

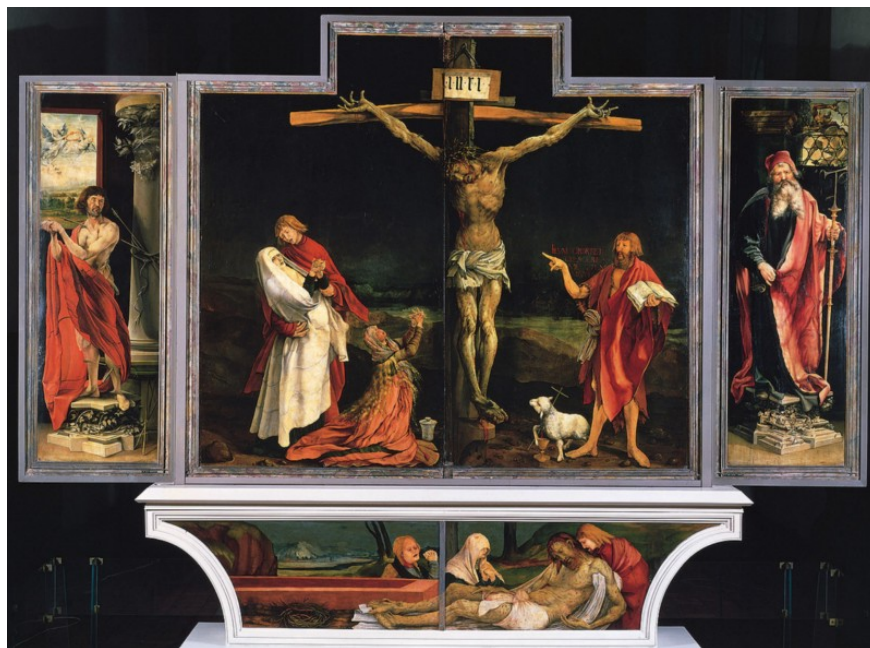


Issue 4: You will be my witnesses

Editor's note

Pointing to someone else: this is what the strange figure in camel's hair does in the sixteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece on display in Colmar, France. Arm bent, he stands and points to another figure hanging from a wooden beam, skin covered with sores, sharp thorns on his head, the colour gone from his lips.

John the Baptist points to Jesus. Risen from death, Jesus promised the apostles would also point to him as his “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8, ESV). After Jesus was lifted up, these apostles saw their role as being “witness[es] to his resurrection (Acts 1:22).



Isenheim Altarpiece, Mathias Grünewald [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

A life that points to someone else: what does this look like today? IFES includes students in Jerusalem and at the ends of the earth. This issue of *Word & World* explores how these students—along with everyone who has heard that Jesus has defeated death—might be witnesses to Jesus Christ in our time.

What does it mean to be witnesses in the university? **Vinoth Ramachandra** encourages students and faculty to join in conversations that are already going on and take them in a different direction.

What is authentic evangelism? **Cathy Ross** writes about joining in God's mission and being with others, recognizing that coming to faith is a process.

Is apologetics passé, or does it play a role today for witnesses to Christ? **Benno van den Toren** writes that dialogue between religions requires exchanging reasons, even if reason is rarely the primary factor in bringing people to faith.

Do witnesses speak on their own? **Fernando Mosquera** says no: the whole creation bears witness to God, and human witness fits within the mission of God as king, who involves his servants in going about his business in society and politics.

May these authors inform and inspire you in pointing to someone else.



Robert W Heimburger, Editor

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Christian witness in the university

Integrity, incarnation, and dialogue in today's universities

Vinoth Ramachandra

The risen Christ first revealed himself to a woman, Mary Magdalene, who was also commissioned to announce the good news of his resurrection to the rest of the apostolic community. Considering that a woman's eye-witness testimony was discounted in Jewish courts of law, and that the particular woman concerned had a low social status, this makes it very unlikely that the resurrection narratives were fabrications of the Jerusalem church. But it is also typical of the subversive, upside-down nature of the gospel itself: a crucified Saviour, God's power revealed in weakness, God's reign expressed through suffering servanthood, the outcasts uplifted, and the mighty humbled. This was

indeed “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:23, NIV)

Before his death, Jesus promised his disciples “the Spirit of truth” who would “bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15:26–27, RSV) The post-apostolic Church is built on the witness of the apostles to the crucified and risen Christ, the Lord of all creation. Our witness, in other words, is secondary; theirs is the *primary* witness. We bear witness not to ourselves and our religious experiences, but to the Christ whose story is told in the fourfold gospel narratives, foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and expounded in the rest of the New Testament.

Nevertheless, our own characters and stories are important. They are what give credibility to our spoken testimony. In a law-court, a witness who has a reputation for dishonesty, exaggeration, self-seeking, or inconsistency is hardly likely to be believed by judge or jury. This is why the New Testament language of “witness” to describe the Church’s relation to the good news of the kingdom of God is profoundly challenging. It draws attention to the inseparability of word and life, speech, and deed. What we *say* to the world must come out of what we *are* and be embodied in all that we *do*.

