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many.

Sermon Brief
Text: Acts 1:8
Title: My Testimony
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Over the past several months I have asked a number of people to share their personal testimony about when they found Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Increasingly I have felt that I needed to share my testimony with you so that you would better understanding my spiritual journey over these past 67 plus years. Today seems to be an appropriate time to do this.

What is a testimony? The English word ‘testimony’ is closely linked in the English Bible to the word ‘witness.’ Douglas Buckwalter in online Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, ‘Testimony,’ has described the biblical perspective as follows:

The biblical concept of testimony or witness is closely allied with the conventional Old Testament legal sense of testimony given in a court of law. Linguistically, the biblical term principally derives from the Hebrew *yaad, ud, anah* [אָנָה] and Greek *marturein* [μαρτυρέω] word groups; conceptually, it broadly influences the thought patterns, truth claims, and theology of nearly all of Scripture.

Its validity consists in certifiable, objective facts. In both Testaments, it appears as the primary standard for establishing and testing truth claims. Uncertifiable subjective claims, opinions, and beliefs, on the contrary, appear in Scripture as inadmissible testimony. Even the testimony of one witness is insufficient — for testimony to be acceptable, it must be established by two or three witnesses (Deut 19:15).

In the New Testament the word group from μαρτυρία occurs well over a hundred times both in the sense of true and false witness or testimony, largely in reference to the gospel message of salvation in Christ.¹ Giving witness to the gospel is important, and equally important that witness must be true and not false. We see this emphasized by Jesus at the outset when the Christian community came together just before His ascension back to the Heavenly Father. Notice how Luke describes this in Acts 1:6-11, with special emphasis on verse eight.

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. **8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**” 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”²

In our text Jesus made it clear to the disciples that they were to be witnesses. Two things about that witness. First, it was to be an ‘empowered’ witness from the Holy Spirit. Second, it was to be an ‘expanding’ witness that had a definite beginning in Jerusalem but was to eventually extend ‘to the ends of the earth.’ By any definition, that was a ‘tall order’ given to these disciples. The day of Pentecost that followed a few weeks later set up the ‘empowered witness’ aspect. The giving of the Holy Spirit to the Christian community officially at Pentecost signaled the beginning of the Spirit’s work in and through the life of the church. God’s Spirit has been continuously present and available for the ‘empowered witness’ ever since. The challenge

¹In the NRSV, the word ‘testimony’ shows up 56 times (the verb ‘testify’ is uses 85 times), while the word ‘witness’ (both noun and verb) is used 79 times. Thus the idea of giving a witness plays an important role in the Bible.

²1.6 Οἱ μὲν οὖν συνελθόντες ἡρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες, Κύριε, εἰ ἐν τῷ χρόνῳ τούτῳ ἀποκαθιστάνεις τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ; 1.7 εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς, Οὐχ ὑμῶν ἐστὶν γινῶναι χρόνους ἢ καιροὺς οὓς ὁ πατὴρ ἔθετο ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ, 1.8 ἀλλὰ λήψεσθε δύναμιν ἐπελθόντος τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς καὶ ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες ἐν τε Ἱερουσαλὴμ καὶ [ἐν] πάσῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ καὶ Σαμαρείᾳ καὶ ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς. 1.9 καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν βλέπόντων αὐτῶν ἐπήρθη, καὶ νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν. 1.10 καὶ ὡς ἀπενίζοντες ἦσαν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν πορευόμενοι αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο παρειστήκεισαν αὐτοῖς ἐν ἐσθήσεσι λευκαῖς, 1.11 οἱ καὶ εἶπαν, Ἄνδρες Γαλιλαῖοι, τί ἐστήκατε [ἐμ]βλέποντες εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ’ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οὕτως ἐλεύσεται ὄν τρόπον ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν.

of the 'expanding witness' was more difficult because it would lead the disciples out of their ethnic and even religious 'comfort zones' time and time again, as Acts ten and eleven describe regarding Peter. It would some 15 years later provoke the first major crisis in the Christian community over how non-Jews can be saved, as Luke details in Acts fifteen. So witnessing according to Acts 1:8 needs two things: the presence of the Holy Spirit and a willingness to give that witness anywhere God leads you on planet earth.

