

You Are Witnesses

Isaiah 43: 8-13

Luke 24: 35-48

Shoppers have great resources on the internet. No longer are shoppers constrained by physically visiting a store, inspecting a product (like they knew what they were looking for), searching out a brand name, or being risky by trying an off-brand label. On any item that you are interested in purchasing, you can get reviews.

Consumer Reports used to be the must-consult papery publication back in the old days. That's how you knew if that big ticket purchase was going to be worthwhile. *Consumer Reports* would run their tests and publish the results. Other than that, and possibly word of mouth from someone else who had been down that road, you were pretty much on your own. And *Consumer Reports* only did big ticket items, cars, appliances, and the like. If you were buying something less, you really didn't have any guidance.

The internet certainly changed that. Not only can you shop online, never having to go to a bricks-and-mortar store, you can do research on your product, connect to online reviews from user-based organizations, but best of all, you can sample the reviews of actual product users. Amazon has been the leader in this, actively soliciting reviews from its own shoppers who purchase these products through Amazon. There are many imitators, but the sheer scope of products that Amazon stocks and sells makes it the default place to begin shopping. Obviously that has huge implications for its ability to generate sales. If you can help a shopper make a decision to purchase, there is a much better likelihood that they'll make the purchase right then.

Buying a vacuum cleaner? Find out what the experience of others has been with different models and features. Buying a cell phone? Don't be like me when I bought that disastrous cell phone, having read the reviews, finding them mixed, but figure it's worth a shot. No, it isn't. Stupid! Buying a new mattress? Go to this web site, this is the real name: sleeplikethedead.com. I'm so glad I did, and now I do ... sleep like the dead. Have doubts about buying a mattress online? Go to Amazon, look up the item, and read what others have said about ordering online. I mean, ordering a mattress online is a fairly unique experience. You are not alone in having some major concerns. You can know what to expect, what to watch out for, and how to prepare.

'So, Bruce,' you're asking, 'is there a point to any of this?' Yes, actually there is. All of this nifty information from actual consumer commenters and reviewers discoverable online should be seen as the **testimony of reliable sources**. These folks are witnesses who share their experience with another who may be searching for the same thing, or who may want to know how you came to your decision, and how you've found it so far.

We've learned at this point that manufacturers, their sales reps, and their promotional literature are notorious for bending the truth, twisting the facts, shaping the reality, or just plain lying through their teeth. In fact, one needs to be careful in

reading those online reviews because big, fat, weenie corporations have been known to contract with writers who simply find places where they can submit a testimonial that was entirely fictional, simply to boost the favorable reviews of the corporation's product. Because the corporations are weenies, they don't tend to pay these writers much, and therefore the writers don't write very well, or very convincingly, or very imaginatively. They can be sniffed out. To combat this, Amazon has a label designating reviewers who have also purchased the product, something like "verified purchaser."

Amazon realizes how important it has become for shoppers to have credible testimony in these reviews. It is a key element in their model of success.

The same has always been true for people in faith in the one God of Israel. In the prophets, like here in Second Isaiah, the call for testimony by witnesses takes the setting of a courtroom and a judicial proceeding. In Second Isaiah, the prophet voices God's assertions that Yahweh is the one God who alone is worthy of praise, devotion, and awe-filled respect. In Second Isaiah, God's people exiled in Babylon know that the time is coming when they will be liberated by God's Messiah, Cyrus the Great, Emperor of Persia. That's right, Cyrus the Great, Emperor of Persia is God's Messiah; not even a Jew, but he is God's Messiah.

However, the prophet (and God) knows that the people are not sure about how things stand among the gods of all. The gods of Babylon had been triumphant and supreme. The God of Judah and Israel had seemed irrelevant in the shadow of the gods of the conquering Babylonian empire. Now that the Persians had come to liberate them, perhaps there are Persians gods who deserve adoration and praise?

You can imagine how upset God must be at this dithering by God's people. (Here's another reason why the word from God must change, not being tied to political entities and empires and emperors; it's too messed up. The separation of church and state hadn't been thought of yet.) Through the prophet, God demands a hearing, presentations by witnesses offering their testimony.

Lead out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Wait, that seems rather silly, bringing out the witnesses who see but don't observe, who hear but don't listen, who have the capability but not the facility. If you're a lawyer, these are not the witnesses you're going to call to testify and make your case to the jury. With the nations and peoples gathered, they are in the role of making their own cases for their gods.