Witness as practising integrity

Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples that their love for each other would be the hallmark of their discipleship and the most powerful argument to a sceptical world (John 13:35; 17:20–23). Further, Pauline texts such as Galatians 3:27–29 and Ephesians 2:14–22 remind us that the death of Christ was a profoundly social and political event. The same act that reconciles me to God *simultaneously* grafts me into a new community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their ethnicity, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another. Thus, membership in the body of Christ is not a question of likes or dislikes, but a question of incorporation into a society under the Lordship of Christ that is a sign and anticipation of redeemed humanity.

Thus, the visible unity of Christians is central to the gospel. The world needs to *see* as well as *hear* the gospel of reconciliation embodied in the life of the Christian Church. That is why the disunity of the Church is a denial of the gospel and a sign not of God’s grace but of God’s judgment. A fragmented, competitive, and divided church has no message for a fragmented and divided world. And, on university campuses, Christian student fellowships that are divided along ethnic,

class, or denominational lines can only preach an individualistic, sub-Christian “gospel”, and not the gospel of reconciliation to the university.

The South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio once observed that “the mention of the Christian God within the South African constitution has probably done more to alienate black people from the church than any secular or atheist state philosophy could ever have accomplished.”* In his magisterial *The secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century*, the historian Owen Chadwick pointed out that the late 19th century critique of Christianity “owed its force... not at all to the science of the 19th century. Its basis was ethical... It attacked Christian churches not in the name of knowledge but of justice and freedom.”* In surveying the entire course of this period of British history, Chadwick could find only three scientists who had been led away from their earlier Christian faith by their growing scientific knowledge.

Witness as incarnational

The incarnation of the Word of God in human flesh speaks of identification, dependence, vulnerability, and weakness. It proclaims a Saviour who comes to us where we are, looks through our eyes, speaks with our tongue, wears our clothes, carries our infirmities, and suffers in solidarity with us. An **incarnational** engagement with the university implies that we are fully immersed in the life of the university. It means we are not only dropping in from the outside for classes or to conduct what are called “missions” without true dialogue and encounter with members of the university. We should also be committed to enabling it to become a means of God’s blessing to humanity.

Are we in IFES taking this calling to the university with sufficient intellectual seriousness? The dominant assumption among students and staff is that evangelism is about inviting non-Christians to come to *our* meetings, to listen to *our* views, to learn *our* language, to read our Scriptures. We are the majority at such meetings, and always in control.

However, a university is a place where conversations of many kinds are taking place, whether in the classrooms, the research labs, the tutorials, the senior common room (faculty club), the student union, or the host of student societies that sprout on campus. That is where Christians should be, humbly yet boldly joining those conversations (which, for the most part, they have not initiated) and taking them in a different direction. I believe it is possible to start with any subject, from the most ridiculous to the sublime, and if we ask sufficiently probing questions

we descend to the bedrock issues that the gospel addresses: What does it mean to be human? What is the nature of ultimate reality? What is it we truly value and why? Whence do we derive our notions of good and evil, reason, beauty, or justice? And so on.

Even if our efforts do not bring people to faith-commitment to Christ, they still witness to God's intention to gather up all human activities, whether in the sciences, business, government, and the arts, into Christ (cf. Col. 1:20). We do not take Christ into the university; it is he who goes ahead of us and leads us there. He is present, even though unacknowledged, in the biochemistry laboratory, the music class, the radio astronomy centre, the Student Union debates about global warming or student funding, and all the conversations that make up university life. We are called to discern his presence and activity and articulate it with courage and wisdom.

Witness as dialogical

Such an approach to witness is always **dialogical**. Indeed, dialogue is the central defining activity of any respectable university. It is what academic freedom is all about: the freedom to think and broadcast even the most outlandish views, provided one is willing to subject those views to rigorous scrutiny and debate by one's peers. Educational institutions that seek to stifle marginal or subversive voices, whether religious or secularist, forfeit their right to be called universities. Christians should be in the forefront of promoting such dialogue all over the university, starting as well as joining ongoing conversations on every topic that is of common interest.

Dialogue proceeds from the belief that, in the encounter with other peoples and their cultures (whether explicitly religious or not), we are not moving into a void, but we go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and communities.

This is why the *other* is essential to our own pilgrimage. We do not know what we really believe, let alone how far our lives conform to what we claim to believe, until we engage in dialogue with others, especially those who are profoundly different from us. It is humility that enables me to see the ways in which I may be prone to use my Christianity to conceal inconvenient facts or to bolster my own ego. Authentic evangelism changes the bearers as well as the recipients of the gospel.

When I first began working with students in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, I remember sitting with Marxist students in the University of Colombo and listening to all the questions they fired at me: What does the Bible say about revolution? What's wrong with using violence to overthrow a despotic regime? Why are Christians colonialists and capitalists? I had not reflected at any depth on these questions during my seven years as an active Christian student in the University of London. Since then, I have constantly sought to listen to the most thoughtful non-Christians, whether atheists, humanists, Buddhists, Muslims, or others, both through their writings as well as personal encounter and public dialogue. I have also actively cultivated friendships with Christians from all theological traditions and persuasions. I have found myself challenged, humbled, and deepened in my reading of Scripture and my discipleship to Christ through such experiences. I have had to repent of prejudices, stereotypes, and naiveté.

