to the testimony concerning Jesus' salvific life, death, resurrection and return.

What characteristics of the witness of Jesus and early Christians are given

in the Book of Revelation? "Faithful and true" are the adjectives used to describe Jesus as a witness (1:5; 3:14). Jesus is the preeminent "faithful" witness in that everything He said and did conformed to the will of God as revealed in His word (John 5:19; 12:50), even as He prayed before suffering the wrath of God for the world's sin, "let Your will be done" (Matthew 26:42; cf. Mark 14:36 and Luke 22:42). He is also the exemplary true witness since His testimony is true, without the falsehood that characterizes all other creatures corrupted by sin (John 8:42-47); He is even "the Truth" incarnate (John 14:6). Because Jesus is "the faithful and true witness," those baptized into Him are also described in the Book of Revelation with these same adjectives (2:13). While the sin in us causes our witness to fall far short of the exemplary witness of Jesus, nevertheless in Christ

The centerpiece of being a faithful and true witness in the Book of Revelation is participation in the faithful worship of "the One seated on the throne and the Lamb" (Revelation 4:1-5:14; esp. 5:13).

we remain faithful and true witnesses, forgiven by His witness when ours has fallen short or been false.

The centerpiece of being a faithful and true witness in the Book of Revelation is participation in the faithful worship of "the One seated on the throne and the Lamb" (Revelation 4:1-5:14; esp. 5:13). Everyone worships someone or something; just look at where one's non-vocational time and money—beyond purchasing the necessities of life—are spent. The numerous pagan temples and the few Jewish synagogues in the seven Roman cities of Revelation were places of patently unfaithful and false worship. The pagan temples of modern day America frequented on Sundays do not only include the churches of Mormons and the mosques of Muslims, but also the stadiums and shopping malls that pack in

thousands for hours and make millions, or the strip clubs and internet pornography that hold captive minds and hearts.

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). Weekly worship reminds us that the grand work we testify to as Christians is not our own accomplishments, however notable or insignificant they may be, but the salvific work of Jesus that has already accomplished the victory over Satan, sin, death that we could never accomplish. What we witness in worship, the victory feast of the slaughtered and standing Lamb, then becomes the foundation for our daily witness: what we say and do in our family and vocational life.

Each year brings more examples of Christians, like those in Egypt on New Year's Day, whose witness caused them to be put to death. These, however, are not the only martyrs in the church. As we have seen, the Book of Revelation defines martyrs primarily as those who testify to Jesus Christ with their lips and lives, faithfully and truly *while they are living* on this earth. To paraphrase: Jesus not only says "Bear witness to Me in the moment of your death," but "Bear witness to Me throughout your life, including your moment of death." May our witness to Jesus—lips testifying who He is and what He has done as well as lives lived in conformity to God's Word—be faithful and true during our life on earth . . . and also in our physical death. For each of us is a martyr of Jesus! 🏰

Dr. Charles A. Gieschen serves as Professor and Chairman of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

