

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his greatness.”

(2 Peter 1:16)

With this statement, one observer of Christ's life and actions declared the special relation that eyewitnesses bore to the information they imparted.

We are indebted to these eyewitnesses for information on the historical events and meaning of the gospel. Most of the New Testament writers were either direct eyewitnesses themselves or had ready access to others who qualified as such. Without this eyewitness data, there would be little or no “good news” to report.

Their Relation to the Gospel Records

According to New Testament sources, the core content of the gospel is the material regarding the person of Jesus Christ – his life, teaching, actions, character, death, burial, and resurrection. The factual, real-world stuff at the foundation of gospel truth comes only from historical documentation, and that translates heavily into the need for supporting eyewitness data.

I. Howard Marshall states the situation with respect to the gospel records when he explains: “though the purpose of the Gospels was primarily theological, their character is in no sense unhistorical. What they described was not invented but really happened. The writers did not make the story up out of their own heads in order to have a vehicle for conveying doctrinal propositions. The heart of the Christian message was that God had acted in history in Jesus.”¹

Included in the gospel's main proclamation concerning Christ is its focus on his redemptive achievement. This saving activity, in turn, is portrayed as inseparable from certain specific events – especially his reconciling death and authenticating resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-4; Rom. 5:8; 1:4; Acts 17:3, 18; 1 Thess. 4:14). The historicity of these events relies at least partly on dependable

eyewitness testimony and accurate recording of same. Some of the events reported in the New Testament were observed by literally thousands of people (Matt. 14:13-21; 15:29-38; Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-9; John 6:1-10). These persons, indeed, were all eyewitnesses of these particular occasions. Regarding those crucial post-resurrection appearances of Christ, we are told that just one such occasion alone was observed by more than 500 persons (1 Cor. 15:6). Altogether, there are an impressive number of persons and groups who qualified as “witnesses” to the gospel related events (Acts 2:32; 10:39,40; 13:30,31; 22:15; John 15:27).

Sometimes, however, we reserve the term “eyewitness” for those who may have had a more in-depth or long-term acquaintance with the persons and events involved. In this category, of course, would be included Christ's disciples – that group of his closest observers. Also, there were those who went to some effort, first, to investigate these happenings, and then to record their experiences. The gospel writer Luke, for example, informs us that “many have undertaken to draw up an account of things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses” (Luke 1:1,2).

Among the primary New Testament writers, there are six who are of particular interest: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, and Paul. Of these, three (Matthew, John and Peter) were themselves direct eyewitnesses of Christ's life, death, and post-resurrection appearances. Concerning Jesus, they could claim that “we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have **touch**ed” (1 John 1:1). In short, what they proclaimed was “what we have **seen** and **heard**” (1 John 1:3) on the basis of firsthand acquaintance.

Three other key writers (Mark, Luke, and Paul) did not witness all these activities themselves; however, they had access to (and used) genuine eyewitnesses for their information. With respect to Mark, he was intimately acquainted with Peter's story of the life and work of Jesus,² and subsequently benefited also as a traveling

companion of the apostle Paul during part of the latter's first missionary journey (Acts 12:25). In the case of Luke, those selected as his informants are described as eyewitnesses "from the first" (Luke 1:2) who could facilitate a careful, investigative report which covered "everything from the beginning" (Luke 1:3), that is, a complete account and not just partial segments of the story.³ As to Paul himself, his extensive travels and contacts gave him access to a whole multitude of eyewitnesses, including at least one very lengthy, in-depth consultation with eyewitnesses Peter and James (Gal.1:18,19).

Limitations and Criteria

Critics of eyewitness testimony, of course, are prone to point to the potential limitations of this kind of testimony. They cite such things as the problems of inconsistent or conflicting statements, the influence of character flaws on a person's ability to tell the truth, and the adverse impact of "motives" on witnesses.