To be dialogical is to be in two-way conversation: allowing the academic disciplines of the university to speak into our faith and, at the same time, articulating our faith intelligently, humbly, relevantly, and boldly into those academic disciplines. In dialogue, unlike a monologue, we take risks. We expose ourselves, in all our vulnerability, to the full weight of alien or anti-Christian thought, as well as receiving new truths that enrich our understanding of God and God's world.

Whenever the gospel crosses a new frontier, new questions arise and the church is forced to rethink the gospel it proclaims and the nature of her obedience in the world. We see this in Paul's letters, all of which are written in response to a new missionary situation.* For instance, the Corinthian Christians ask him questions such as, "When our pagan friends invite us to their homes and serve us meat that has been offered up in temples, are we committing idolatry by partaking of it?" This is a question that Paul never had to face until now, because Jews like himself simply never entered pagan homes. It is at the cutting edge of missionary engagement with the world that theology is done, and the church grows in its understanding of Christ.

Likewise, when the gospel is translated into the various academic disciplines of the university, whether architecture, robotics, cosmology, or musical composition, new questions will arise that we have to wrestle with. If we do this with integrity, more of the splendor of Christ will be revealed to the Church.

Finally, speaking with a Christian voice is about knowing *how* to speak as well as what to say. Sometimes Christian students think that if they quote proof-texts from the Bible in a seminar or classroom, then they have witnessed to Christ. The result, however, is only embarrassment for other Christians and a hardening of the hearts of others towards Christians. Charity, respect for the other, and using language that is appropriate in the given context are indispensable virtues for academic life. The novelist Madeleine L'Engle once told a student who wished to become a "Christian writer" that "if she is truly and deeply a Christian, what she writes is going to be Christian, whether she mentions Jesus or not. And if she is not, in the most profound sense, Christian, then what she writes is not going to be Christian, no matter how many times she invokes the name of the Lord."*

To be "in the most profound sense, Christian" is surely the challenge we need to be presenting before Christian university students and teachers.

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About the author

Vinoth Ramachandra is from Sri Lanka and lives with his Danish wife, Karin, in Colombo. He holds bachelor's and doctoral degrees in nuclear engineering from the University of London. Instead of pursuing an academic career, he returned to Sri Lanka to help pioneer a Christian university ministry there. He has served as IFES Regional Secretary for South Asia and since 2001 as the international Secretary for Dialogue and Social Engagement. Vinoth has authored several essays and books, including *Gods That Fail* (1996), *Subverting Global Myths* (2008), and *Church and Mission in the New Asia* (2009). He blogs occasionally on contemporary global issues at <http://vinothramachandra.wordpress.com>.

Discussion questions

Read Vinoth Ramachandra, “Christian witness in the university”, and John 15:26–27.

1. When we bear witness, to whom do we witness? Who does the witnessing?
2. What does it mean for you to practice integrity in your studies and work?
3. Does your student fellowship or church bear witness to the body of Christ as a community with no divisions based on sex, ethnicity, or social class?
4. Do you tend to think of bearing witness in the university as about hosting evangelistic events, about participating in events others organize, or both?
5. When have you taken part in dialogue in the university? How has that dialogue changed you? How has that dialogue changed those with whom you speak?

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Sharing the joy of the gospel

Participating in God's mission and being with others

Cathy Ross

*The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness.**

These are the first two sentences of Pope Francis' encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel*. Immediately we find ourselves drawn in, introduced to Jesus, and presented with an implicit challenge. Does the joy of the gospel fill our hearts? Anglican Archbishops Justin Welby and John Sentamu issued a similar challenge in a paper presented to

General Synod in 2013, entitled “Challenges for the Quinquennium: Intentional Evangelism”.^{*} They open this document with two Scriptures and a strong statement on the place of evangelism in the life of the church:

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:45–6, NRSV)

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:8, NRSV)

So, evangelism is all about Jesus.

I would like us to reflect on four ideas when we think about and engage in evangelism. They are:

1. “Mission [and I would include evangelism as a vital component of mission] ... means to recognize what the Creator-Redeemer is doing in his world and try to do it with him.”^{*}
2. Coming to faith is a journey, and it can be messy.
3. People in the world have real insights and can teach the church some truths and realities.
4. It is about “being with” rather than “doing for.”

1. “Mission [and evangelism] means to recognise what the Creator-Redeemer is doing in His world and try to do it with Him.”

Former Anglican archbishop Rowan Williams was saying this back in 2003: “Mission, it’s been said, is finding out what God is doing and joining in.”^{*} He explained that this is where the unexpected growth happens and that so often this is from the edges, from the margins, not from the centre. That was the way of Jesus—always on the margins, looking out for the little ones—the children, the women, the blind, the lame, the sick; those who were imprisoned physically or mentally.