BODY

I chose this passage as the foundation of my own personal testimony largely because in giving my witness to Christ, my deep prayer is that God's Spirit will empower my words with divine strength and thus be able to use them to help and bless you. Secondly, this passage is relevant to my spiritual journey which has taken me to places in the world I could never have imagined as a youngster growing up in West Texas in the 1940s and 50s. Many of you have most likely experienced something similar, having immigrated from your native homeland to Europe. Moving from home and family to a strange new place presents all kinds of challenges. Yet, in Christ's command in Acts 1:8, we are to be His witnesses in every place we go.

I. My Conversion

My spiritual journey began before I came to Christ. My father came from a family of six brothers and one sister who were raised in Baptist church life in the little ranching / farming community of Perrin, Texas. Now Perrin is about a hundred kilometers northwest of Ft. Worth, Texas, The city of Fort Worth traditionally marks the beginning of west Texas on the east side. To be sure, it is over 900 kilometers from there westward to El Paso, Texas all the way across west Texas. My grandfather was a leader in the Baptist church in Perrin for most of his life. When my dad and mother married in 1939, they made that church their spiritual home and continued faithfully serving God through the church in virtually every job possible in the church. My father, Lorinza Heath (my first name is a shortened form of his first name), was a deacon, Sunday School director, church training director, committee chairperson on countless committees -- just to name a few of his contributions. My mother came out of the Assembly of God church into the Baptist church when she married my father. Immediately she went to work serving the Lord in the church. Her special talent was music and she both played the piano and sang quite well. Eventually she became minister of music in the church by the early 1950s and continued to lead the music program of the church until her death from cancer in 1975. She worked extensively with the pastor of the church, Bro. McQuarrey, in leading the music program of the church. She and Bro. Mac became something of a team who did an enormous number of funerals and weddings all over that part of Texas for many years. Mother would sing and Bro. Mac would preach. Before his death in the late 1960s and then her passing from cancer in 1975, they did over two thousand funerals together! This doesn't count the hundreds of weddings they did together. To be honest, I can never remember a time in my life from earliest childhood when my family wasn't actively involved in serving Christ in the church. For that heritage I am profoundly grateful. From what I have been told, I made my first appearance in church when I was two weeks old. And have been regularly attending church ever since.



One of the long standing traditions of all of the churches in Perrin during those days was a summer revival meeting. All five of the churches in the little community of about 300 people conducted a week long revival every summer, and all of them scheduled their own meeting so as not to conflict with the revivals of the other churches. The Baptist church had the first week in August as its time slot. In the summer of 1948 (or 1949), I can remember attending this revival service held outside on the west side of the church in the open air. Toward the end of the week I began feeling troubled down inside with a growing sense that I needed Jesus as my Savior. On Friday evening during the invitation service, I went forward to tell our pastor, Bro. Mac, that I wanted to become a Christian. My next recollection of that evening is of going to bed later on. In the 1940s the idea of air conditioning was what God did to the air outside. From July through September in west Texas the temperature normally exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) most every day. And at night it won't usually cool down below 80 degrees (27 degrees Celsius). My solution to this stifling heat was to sleep outdoors in the backyard all through the summer months. I would set up a bed and rig up a make-shift mosquito net over it in order to keep insects away. I can vividly remember looking up at the stars that night as I went to bed. For the first time in several days I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and contentment. All was well with God. I belonged to Him now, and I knew this without any question. This is a feeling that one can't put into logical words. It has to be experienced in order to be clearly understood. I've



never had a similar experience of inner peace and serenity to this extent either before or after my conversion to Christ. On Sunday evening of the last service of the revival I was baptized along with the others who were saved during the week of revival.

II. My Call to Ministry

A second time of inner troubling of spirit came during my sophomore year of high school in the middle 1950s. From my freshman year of high school (grade 9 in the American system), I began making career plans to attend the US Air Force Academy when I graduated from high school. The application process was put in place and began moving forward with all indications that I would receive appointment to the academy my senior year of high school. My career goal was to do my bachelor's degree at the academy, complete my military obligation as a jet fighter pilot, and then go to MIT University in Boston, MA, in order to get a degree in aerodynamical engineering. My dream was to design and fly airplanes. The legendary test pilot, Chuck Yeager, was my hero and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. Our school was an outstanding school with high academic standards during those years. The 1940s through the 1960s were oil boom years in that region of Texas. Consequently, the school of less than 200 students in Kindergarten through high school had tons of extra funding in order to hire outstanding faculty and provide excellent facilities for the students. All through my high school years, all but one of my teachers had at least a master's degree in the field they taught at the school. The fields of math and science were especially outstanding and trained the young people to do virtually anything they desired.