Admittedly, these are recognized concerns, for example, with which court judges and juries must deal. Thus, legal counsel is usually retained to protect the legal and testimonial interests of the parties involved.

Cross-examination of witnesses and presentation of other corroborating or refuting evidence are employed to sift out the details. An attempt is made, wherever possible, to arrive at decisions which are based on a representation of the factual situation beyond reasonable doubt. Historians, too, must keep these matters in mind when they develop their assessments.

Problems notwithstanding, use of eyewitness testimony is a beneficial and even critically necessary part of the historical/legal investigative process. Coady readily acknowledges that eyewitness testimony needs to be subjected to critical scrutiny and rejected where found to be mistaken or spurious. Nevertheless, he concludes, that "just as we cannot dispense with observation and experimental data in natural science, so we cannot do without testimonial data in history"⁴

What, then, are some of the criteria which can be used to determine if a person is to be considered a genuine eyewitness? First, an eyewitness must be in a position to have had the **opportunity** to observe the alleged events and persons. Testimony by direct observation is that which comes from an individual who Schum identifies as having "direct sensory interface" with the possible events.⁵ Put more simply, Newman and Newman insist a primary witness "needs to have been where the action was."⁶

Additionally, indications of one's **ability** to take advantage of the opportunities afforded him strengthens his potential usefulness as a witness. His training or track record may play a helpful part here. Simon Greenleaf, Harvard law professor, mentioned the eyewitness' "accuracy of his powers of discerning, and the faithfulness of his memory in retaining the facts."⁷ In this connection, Greenleaf cited the example of Matthew whose vocation as a tax-collector accustomed him to habits of investigation and detailed scrutiny, and to Luke whose everyday profession as a physician called for exactness of observation.

Also, where more than one witness is involved, the number and consistency of **independent** witnesses is important. The ideal situation is to obtain separate testimony by different witnesses who – while they may differ in minor details – yet furnish corroborating information on key matters of substance. Helpful, then, would be separate witnesses who provide "at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same transaction, as the events actually occurred."⁸

Finally, the **vividness of details** and naturalness of their portrayal contributes to the reliability of the eyewitness testimony.⁹ In this regard, Doremus A. Hayes observes that the stories related "in our Gospels have an air of soberness and reality about them These are plain matter-of-fact people telling just what happened to themselves They furnish just such testimony as the facts would warrant, and such as plain people convinced

beyond any question or doubt would give. They have all the signs of veracity.”¹⁰

Eyewitness Testimony in Proclamation and Narrative

Analysis of the speeches of Peter in the book of Acts yields some clues about the role of eyewitness testimony in the early expansion of the Christian enterprise. Besides (a) brief summaries of Israel's redemptive history and (b) challenges to repentance and faith, these speeches set forth key information on the person and work of Jesus Christ – information obtained from primary, eyewitness sources.

Here, we notice Peter's repeated reference to the fact that he himself and many others were eyewitnesses of what he preached about Christ, especially in regards to events related to Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:32; 4:33). “We are all witnesses of this” (Acts 3:15), he claimed, and furthermore “we are witnesses of everything he did in the country ... and in Jerusalem” (Acts 10:39).

That they were eyewitnesses is one of the main motivating forces behind their convincing proclamation of the gospel. “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20), they explained. This witnessing nature of their preaching put the greatest possible emphasis on the factual content of their preaching. Canadian scholar Allison A. Trites maintains that “it was of supreme significance to the New Testament writers that the apostolic teaching was not based on a collection of myths, but on the experience of eye-witnesses.”¹¹

Former University of London legal scholar and Director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, Norman Anderson, observed that Jesus “confided the testimony to who he was, what he had done and what he had taught to ... eyewitnesses.”¹²