Pope Francis offers a similar challenge:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably

*channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.**

Imagine. Imagine if we could do that: rearrange our structures, our timetables, or ways of doing things to suit the world rather than us! This is the missionary impulse. This is the sent-ness of the gospel.

So, what might this look like? I took part in a recent research project entitled “Beautiful Witness: Practical Theologies of Evangelism in the Church of England” which was funded by Durham University and the Evangelism Task Group of The Archbishops’ Council. The project interviewed eight practitioners, lay and ordained, to ask them what evangelism means and how they engage in evangelism. All of them commented on how important it is to listen to their context. All of them know their contexts well; they live there. They are attentive and observant—and they had researched their contexts. They know about levels of unemployment or affluence, housing statistics, demographics, the history of the place, industries and businesses coming and going, the people of influence, as well as the underbelly and the unseen and powerless in their places and spaces.

They pray and wait for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. One woman prayed for a year before initiating anything. They all said it is about listening to the Holy Spirit, listening to where the community is at, being where people are, having relationships and discovering where God is already at work in people’s lives. It is about listening to the questions people are asking and as Bishop Graham Cray has put it, resisting “the temptation to turn every tentative question into an excuse to preach the ‘right’ answer, without giving evidence of attentive listening.”*

One example comes from a vicar who was getting to know mothers at the school gate. She started a group in the community lounge in the school on a Friday morning after the mothers had dropped their kids at school. They came and had coffee, cake, and conversation. She explained that they did not have to cross a threshold, not a spiritual one or a physical one. It was easy for them because this was a place they knew and a time they could manage. The conversations grew out of the questions these mothers were asking, and eventually they formed their own faith community.

2. Coming to faith is a journey and can be messy.

I know the metaphor of a journey can be overused. Still, it really does seem to be the case today that it can take people a long time to come to

know Jesus. All the practitioners in “Beautiful Witness” affirmed this: God will meet people where they are at, and sometimes it can take a long time for people to come to faith. It can also be messy. One of the practitioners talked about people journeying towards or away from Jesus. For those who are moving away from Jesus, this person talks about the old message of repentance. For those journeying towards Jesus, this person encourages them to make specific steps such as prayer, reintegration into the community, or baptism.

One couple who have been in a tough context for 17 years observed that even after people come to Christ, their lives may still be chaotic and difficult. People who suffer from addictions or people in prison may not be instantly healed of their addictions or bad behaviour. They may still go back and get into fights in their cells or wings, they may still take drugs or suffer from their addictions, but they know they are loved by the outrageous love of God, so their lives *are* different from before. They are given a whole new identity because now they know who they are in Jesus. They gave one very moving example of a young woman who was an alcoholic and became a Christian, but she was still an alcoholic. She made a commitment to Jesus, she talked with God constantly, she was a person of faith and this changed her life hugely, but she was still an alcoholic and eventually it killed her. So, this is not a glib “come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.” No—this is a longer, tougher road. However, God is in the mess. There is treasure in the rubble, and when we keep on trying to tidy things up, we may prevent things from happening because God is there in the mess, the pain, and the trauma.

Another practitioner in a different context affirmed that when people know they are loved, they can begin to thrive rather than just survive. He spoke of the victim mentality that is a reality in his context where folk walk around with their heads down, refusing to make eye contact. However, he noticed a difference when people came to faith: they would begin to walk around with their heads up because Jesus is in control. Several of the practitioners talked about the work and prayer that was needed for people to free themselves from shame and the feeling that they were useless.

Our life of faith begins with an invitation to participate in the *missio Dei*, and this is essentially a lifelong pilgrimage. It is this pilgrim principle that will keep us on the move, that informs and nurtures our call to be engaged in evangelism, that motivates us to believe that another world is possible. Almost by definition, a pilgrim operates at

the margins of a culture—because they are pilgrims, wanderers, on the edge, out of step with the mainstream.

One of the practitioners offered this which could almost be a framework for evangelism: love, courage, imagination, and activism.

3. People in the world have real insights and can teach the church some truths and realities.

This is an important and vital truth for us to remember. This was a clear theme among the practitioners interviewed for “Beautiful Witness.” One reminded us that often we think our role is to proclaim the truth, but sometimes people outside the church already know that truth. One asserted that the world knows that the gospel is about love, and sometimes the world needs to remind the church of that because we can be very busy being the church and doing church things. Several spoke of how the church can be perceived as authoritative and hierarchical, preaching at people in an unhelpful way.

Others spoke of how their community helped them to come to faith as well and helped them to “understand God differently”. They learned things about God from their communities—it is certainly not a one-way street.

