

We Are Witnesses. 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. 2 Peter 1: 16-21

Adapted from Eyewitness Testimony Series, by Jeff Strite @ SermonCentral.Com

About 10 years ago, during a Homicide trial in Nassau County in the state of New York, the prosecution put their eye witness on the stand. In his testimony, the witness stated that he saw the victim lying on the ground, obviously dead.

When the prosecution had finished, the defense lawyer rose to his feet intent on undermining the credibility of the witness. and conducted the following cross-examination:

"Sir, are you a doctor?"

"No," replied the witness.

"Are you a paramedic?"

"No, I'm not," the witness stated.

"Have you ever gone to medical school?"

"Never," was the answer.

"Then tell me, sir, how do you know that the victim was indeed dead?"

"Well," responded the witness, "I went to his funeral."

For every Crime Scene or major event in history, it's hard to beat the value of eyewitnesses



Now, it is a fact that witnesses can often disagree on some significant details of a event, but when large numbers of eyewitnesses tell you they saw same thing over and over it's a pretty good indication that what they say they have seen is true.

The Bible recognizes this fact. According to Hebrew law: *A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained* (Deuteronomy 19:15).

This concept is so central to Biblical reasoning that Jesus taught his disciples the same principle about confronting one another, *if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses* (Matthew 18.16).

And when Paul confronted the church at Corinth about problems they had there, he told them:

“Any charge must be sustained
by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”
2 Corinthians 13:1

In a major proof Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin was illegal, is that they could not find two witnesses who agreed in their testimony about what Jesus had said concerning the Temple (Mark 14:56-58).

I. The testimony of reliable witnesses is a powerful indicator of truth. **That is why Jesus made a point of building His church upon the foundation of a multitude of witnesses.**

the Apostles must have known that this had been one of his intentions for them, because after Jesus’ death and resurrection, while they were waiting in Jerusalem for Pentecost, Peter explained their need to replace Judas:

[so we must choose] one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” Acts 1:21-22

Whoever was going to replace Judas as one of the 12 had to be an eyewitness – not just of His resurrection - but of everything Jesus had done from His baptism by John ALL THE WAY thru His ministry until His death, burial and resurrection. Finding two men who met that criteria, The apostles prayed and cast lots as to who would become the new 12th Apostle. The lot fell to Matthias, and he was added to their number. Yes, the Apostles knew their importance as being eyewitnesses of the resurrection.

When Luke wrote his story of Jesus, he stressed how important 1st hand accounts were for his research. The Gospel of Luke opens with this introduction.

*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those **who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.** I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account ...” Luke 1:1-2*

Later, when he composed his story about the church (the Book of Acts) Luke opened with these words:

*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering **he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days** and speaking about the kingdom of God. Acts 1:1-3*

Very subtly, Luke is telling his friend Theophilus that the eyewitnesses he's used for his book didn't just see the risen Jesus once... they saw him several times over a period of 40 days.

So, when Paul writes to the doubting Corinthians about the foundational truths of Christianity

- That Christ died for our sins according to scripture.
- And that he was buried and raised again the third day according to scripture

The other major point undergirding these two truths was the enormous number of witnesses who could attest to seeing Jesus alive again after his death. You can sense that Paul was also referring to witnesses some of whom he had personally questioned.

It has been said that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the best proven fact in history, that there is more documentary evidence for the resurrection of Christ than for the conquest of Britain by Julius Caesar. "*He was seen*" states Paul four times in four verses. These numerous witnesses, totaling over 500, could not have all been guilty of agreeing to a corporately concocted lie, or wishful thinking, or a mass hallucination (which are a few of the explanations trying to discount the reality of Jesus' resurrection).

Furthermore, what these people saw was under all sorts of conditions. Some saw Him in a garden, others in a room, others on a road, others by the sea, and others on a mountain top. Some saw Him at dawn, others during the light of day, and yet others, at night. Some watched him eat and drink (ghosts can't do that). Others made a point of examining his wounds. This diversity of circumstances and conditions and the Apostles willingness to die for their convictions puts the reality of the resurrection beyond refutation.

The resurrection was more than a fact. It was a force that changed the world. The resurrection turned coward followers of a crucified rabbi into courageous witnesses and martyrs. You could imprison them, beat them, kill them, but you could not make them deny their conviction that on the third day Jesus arose.