Christianity is intensely preoccupied with the matter of truth. The biblical documents, accordingly, often furnish compelling evidence in support of Christ's claims. Historian and legal scholar John W. Montgomery argues that “This is why the New Testament makes so much of the eyewitness contact” that the early believers had with Jesus.¹³ The prevalence here of eyewitness testimony and the independent reporting it yields are significant indeed. Montgomery says the New Testament documents “can be relied upon to give an accurate portrait of him [Christ],” and that this portrait cannot be rationalized away by wishful thinking or literary manoeuvring.¹⁴

Credible eyewitnesses can provide accurate information which, in turn, can be reliably recorded for public review. This is precisely the case with respect to the documentation supporting the New Testament narratives. As to the primary object of the eyewitnesses' inquiry, Charles H. Hayes noted:

“Men heard him [Jesus] speak, saw him act, and could declare to the world what kind of person this was whom they knew as a man knows his friend.”¹⁵

“From the observation of these facts, visible to their eyes, tangible to their hands, audible to their ears... [they] drew their conclusions concerning him.”¹⁶

References

1. I. Howard Marshall, "Jesus in the Gospels" in *The Expositor's Commentary Vol. 1*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 519.
2. A. T. Robertson, *Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), 7, and *Epochs in the Life of Simon Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 265.
3. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1946), 29. Also see the discussion on Luke sources by A. T. Robertson, *Luke the Historian in the Light of Research* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 48-49.
4. C.A.J. Coody, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 248. Legal researchers concede that the legal system too can neither afford to exclude eyewitness testimony or to ignore it. See Elizabeth F. Loftus & James M. Doyle, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 3rd ed. (Charlottesville, VA: Lexis Law Publishing, 1997), 8.
5. David A. Schum, *The Evidential Foundations of Probabilistic Reasoning* (N.Y.: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 94. Trites concurs that qualifying eyewitnesses need to "have an immediate relationship to the events that they describe." Allison A. Trites, *New Testament Witness in Today's World* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1983), 29.
6. Robert P. Newman and Dale R. Newman, *Evidence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 83. Also see Loftus & Doyle, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 333.
7. Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 31. [reprinted from 1874 edition].
8. Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony* 32, 42. Cornell University's Max Black concurred that "an individual observation ... is said to be publicly verified when it has been so confirmed by a sufficient number of other observers." Black, *Critical Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1946), 328.
9. Arne Trankell says, "Witness testimonies in which observations of real events are described thus often deviate from constructed lies by their greater richness in detail." *Reliability of Evidence: Methods for Analyzing and Accessing Witness Statements* (Stockholm: Beckmans, 1972), 125. As to the resultant gospel narratives, Craig Blomberg sees them as "vivid but uncluttered, full of incidental details, ordinary people and psychological realism" *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1987), 234.
10. Doremus A. Hayes, "The Resurrection Appearances of Christ" in *Great Sermons on the Resurrection of Christ*, ed. Wilbur M. Smith (Natick, MA: W.A. Wilde, 1964), 71. Likewise, Cambridge University's Frederick W. Farrar characterized the writers of the New Testament accounts as men who were "preeminently truthful, preeminently soberminded." *The Witness of History to Christ* (London: Macmillan, 1872), 50.
11. Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 225.
12. Norman Anderson, "The Historical Basis: Is It Convincing?" in *Jesus Christ: the Witness of History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 25.
13. John W. Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1978), 38. Peter Jensen, Australian scholar, observes that "the witness of those who knew him [Jesus], and of those who met the ones who knew him, is of prime importance." Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 56. Trites agrees that "the value attached by the New Testament itself to eyewitnesses places the greatest possible stress upon the historical facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus." *Witness in Today's World*, 136, 137.
14. John W. Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1965), 40.
15. Charles H. Hayes, "What Have Facts to Do with Faith?" *Harvard Theological Review* 2, no. 1 (July 1909): 357.
16. *Ibid.*, 363. Dallas Willard, University of Southern California professor, adds that the authors of the Bible "were quite capable of accurately interpreting their own experience and of objectively presenting what they heard" Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), xvi.