God proceeds to inform the seeing blind and hearing deaf – his people – that **they** are to be God's witnesses, that God is their Savior and Deliverer.

The testimony of which they are witnesses is that the Babylonians are being brought down. The greatest empire in the world is being overrun by the one called by God to liberate his people from Babylon and restore them to the land of promise.

I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.

It's important for God's people to bear faithful witness to the wonders of God's power and sovereignty over the worldly powers. They need to know that their God acts on their behalf, bringing them peace and new life. They are God's witnesses in the world, and importantly, they need to watch and listen as God brings about a new era for God's people.

This new era for God's people is also true for early Christians. The early church is trying to fathom this figure Jesus, the Messiah spoken of by Jews, the One who was crucified and resurrected to new life, who brings good news of grace, forgiveness, and salvation, of peace, justice, and truth in the coming Kingdom of God, the One who will make all things new.

The passage at the end of Luke's gospel starts as the two men, the ones who had been walking out of Jerusalem to Emmaus, return to Jerusalem to tell the disciples there how they had encountered and spoken with Jesus, unwittingly until the bread was broken as they sat at table together. The two from the Emmaus Road are giving their report when Jesus comes to stand among them.

Jesus knows that they're perplexed by what's happened, shocked to see him among them. Jesus invites them to touch him, but they remain overwhelmed. They're joyous and thankful, but they're still caught flat-footed.

Jesus then turns to teaching, starting with a reminder of what needed to happen with him, fulfilling what the scriptures had written about God's promised servant. Remember, it says that *he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures*. He tells them: *This is written: [1] that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and [2] that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations/peoples, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.*

That last line reminds them of their role. It is not to receive this information and not do something with it, as if knowing this would somehow satisfy God's expectations from God's people. Simply knowing and not doing something is very limited. They are **witnesses of these things**. They have a testimony to offer; they have had this reality in their lives. It is something to be offered to those in need of such new insight.

Now some folks have this idea that one is faithful when offering a testimony of faith in Jesus to complete strangers. To go back to the example of Amazon customers, this kind of approach to a stranger is pretty much the same as going up to some stranger and telling them how wonderful your vacuum cleaner is, encouraging them get this vacuum cleaner for themselves. Or if you told a complete stranger how you've read a wonderful book about Scandinavia, urging them to read this book about Scandinavia. It seems rather silly. The missing piece is the desire to gain insight into the subject.

Another mistake is that people believe that there's something magical about the name of Jesus. People don't need to know about Jesus, some notion in your head. They

need your testimony, your witness that comes in a way that meets an inquirer where they are and provides them relevant and useful information.

At the end of our passage in Luke, Jesus gives two major portions of what that testimony should include. First, it should make it clear that Jesus was put to death and yet Jesus lives, according to God's will and promise of new life. Second, that anyone can get in a good relationship with God, and be given a clean slate, forgiven of any wrongdoings, and be united to the covenant of new life in Jesus Christ.

Today, we are the ones who offer our testimony. We should not limit our imaginings about offering testimony to the one dimensional aspect to direct conversation. Our testimony is also rendered whenever we act. Indeed, all of what we do, say, think, etc., is altogether a presentation of our witness and testimony.

We've met people who profess their Christian faith, yet their witness, their testimony, suggests that they don't know much, if anything, about Jesus. You don't trust them enough to shake their hands, but they can't stop talking about their faith, their church, and how they serve the Lord. What's wrong with that witness and testimony? It doesn't match what's expected and what's needed. It doesn't seem genuine or authentic. Instead, it seems contrived, overbearing, and insincere. A Christian of any degree of seriousness should be able to do better than that.

Of course, I'm talking about somebody else having this weak witness, but flip the arrow, and what happens when we point it at ourselves? Would anyone find our witness and testimony convincing? Or would it seem insincere, inconsistent, or irrelevant?

We are called to be witnesses, offering our testimony to the good news of new life in Jesus Christ. We aren't ever going to be the perfect messengers, but we ought to know our roles, and we ought to know that people are watching, people are assessing the testimony of our lives, our choices, and our values.

May we be worthy witnesses to the power of a new life faith in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior. It is Jesus who makes all things new, according to the purposes of our wondrous God.