Which is why, in his last letter just before his own death, Peter strongly assured his readers that

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but **we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.**

2 Peter 1:16

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is basically saying: *“Hey, there are over 500 witnesses who saw the risen Christ. If you don’t believe me... if you have any doubts... if you have any questions... go talk to one of them.”*

II. So there were over 500 witnesses, many who willingly suffered martyrdom for their testimony of seeing Jesus alive as proof that he was God in the flesh. But how do we know what these witnesses saw?

Well, a few of them wrote books.

One of those witnesses had once been a tax collector before he met Jesus. He was an educated man who wrote down in detail the things that he’d heard and observed. He wrote a book we call the **Gospel of Matthew**.

Then there was the man who apparently came from a fairly wealthy family because his dad owned several fishing boats and he had servants. This man was one of Jesus’ closest disciples and he was privy to conversations and miracles the others never saw nor heard. His was the last Gospel that was written and he told things that aren’t in the other three. His name was **John**... and he wrote the Gospel that bears his name.

Then there is **The Gospel of Mark** which was written by a nephew of the Apostle Peter who later served as his personal secretary in Rome. Thus Mark’s record of Jesus’ ministry comes from Peter’s recollections. But Mark wanted his audience to know that even though he was a youth during the days of Jesus, he had also been a follower. So Mark’s Gospel is the only one to record this strange incident of a youth who was with Jesus on the night of his arrest.

A certain young man was following him, wearing only a simple linen garment. They caught hold of him, but he left the garment and ran off naked.
Mark 14:51,52

This was Mark’s way of saying. I may not be an apostle, but I was there and I too am a witness.

And of course the **Gospel of Luke** was written by a highly educated Greek Doctor, a dedicated traveling companion with the Apostle Paul, who, as he noted in his two letters, worked diligently to interview the actual people involved to get the facts behind Jesus life and death: people such as Mary the mother of Jesus along with his family and many of the original apostles.

Thus the Gospels are all firsthand accounts by eyewitnesses who actually saw and heard Jesus both alive, dead, and then alive again.

III. Now lately, some people have tried say that there were "OTHER" Gospels telling alternate stories about Jesus which were intentionally eliminated by the Church in order to "spin" the story of Jesus as God in the flesh.

Such as National Geographic, who in 2006 published their translation and commentary on a Coptic text, discovered in Egypt in the 1970s, known as "**The Gospel of Judas**". The translation caused a sensation because it seemed to overturn the popular image of Judas the betrayer and instead presented a benevolent Judas who was a friend of Jesus

Inspired by this discovery, Dr. April DeConick sought out the original Coptic text and began her own translation. She later published a book "The Thirteenth Apostle," in which she wrote:

"I didn't find the sublime Judas, at least not in Coptic. What I found were a series of English translation choices made by the National Geographic team, choices that permitted a different Judas to emerge in the English translation than in the Coptic original. Judas was not only not sublime, he was far more demonic than any Judas I know in any other piece of early Christian literature, Gnostic or otherwise."

In other words, whatever their reasons, the NG team "spun" the story of Judas to make him more attractive to their readers than he actually was.

The early church also knew (and we know as well) that this so-called Gospel was NOT an eye-witness account. Since it was written sometime in the 3rd or 4th century (180–300a.d.) which was long after Judas had died and in all likelihood, long after anyone who KNEW anyone who had seen Jesus had died. So the Gospel of Judas has the same credibility as all the other false gospels that began to appear some 200-300 years after Jesus' life.

In a similar fashion, Dan Brown published "The DaVinci Code" in 2006, which was subsequently made into a best seller movie in 2009. Dan Brown called his novel a "historical" fiction, trying to convince people that his fiction is built on truth.

In his book, Mr. Brown declared that "*Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.*" (p. 234 DaVinci Code)

Brown went on to say that *"More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion-Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them."*(p. 231, DaVinci Code)

But the truth is, that Dan Brown was not very truthful nor is he a good historian. Many of his statements were flat out lies.

For instance Brown states that there were upwards of 80 gospels rejected by the early church in the days of Constantine. In reality, I know of only know of about 35 such writings (not 80) that were not included in our Scriptures. And of those 35 known works only 14 of which would be considered as a Gospel type story about Jesus' life.

Almost all of those documents were all rejected principally because, written many years after the Apostle's deaths, they weren't even close to being the writings of eye-witnesses... or of anyone who knew an eye-witness. Which was the principle rule by which the early Church selected those letters to be included in our New Testament.