But God had other plans for me. I experienced a growing sense of divine calling to the gospel ministry. I didn't like what was happening, and tried to bargain with God. "God, just let me go on to the academy," I reasoned, "and afterwards I will apply to become an Air Force chaplain." Meeting God "half-way" between what I wanted and what He wanted seemed reasonable to me. I would give up the engineering part in order to become a chaplain. But, as you who know God fully understand, one doesn't bargain with God! As believers, we are His servants, and stand under His authority. Thus one does what God tells us to do, if we want to be happy and productive in life. So after almost a year of struggling with this, I made a public commitment in a worship service at the church to become a preacher in the fall of 1957. To my amazement, I soon realized



many folks in the church, including my parents, were already aware that God was working in my life for this. Later on I was made aware that this commitment was God's answer to a life-long prayer of my grandmother, Granny Brannan, that God would see fit to call one of her children to gospel ministry. This saintly Assembly of God woman had fervently prayed for God to choose one of her children for ministry. Although she was not overly sure about a grandson becoming a **Baptist** minister, she nonetheless was grateful that God had honored her long time prayer to Him.

Shortly after making this public commitment to gospel ministry our pastor, now Bro. Griffin, told me that he wanted me to serve as youth pastor during the Youth Week activities in March 1958. Although scared out of wits at the idea, I agreed. So in March 1958, I preached my first sermon. It lasted a total of five minutes and was based on Gal. 2:20.

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Very quickly this five minute sermon stretched out into thirty to forty-five minute sermons -- as my younger brother has taken great delight in reminding me many times over the years since then. Through the remaining high school years I preached a number of times, and served as a leader of the youth group in the church at Perrin. During my high school years I was active in a variety of endeavors, including sports. I managed to average a little over twenty points per game in my three years of being on the starting basketball team.



With high school graduation in May of 1960 came college in the fall. I began my university studies at East Texas Baptist University in Marshall, Texas that fall. But after the first year the tall pine trees in the surrounding forests of East Texas began to get to me. Coming from West Texas, I wasn't used to so many trees and them being so tall and overbearing. So my second year of university studies, I transferred to Wayland Baptist University at Plainview, Texas in the Texas panhandle in far west

Texas. This was a much better fit for me and provided me the opportunity to study in a more culturally diverse atmosphere. In May of 1964, I graduated from Wayland with a Bachelor of Arts degree in religion.

Next came seminary. That summer I moved my young family from Plainview to Fort Worth in order to begin working on a Masters of Divinity degree at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary there. In the fall of 1964, the First Baptist Church of Graford, Texas called me as their pastor. God has a real sense of humor, because this church was located in a community fairly close to Perrin where I grew up. All through those years, Graford and Perrin were the bitterest of enemies in high school sports competition. Most every year the conference championship in basketball, baseball etc. came down to either Perrin or Graford winning. I knew a lot of these fellows at Graford and we had been intense opponents all through high school. Now God was calling me to be their pastor! But for the next four years I faithfully made the 150 mile (242 km) round trip from Graford to the seminary in Fort Worth four days a week while pastoring the church and working on my master's degree at the seminary.

During my second year of seminary that troubling feeling returned to me for the third time. With my studies I had assumed that upon finishing my MDiv degree from Southwestern I would find a larger church where I could adequately provide for my family while serving God as a pastor. But now God seemed to be calling me to missionary service. I wrestled with this for several months and finally became convinced that -- of all things -- God wanted me doing theological training of pastors in Brazil through the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. But, that meant doing a doctor's degree. And that meant four more years at least of seminary studies. My grades had always been good in all my school experiences. So the academic side posed no problem. Just the extension of very regimented studying, and at a PhD level it would be highly demanding and challenging.

With my graduation from SWBTS in May of 1968 with the Master's of Divinity degree there came other major changes in my life. By then it had become clear that the church at Graford would not be sympathetic to their pastor working on a doctor's degree. Almost no one in the church understood or appreciated the need for this much education. God in His gracious provision opened the door in June for me to become senior pastor of the Springdale Baptist Church in Fort Worth as I prepared to begin work on my doctorate, then the Doctor of Theology degree. This was a large urban congregation of almost 700 members at that time in contrast to the 100 or so members of the small ranching community church at Graford. Lots of adjustments in ministry had to take place as I learned how to minister to city folks for the first time in my ministry. As senior pastor I supervised a church staff of several individuals as the church sought to overcome troubles and division that had emerged in the church sometime prior to my becoming their pastor.