We do not approach other contexts with a ready-made gospel and with God in our pocket; rather, we go in all humility and gentleness. Max Warren expresses it beautifully:

*Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.**

Another image is of entering another’s garden. In someone else’s garden, there is much to learn, and this learning can only come through developing a relationship of trust and respect.* How is Christ understood and to be understood in the new context? How might the gospel best be expressed in this new soil? How will the gospel flourish in this new soil? And how may this new soil enhance the understanding and depth of the gospel? One of the key things that was learnt from how Christianity was received in Africa, for example, is that it was not what Western missionaries said that mattered in the long-term but rather how African Christians appropriated Christ in ways that made sense to them, utilizing African spiritual maps of the universe. This is a lesson for Westerners when we consider evangelism and for anyone

considering mission in a new setting. Are we able to engage in ways that are truly contextual, allowing faith communities to flourish in local soil using local spiritual maps? And conversely, do we find our *own* understanding and appropriation of the faith challenged and enhanced by deep engagement in this particular context?

4. It is about "being with" rather than "doing for".

Andrew Walls reminds us that mission:

*... means living on someone else's terms, as the Gospel itself is about God living on someone else's terms, the Word becoming flesh, divinity being expressed in terms of humanity. And the transmission of the Gospel requires a process analogous, however distantly, to that great act on which the Christian faith depends.**

Are we able to do this? Are we able to be a winning presence, a witnessing presence, an evangelizing presence that can be alongside others, living on someone else's terms and resisting the temptation to fix everything and make them like us?

One person interviewed for "Beautiful Witness" asserted that we are not placed on earth to do things to people; rather we are here to be alongside people and to be community with them. Moreover, programmes can be patronising. They can give the wrong message where people see things being done to them and themselves as a worthy project to be fixed, rather than being given the opportunity to grow, offer their own gifts and talents, to give back out of who they are and therefore to begin to flourish.

In his latest book, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, Samuel Wells claims that the most important word in theology is the little word "with", from Emmanuel, God *with* us.* He explains that the story of Scripture is the story of God's desire to be with us, and only within this "with" can we speak of a "for". He suggests that we believe that the human predicament is mortality when in fact it is isolation.

John Drane maintains that people are more interested in how to live well rather than in heaven or hell or sin. In fact, John Taylor maintains that sin ought to be the last truth to be told and that judgement is best brought about by the activity of the Holy Spirit. He writes, "For the evangelism that proceeds by listening and learning, entering into another [person's] vision in order to see Christ in it, does not start with assertions about sin but waits to be told about it. And usually the truth about sin is almost the last truth to be told."*

To conclude, can we recognize God's Spirit at work in our contexts and join in with God as winsome witnesses to who God is? Can we allow someone's journey to be messy, and are we willing to accompany them along that journey? Do we genuinely believe that we are evangelizing in a "graced world"* that has much to teach us also so that we too will be transformed? Finally, are we humble enough, vulnerable enough, de-centred enough to "be with" rather than "doing for"? Then the joy of the gospel will fill our hearts and the lives of all who encounter Jesus.

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About the author

Dr Cathy Ross is Tutor in Contextual Theology at Ripon College Cuddesdon and MA Coordinator for Pioneer Training at the Church Mission Society. She has previously worked in Rwanda, Congo and Uganda with the New Zealand Church Mission Society. Her publications include *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, ed. with Andrew Walls (London: DLT, 2008); *Life-Widening Mission: Global Anglican Perspectives* (Oxford: Regnum, 2012); *Mission in Context* (with John Corrie, Ashgate, 2012); *The Pioneer Gift*, with Jonny Baker (London: SCM, 2014); *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*, with Steve Bevans (London: SCM, 2015); and *Pioneering Spirituality*, with Jonny Baker (2015). Her research interests are in the areas of contextual theologies, World Christianity, feminist theologies, and hospitality. She is a New Zealander, married to Steve, a medical doctor, and they have three children and one grandchild. She is a keen supporter of the All Blacks and the Silver Ferns.

Discussion questions

Read Cathy Ross, “The joy of the gospel” and Matthew 1:22–23 or another passage of Scripture that deals with the gospel.

1. What do you think evangelism is?
2. What experiences have you had of evangelism?
3. What difference does it make when you recognize what the Creator-Redeemer is doing in his world and try to do it with him?
4. In your own experience, in what ways might you describe your coming to faith as a journey?
5. What are the most significant things that you have learned from people outside the church?
6. What difference would being with others rather than doing things for them make for your student movement? Your church?

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Why inter-religious dialogue needs apologetics

Intrinsic to bearing witness to Christ is making truth claims

Benno van den Toren

Christians engage in dialogue with their religious and non-religious neighbors for a variety of reasons. They might want to get to know them better, or they might want to draw from the wisdom that their neighbors have acquired in the course of their lives. They might want to work out how to live together when their communities are in tension, or they might want to discuss projects of joint interest for the benefit of our communities. One of the principal reasons for engaging in such attentive dialogue is the desire to share our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in whom we find the fullness of life (John 10:10) in the hope they will joyfully embrace this precious gift.

Such inter-religious witness should be holistic. It can never be merely intellectual, and it should always reach out to the entire person. In this article, I will discuss why an integral Christian witness involves giving reasons for our faith. I will express why Christian witness needs to have an apologetic component, a component that at times needs to be at the forefront of our attention.

Why do people from other religions embrace Christ?