Dan Brown should have known all this. But his intention was not to present truth, or to build his novel upon reality, but rather to push his own ideas about who Jesus was as fact rather than fiction; and he misled a lot of people.

The stories of Jesus Christ – His death, burial and resurrection – were all built the foundation of a multitude of RELIABLE witnesses. The Gospel of Judas, the DaVinci Code, and all of the other false gospels were not.

Jesus told his followers:

*If you continue in my word,
you are truly my disciples;
You will know the truth
And the truth will set you free.*
John 8:32

If you want to know the truth about Jesus, listen to the eye witnesses; read the four Gospels.

Around the year 1870, two men were riding on a railroad train discussing the story of Jesus. The first man said, *"I think an interesting romance could be written about (Jesus)."* The other replied, *"You are just the man to write it. Set forth the correct view of His life and character. Tear down the prevailing sentiment as to His divineness and paint Him as He was - a man among men."*

The man who made that suggestion was Colonel Robert Ingersoll - a renowned agnostic and enemy of the church. The other man was retired Army General Lew Wallace.

Wallace began investigating the stories of the Gospels, and the more he investigated, the more convinced he became that the eyewitness accounts were extremely truthful, and that the Jesus presented by them was indeed the resurrected Son of God. He then wrote "BEN HUR," one of the most powerful novels and later one of the most powerful movies ever written about Jesus as God's son and our savior

Down thru history... many others have come to the same conclusion. Doctors, scientists, lawyers, historians all have seen the Bible as an unshakable base for their faith.

IV. But as reliable as those witnesses are we need to understand something – they're all dead now!

Granted we have their written stories, but many people aren't interested in the stories of dead men. In their minds, the witness of men and women from the past are interesting, but they don't apply to their present needs. ... they want to hear the stories of the living. **In other words, they don't want to know about a dead religion - they want experience a living faith.** They don't want a history lesson... they want to know if Jesus **STILL** changes lives today. They want to know if Jesus works for you.

As the famous atheist Friedrich Nietzsche once said: "*Show me that YOU are redeemed, and I will believe in your Redeemer.*"

Christians often fall into a trap when it comes to talking to others about their faith.

- we focus on inviting people to our church because we have a loving congregation.
- Or you talk about how much you like your preacher.
- Or you talk about how great your worship service is

And those things are ok... but we can often allow those surface realities to overshadow the really important information. **We forget to talk about Jesus and what Jesus HAS done for us in our lives. That is what those people who are seeking want to hear.**

Then there are others who just don't share their faith in Jesus because they want to avoid being seen as a "fanatic."

Bill Bright told of meeting with a leading American statesman who was supposedly a professing Christian. Bright had just asked the man to become involved in a massive effort to share their faith with people around the world. The man's response shocked him: "I don't wear my religion on my sleeve. My religion is personal and I don't want to talk about it."

Bright was startled and could only ask: "You are a Christian aren't you?" The other man replied "Yes, but I'm not a religious fanatic." Bill Bright thought about that for a moment... and then asked "*Did it ever occur to you that it cost Jesus Christ His life so you could call yourself a Christian? It cost the disciples their lives too, and millions of Christian throughout the centuries have suffered or died as martyrs in order to get the message of God's love and forgiveness to you. Now do you really believe that your faith in Christ is personal and private and that you shouldn't talk about it?*"

After a thoughtful moment, the man replied, "No sir, I'm wrong. Tell me what I can do about it."

So here is your take home for today.

Back in the 1800's there was a British preacher named **Alexander Maclaren**. He managed to get a one of the town's leading skeptics to promise him that he would attend church for four Sundays on which Maclaren would be presenting the main tenets of Christianity.

The skeptic listened intently to Maclaren's sermons. And after hearing the fourth message, the skeptic was converted to Christ. Maclaren was delighted and could not resist the impulse to ask which of the four sermons brought him to this decision.

The skeptic replied, "Your sermons, sir, were helpful, but they were not what finally persuaded me." He said that after church one Sunday as he was helping an elderly lady on a slippery walk, she looked up into his face and said, "***I wonder if you know my Savior, Jesus Christ. He is everything in the world to me. I would like you to know Him too.***"

It wasn't the sermon that converted the skeptic. It wasn't the history lessons from Scripture that changed his heart. It was the simple loving witness of an elderly woman. The Gospel of Jesus is often called "the living word of God," because it should not be mere history, but that which lives in your heart; that which you joyously share with others. Let's pray about this.