

Bearing Faithful Witness - Resources

Exploring what it means to become a community that responds to "our people" by living and communicating a good news story.

RESOURCE #5

BEARING FAITHFUL WITNESS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THEIR LIVES THAT WAS SO ATTRACTIVE? MICHAEL GREEN OFFERS SIX FACTORS:

THEIR EXAMPLE: "THE TRUTH OF THEIR CLAIMS MUST HAVE BEEN ASSESSED BY THE CONSISTENCY OF THEIR LIVES WITH WHAT THEY PROFESSED. THAT IS WHY THE EMPHASIS ON THE LINK BETWEEN MISSION AND HOLINESS OF LIFE IS GIVEN SUCH PROMINENCE . . . PETER HOLDS BOTH TOGETHER WHEN HE IN ONE AND THE SAME BREATH URGES HOLINESS OF LIFE SPRINGING FROM "REVERENCE FOR CHRIST AS LORD IN YOUR HEARTS", AND OUTREACH TO OTHERS, "BE READY ALWAYS TO GIVEN AN ACCOUNT OF YOUR FAITH TO ANYONE WHO ASKS YOU A REASON FOR THE HOPE YOU CHERISH."

THEIR FELLOWSHIP: THE EARLY CHRISTIANS USED THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF INFORMAL ASSOCIATIONS THAT WERE COMMON IN ROMAN SOCIETY AT THE TIME. "BUT MATERIALLY THERE WAS A DIFFERENCE – IN THE QUALITY OF THE FELLOWSHIP. HERE WERE SOCIETIES IN WHICH ARISTOCRATS AND SLAVES, ROMAN CITIZENS AND PROVINCIALS, RICH AND POOR, MIXED ON EQUAL TERMS AND WITHOUT DISTINCTION: SOCIETIES WHICH POSSESSED A QUALITY OF CARING AND LOVE THAT WAS UNIQUE. HEREIN LAY ITS ATTRACTION."

THEIR TRANSFORMED CHARACTER: JUSTIN CLAIMS "WE WHO FORMERLY DELIGHTED IN FORNICATION, NOW EMBRACE CHASTITY ALONE; WE WHO FORMERLY USED MAGIC ARTS DEDICATE OURSELVES TO THE GOOD AND THE UNBEGOTTEN GOD; WE WHO VALUED ABOVE ALL THINGS THE ACQUISITION OF WEALTH AND POSSESSIONS NOW BRING ALL WE HAVE INTO A COMMON STOCK AND SHARE IT OUT TO ALL ACCORDING TO THEIR NEED; WE WHO HATED AND DESTROYED ONE ANOTHER, AND ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR DIFFERENT MANNER OF LIFE WOULD NOT LIVE WITH PEOPLE OF ANOTHER TRIBE, NOW, SINCE THE COMING OF CHRIST, LIVE HAPPILY WITH THEM."

THEIR JOY: CONVERSION AND JOY ARE CLOSELY RELATED IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, AND IT REMAINED A CHARACTERISTIC THING ABOUT THE EARLY CHRISTIANS WHICH ATTRACTED OTHERS INTO THEIR COMPANY. THE NEW FAITH DID NOT MAKE THEM MISERABLE. OFTEN OUTWARD CIRCUMSTANCES WERE UNPLEASANT ENOUGH, BUT THAT COULD NOT ROB OF THE JOY WHICH WAS THEIR CHRISTIAN BIRTHRIGHT.

THEIR ENDURANCE: THIS JOY OF THE CHRISTIANS BOTH IN LIFE AND DEATH IS CLOSELY LINKED WITH THEIR PATIENT ENDURANCE OF SCOURGING, INSULTS AND MARTYRDOM WHICH HAD AN INCALCULABLE EFFECT IN BRINGING OBSERVERS TO FAITH. "THE MORE OFTEN WE ARE MOWED DOWN BY YOU, THE MORE IN NUMBER WE GROW. THE BLOOD OF CHRISTIANS IS SEED," SAID TERTULLIAN.

THEIR POWER: THE PREACHERS WERE SO FULL OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD, SO PERSUADED OF THE TRUTH AND RELEVANCE OF THEIR MESSAGE THAT IT OVERFLOWED FROM THEM AND PEOPLE RECEIVED WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY, "NOT ONLY IN WORD BUT ALSO IN POWER AND IN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WITH FULL CONVICTION." IN A SOCIETY BORED WITH THE ENDLESS CHATTER OF PHILOSOPHERS THIS WAS, IN ITSELF, IMPRESSIVE. BUT THERE WAS ANOTHER DIMENSION TO THIS POWER. IT INVOLVED HEALINGS AND EXORCISMS, AND THIS WAS A FACTOR OF INCALCULABLE IMPORTANCE FOR THE ADVANCE OF THE GOSPEL IN A WORLD WHICH HAD INADEQUATE MEDICAL SERVICES AND WAS OPPRESSED WITH BELIEF IN DEMON FORCES OF EVERY KIND.

[EVANGELISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH, MICHAEL GREEN, P.178-193]