When we reflect on the role of apologetic witness in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, we are aware that many factors play a role when people from radically different religious or ideological backgrounds come to faith in Christ. For example, Rahil Patel, born in a Hindu family in East Africa, became a leading figure in the European branch of a worldwide Gujarati Hindu movement. He tells his story of leaving all to become a swami. He became gradually dissatisfied with the movement, particularly with the lack of room to ask critical questions and with the impossibility of finding the spiritual freedom and satisfaction that his guru promised. Still, the decisive event that brought him to faith in Christ after leaving and being cut off from his former spiritual home was an overwhelming experience of the presence and love of God in Christian worship.*

In other stories, different aspects move to the forefront. Sometimes, the welcome and care provided by the Christian community plays a major role, as in the conversion of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Steven Masood and the English Buddhist nun Esther Baker.* The Chinese Christian artist He Qi shared in a personal testimony that during the Cultural Revolution, he secretly copied a picture of a mother and child by the Italian Renaissance painter Rafael. This became a major factor in his conversion. Only much later, he discovered that it was a picture of Mary and Jesus. For him, this picture really was an icon conveying a peace and divine presence that guided him on his way to faith.

These stories should not merely be read at a human level. They point to the importance of bringing God into the picture if we want to understand such conversion stories. Sometimes this is very explicit, as when Muslims testify to appearances of Christ. There are other stories of conversion instigated by experiences of healing and deliverance through the power of the Holy Spirit like in Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka. Of course, God can also be present in the ordinary. Such is the case in the conversion story of the Oxford zoologist Andy Gosler, who came to Christ from a secular background, meeting God through apparently coincidental encounters and receiving the right messages at the right time.* God often works indirectly, through events,

experiences, people, and communities. This is why recognizing the decisive role of the Holy Spirit in the conversion process does not make other more human factors redundant.

Among these different factors, an intellectual search for truth can play a crucial role. The Egyptian Muslim Mark Gabriel tells the story of how the Quran itself motivated him to search for truth, but he became deeply dissatisfied with his religious community. This community was willing to use pressure, violence, and even threats of death to discourage an open quest. In the end, this search for truth, combined with his community's suppression of his quest, led him to Christ.* Jean-Marie Gaudeul's study of Muslims who convert to Christ points out that Gabriel's story is not an isolated case. The discovery of the reasonableness and truthfulness of the Christian faith is one of the five recurring motifs Gaudeul detects in these conversion stories.*

Given the small number of conversion stories in which the search for truth was the main trigger to embrace Christ, apologetic witness to members of other religious communities may not seem all that important. A closer look at such stories shows, however, that in many of them, questions of truth play a decisive role though sometimes they remain in the background. Indeed, there are a number of ways that Christian witness to other religions requires giving and receiving reasons, ways that inter-religious dialogue needs apologetics.

1. Avoiding manipulation

Firstly, inter-religious dialogue needs apologetics because otherwise evangelism is reduced to proselytizing in the negative sense. Evangelism can never limit itself to an emotional appeal or play on the immediate needs of the hearers. The gospel is, of course, the answer to our deepest needs, but if it is to be accepted as such it should be accepted because we believe it to be true. Christian mission is radically different from propaganda and averse to all forms of manipulation. If missions in the past have sometimes used power and manipulation, thus producing so-called 'rice Christians', we should repent of it. We should repent of it because God himself never forces himself on people but always offers himself freely, allowing for rejection. Prophets could be rejected; the Son of God himself accepted rejection to the point of going to the cross. God wants people to freely embrace his free gift of love. He might be able to force us to be his slaves or manipulate us to embrace his grace, but he wants us to be his children, his friends, and even his bride. These gifts can only be accepted freely. The father of the prodigal son was a parable of God himself: the father did not force his son to stay with him, but allowed him to move to a far land, all the

while eagerly awaiting his return. In the same way, the apostles and evangelists of the New Testament used nothing but an appeal to the truth and goodness of the message of Jesus to bring people to conversion, trusting in the power of the Spirit rather than on clever manipulation.

This appeal to a free acceptance of the truth and goodness and the gospel reflects the nature of the gospel and the relationship God intends with us. It has particular importance today. In a time in which religions are so easily associated with the abuse of power, we need to stress that we invite others to believe this message because of its truth and goodness, not because we want to enlarge our community, gain greater political influence, or benefit in some other way. We should avoid all manipulation. Apologetic witness is therefore crucial in order to show that evangelism is different from proselytization in the negative sense. This is also important in countries where different religious communities live together in tension and where conversions are seen as threats to the social equilibrium.

It must be clear first that our evangelistic efforts are not about growing the political influence of our community, but about God and salvation. Secondly, it must be clear that conversion is not primarily a change of political stance (though it may include this), but primarily a change of allegiance to Christ as Lord and Savior. Thirdly, it must be clear that when other religious communities use political power and other manipulative means to induce conversions, this doesn't do justice to what religion should be, at least not as we have come to know God in Christ. Those outside the faith may not be convinced because the power interests at stake are too great. But Christians will at least have good reasons to keep challenging others and to do so with integrity.