So in the fall of 1968 this dual role as pastor and doctoral student began. Additionally to this, I had already been serving since the second semester of my MDiv studies as a student assistant to one of the professors in the New Testament department at the seminary. This involved occasional teaching of seminary classes, grading papers etc. I continued in this role until my appointment of Instructor in New Testament and Greek in 1974 at the seminary.

God blessed the church in Fort Worth in many unusual ways. In 1969 God began a spiritual awakening in the Springdale Church first through the young people that spread to the entire congregation very rapidly. In the process He completely turned this congregation around to become a dynamic group of believers intensely engaged in ministry and witness. Many, many people came to Christ and the church grew when surrounding churches were experiencing decline in membership and attendance. To His glory, that spiritual awakening continues in the church to this very day, some forty plus years later. The young people through whom it began later on became the leaders of the church and now God is continuing to work through their children and grandchildren to keep the congregation vibrant and spiritually alive.

III. Service to Christ

By the fall of 1973 the Foreign Mission Board informed me that they could not appoint me and my wife as missionaries to Brazil as we had anticipated. My health was not up to their requirements for appointment. That left me wondering what it was that God had intended with all this work toward a doctorate. We went through several months of uncertainty about what we were supposed to do.

Then totally unexpectedly in January of 1974 a telephone call came one Saturday afternoon. It was the dean of the School of Theology at the seminary. Dr. Drumwright extended to me an invitation to join the faculty in the New Testament department as professor of New Testament and Greek. This was completely overwhelming to me. I had never even thought about doing such a thing. These professors were my heroes and mentors whom I held in the highest esteem. The thought of becoming one of them had not ever crossed my mind. After a few weeks of intense prayer and consultation



with trusted friends I accepted the invitation from the seminary. The sacrifices were going to be significant for my family. We would be moving out of a very nice parsonage provided by the church into a home that we would have to pay for ourselves. Added to that was about a thirty percent cut in salary from the church to what the seminary would be paying. That would mean 'moon lighting' every weekend through preaching in churches all over the place in order to supplement the limited salary from the seminary. Trusting God to provide, we made the move to the south side of Fort Worth in July of 1974 to begin teaching in the fall. I was just finishing up my dissertation on my doctorate, and now this would take another year to complete because of the teaching responsibilities at the seminary.

We began in August 1974 a teaching career that would continue until December 1997 at Southwestern. During these years God positioned me to make an impact on the lives of many, many young people who studied at Southwestern. In the US the average size of the typical seminary or divinity school is about two hundred students. By the middle 1980s Southwestern had almost 5,500 students and was significantly larger than any other theological graduate school in North America. By the middle 80s my teaching responsibilities shifted to primarily teaching PhD students with only Greek courses at the master's level. I additionally served as founding director of the Modern Languages Studies Program which provided four semesters of intense instruction in German, French, Spanish, Latin and several other languages for helping prospective PhD students meet the entrance requirements in Greek, Hebrew and at least two additional foreign languages for the doctoral program.

During these years, I was privileged to participate in two year long sabbatic leave programs that provided continued full salary, benefits and additional funds. This enabled me to spend a year (1981-82) working as Gast Wissenschaftler in the Protestant faculty at the university of Bonn. During the year I traveled to Hamburg to give lectures at the German Baptist Prediger Seminar located then in Hamburg. Then in 1990-91, I took my second sabbatic leave working at Gast Wissenschaftler in the Protestant Faculty at the university of Heidelberg. During this time I received invitations to give lectures at the universities in Bonn, Heidelberg and Göttingen, as well as at the Prediger Seminar in Hamburg. I also preached frequently in both IBC churches and German Baptist churches. From my initial experience in the summer of 1980 while studying German at the Goethe Institute in Freiburg I came to believe that one day God would bring me back to Germany to live and serve Him. I didn't know how or when, but I sincerely believed that eventually Germany would become my home.

In 1992, Claire came into my life as a bright ray of sunshine and laughter who revolutionized my life. We were married in June 1993 and she remains the very center of my life, outside of God. She is my best friend and life partner with whom I can share my life and ministry. We have become a ministering team over these years together.