2. Responding to relativism

Secondly, inter-religious dialogue needs apologetics because without it we do not have a response to religious relativism.

Religious relativism is a variety of cultural relativism and believes that religious convictions can have nothing to do with a universal and objective reality. In this view, religious beliefs are no more than the projections or constructions of the religious believers themselves. People embrace cultural and religious relativism for a variety of reasons. It may be because it allows them to live comfortably in the immediate without considering any questions about the ultimate meaning of life. It may be because they have political interests in pushing religious convictions to the private sphere. It may be that they

have given up on ever finding the truth about God, salvation, or ultimate meaning because of the 'vertigo of relativity' * induced by the many options. In all cases, a simple claim that Christianity is different will not provide an answer. We will need to argue that real issues are at stake in what religion or worldview we embrace. Religious practices are not just an epiphenomenon of other realities such as economics, politics or social or psychological well-being. Relativism is paralyzing, making all exchange of religious ideas a harmless game rather than a deeply serious affair addressing questions of ultimate truth, significance, and salvation. In a relativistic culture, if we do not explain why we believe our convictions are equally true and good for others as they are for Christians, we will have no answer to relativism.

3. Reaching those who are deeply invested in their religious traditions

Thirdly, inter-religious evangelism needs apologetics because otherwise we will have no message for those who are deeply invested in other religions.* Christian mission often invests most in the disenfranchised of other religious communities, those who are marginalized or left out. It is obvious that those who are well-rooted in their own religious traditions may have less openness to consider alternatives. If Jesus Christ is only an answer to poverty and injustice or the end of a search for community or identity, then Christian evangelists will not have something to say to those who are invested in their religious traditions. But if Christians believe that Jesus is the answer to our deepest need for salvation and our longing for God, then we should have a message for those who are deeply embedded in their communities. We can only reach them if we start to dialogue with openness and integrity about what people believe. We need to talk about how their beliefs respond to their deepest needs and higher desires, asking what beliefs are justified and where real salvation can be found.

The issue of addressing those who are at the heart of other religious communities is compounded by the fact that other religious traditions have their own apologetic discourse, both in favor of their own beliefs and against the Christian tradition. Many Muslims, for example, are convinced that Islam is a much more rational religion than Christianity with its irrational beliefs in the Trinity and the atonement and its corrupted scriptures and morals. These views have such a strong warrant in these communities that many of its members will rarely consider the Christian faith as a serious alternative even if they are searching spiritually and aware of the Christian message. Many Hindus would not consider conversion because their apologetic for their

religious tradition tells them that everyone should experience spiritual growth within the religious tradition in which they are born.*

Joyful con dence

Some skeptical onlookers would argue that these apologies for Hinduism, Islam, or other religions show precisely why inter-religious apologetics does not make sense: doesn't this prove that the truth cannot be known? However, the fact that there is a diversity of opinion does not show that truth cannot be ascertained, even when those opinions are well thought through. Consider a parallel case: People can come up with contrasting economic policies about how to lower the rate of unemployment in the country. The debate would be complex and multi-layered, considering ideological biases and personal interests and historical loyalties that may be at stake. Yet the complexity of the issue in no way means that the debate isn't worth having. Despite this complexity, one side might be justified in its belief that it holds the key to the problem.

Christians believe that we are not merely stuck with a set of incompatible stories about God amongst which we will need to make the best possible guess on the limited evidence available. We believe that amidst all human conversations about God, God himself has appeared on the scene. As Lesslie Newbigin says, when a person we have been talking about appears herself amidst the conversation partners, the nature of the conversation changes, or at least it should. We are invited to enter into a conversation with the person we have so far been talking about.* Christians witness to Christ among the religions, because we believe that He has entirely changed the nature of the conversation and we want to invite others to join us in our grateful recognition of this Savior and Lord of all.

About the author

Benno van den Toren taught Christian doctrine and apologetics in Bangui, Central African Republic, and Oxford, UK. He is currently professor of Intercultural Theology at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen, the Netherlands. His research and teaching focuses on African theology, the role of the worldwide church for our understanding of Christ and the Scriptures, and inter-religious apologetic witness. In Groningen, he is involved in a small church plant. Benno is married to Berdine, a mission partner for the Church Mission Society-UK, and they have three sons. He loves travelling and getting to know people from different cultural backgrounds.

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Discussion questions

Read Benno van den Toren, “Why inter-religious dialogue needs apologetics,” and John 10:1–21.

1. What does Jesus mean in John 10:10 when he says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (NIV)?
2. Did reasoning about truth play a role in your conversion or the conversion of someone you know?
3. What makes the difference between manipulation and freely offering God’s gift of love?
4. How do you respond to religious relativism, the idea that religious convictions can have nothing to do with a universal and objective reality?
5. What might you say to a member of another religion who thinks their religion is true and good?