By 1997, the atmosphere at Southwestern had become intolerable. By the early 90s, the so-called Southern Baptist controversy in which the fundamentalist segment managed to take over absolute control of the convention and all of its agencies, of which Southwestern Seminary was one, created a poisonous atmosphere of suspicion and ungodly actions by those in power. I knew that I could not continue with integrity of commitment to God in my teaching ministry at the seminary. Too much evil and wickedness was enveloping the seminary for me to be able to make a difference in the lives of the students. For several years from the late 80s I had sought God's leadership about what to do. Invitations came from two of the larger IBC churches in Germany to become their pastor, but God said no. Some other opportunities to teach in other Baptist seminaries in the US had opened up also but again God said no. Then in the summer of 1997 the invitation to go to Gardner-Webb University in western North Carolina was given to me by the university president. This time God gave us a green light and so Claire and I packed our belongings and moved from Texas to North Carolina, some 1,100 miles (1,780 km) to the east of Fort Worth.

In January 1998, I joined the department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at the university and would spend the next eleven years teaching both undergraduate and master's level students both New Testament and Koine Greek. The challenge was to move from working with very advanced level PhD students in highly technical studies to exposing seventeen and eighteen year old kids just out of high school to an understanding of the Bible in the survey courses. That was one of the larger challenges of my thirty six year plus teaching career.

As we began anticipating a second retirement (I had retired early from SWBTS in Dec. 1997), where



and what to do became burning questions. Initially our plans were to both retire in the summer of 2010. In 2001, my health fell to pieces with a quick succession of cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis and a few other maladies. By the fall of that year I was facing death or else a very uncertain future of severe mobility limitations, if I managed to survive these illnesses. So as we approached retirement the direction it would take was very uncertain. Then in the winter of 2008 my health took a dramatic turn for the better under the guidance of a diabetes doctor. The cancer had been successfully removed surgically just before spreading throughout my entire body. With the diabetes now coming under control the other health problems began diminishing. So much so that a much more active life now became possible.



In January of 2008, I communicated with Jimmy Martin, a former student now general secretary of the International Baptist Convention in Frankfurt, that we were approaching retirement in 2010 with the growing anticipation of moving to Bonn Germany where I could continue a research and writing ministry. We wanted to make ourselves available to help any IBC congregation needing an interim pastor on a short term basis. In late March he called me to see whether I would be interested in coming over that summer to help out the IBC church in Cologne. Feeling God's leadership in this we say yes we could come, although we had no idea where the funds for such a trip would come from. But God in absolutely fantastic ways provided the necessary funding and we arrived here on June 15 last summer to spend eight weeks helping the church. Then in July the church extended a call to become permanent pastor. Again, how God would make this work was not clear, but we said yes. In January Claire and I moved into the apartment in Wesseling to begin helping the church develop ministries to make a difference in our city. And the rest is history -- as they say.

CONCLUSION

This is 'my story.' Or, more precisely, it is the story of God's work in and through my life. What lessons are possible from this? Let me suggest a couple.

First, serving God is always the best way to go. For a believer, doing God's will is the only way to genuine happiness and contribution to our world. Nothing but frustration and defeat will come when you fight God and refuse to walk in His paths. I've been pastor over the years to several such individuals and have had to deal with them as sources of trouble and disruption inside the churches they belonged to. Their lives have been one long story of unhappiness and often failure in life generally -- all because they chose to fight God and His will for their life.

My friends, I plead with you: don't fight God. Instead, yield your life to Him. He has nothing but good in store for you when you do.

Second, serving God is an adventure. You never know where God is going to land you in ministry. As a youngster growing up in West Texas I could have never ever have imagined one day living in Germany and pastoring a multi-cultural congregation of believers. God owns the whole world and chooses to place His people in the strangest of places at times in order for them to bear witness to His grace and love. Most of you in the service are immigrants just like Claire and me. Family and loved ones are back in the homeland, a long way from Cologne. Home sickness is very real. But I challenge you to remember the opportunity God is giving you to the people of Cologne to be a witness of His love. Remember, Jesus said that we would be His witnesses "to the ends of the earth." You and I here today as immigrants are living out that command of our Lord. Rejoice in this! Make use of this! God is blessing you. And He is giving you opportunities you could not have dreamed of in your youth.

In summary, my story can be your story. For many of you it already is. God had done unimaginable things in and through your life over the years, just as He has in my life. For some of you, the adventure needs to begin today. Right now you stand outside the Kingdom of God and have not yet made Jesus your Lord and Savior. Accept Him today. Give Him your life and let Him take you on the most exciting adventure imaginable! You'll never regret it. For a few of you, the adventure needs to crank up again. Years ago you began your spiritual journey with God, but then you got off God's train and parked yourself in the middle of "my way" rather than continuing on with God. Through rededication of life today you need to get back on that Heavenly train that ultimately is headed for Heaven as its final destination. Recover the excitement and joy of serving God! It will be the best decision you could make.

Amen!