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Creation, mission and Christ's witnesses

Exploring the biblical concept of witness

Fernando Abilio Mosquera Brand—Translated from the Spanish by Ellie Monteiro and Robert W. Heimburger

In this brief article I seek to demonstrate that witness, creation, and mission are closely linked concepts that inter-relate and intertwine in the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments. I will deal with these topics in the following order: 1) a semantic analysis of the term "witness"; 2) the relationship of witness, creation, and mission; and 3) the social and political responsibilities that witness entails.

1. A semantic analysis of the term "witness"

The term "witness" is used in a range of contexts: on the one hand it can be used for legal processes, where the intervention of third parties is necessary to help judges make correct and fair decisions. In this

context, the testimonies of the conflicting parties (the plaintiff and the defendant) are not likely to be conclusive. Each will speak from their own perspective, pursuing their own interests. In this context, the presence of witnesses is essential in determining the truth. Regarding the legal meaning of the term, Manuel Ossorio states that “the term has importance in the area of judicial procedure since testimony is a means to check the veracity of the facts that are debated in a trial or criminal case.”*

In Old Testament jurisprudence, a witness (*‘et-‘ud*) was required to be trustworthy without any doubt or suspicion. It was expressly forbidden for the individual to be *‘et hamas*, a false witness, behaving like the wicked (Exodus 23:1). Due to legal provisions, a witness was committed to the *emeth* (truth), and so they could not testify falsely at court. The author of the Book of Proverbs echoes this provision, signalling the trustworthy character of the ideal witness when he states that “an honest witness does not deceive, but a false witness pours out lies” (Prov 14:5, NIV). In the literary work *Salamina*, Javier Negrete places the following statement in the mouth of Phoenix the Grammarian, Themistocles’s professor: “Truth is the cornerstone of virtue.”* Negrete stresses the role of truth when the professor teaches students that “not even the gods escape the obligation of telling the truth.”* These statements summarize the essence of the truthful witness.

The forensic character of witness is further confirmed by Harrison, who explains that “in antiquity like today, this was a legal term that designated the testimony given for or against someone in court.”* It is also used as a technical term within Christianity. In this context, the term means “the testimony given by Christian witnesses about Christ and his saving power.”*

The concept arises within biblical semantics expressed through the Hebrew term (*‘et –‘ud*) and the Greek expression *martyr*. Both words mean witness.

The appearance of the word *‘ud* 44 times in the Old Testament displays the richness and importance of both words. In the New Testament, the concept appears in five different forms: a) the adjective *mártir-mártys* (witness, confessor of the faith), 35 times; b) the noun *martyría* (testimony, evidence), 33 times; c) the noun *martyrion* (proof, praise), 20 times; d) the verb *martyréo* (attest, testify), 76 times, and e) the verb *martyromai* (affirm, call as witness, witness), 5 times.

In this brief work, I will address the Judeo-Christian meaning of the term “witness,” beginning with a vision of witness in the context of creation and mission.

2. Witness, creation and mission

One of the primary truths we need to know about God has to do with mission. All the acts of God in history are salvific, characterised by his grace, love, mercy, goodness, and justice. God is a missionary being who makes himself known both in the universe and in eternity. Since the creation of the cosmos, God has acted as a missionary and will continue to do so as long as the universe exists. His mission is an act of salvation. God’s great mission is to save and restore for himself his creation that was alienated by sin.

God advances his missionary action through mediators; he uses agents who are responsible for carrying out the mission. Intervening in this evangelising act are the Trinity as well as the angels who are God’s emissaries, taking his message to specific people and executing certain plans. In a decisive and committed way, his holy people also intervene.

God’s project of salvation and his creation are inseparably intertwined, since his project of salvation involves the creation and the creation presupposes his mission. Within this order of ideas, the Bible considers creation from three different perspectives: as *res creatio*, *res escatologica*, and *res misiologica*. As *res creatio*, creation is presented as a sovereign, free and loving act of God, without any pre-existing material. For this reason, in theology we affirm *creatio ex nihilo*, which means that at the beginning of time and before the beginning of time God alone existed, and outside of him there was only absolute inexistence.

When we speak about God and creation, we always face a paradox which takes us to the limits of human reasoning. Our human reasoning is not capable of explaining what it is to be God, and it cannot do so due to our inherent limitations.

God is distinguished perfectly from the created world, but he is united to the world not in a symbiotic or immanent way but by his providence (Psalm 104). God is not of this world, he is not the world, he does not form part of the world, and the world does not form part of him, but he is active in the world and he sustains it as a provident being. As such, he acts in the world, inside the world, and outside of the world in favour of the world. In this world, God acts in a natural way and also in a supernatural way.

According to Pauline theology, creation makes two of God's qualities visible: his eternal power and his deity. In other words, creation is transparent to God's being, as Psalm 19:1 says: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (NIV). According to this Psalm, the heavens play the role of proclaiming God's glory. The psalmist assigns the sidereal realm a special mission: to proclaim to whomever is watching the hidden being of God through the manifestation of his glory. The glory of God is the visible manifestation of his hidden being. Habakkuk says: "His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth" (3:3b, NIV). In Yahweh's claim against the people of Israel, God makes use of a prosopopoeia and calls the heavens (*hash-shamayim*) and the earth (*ha-arets*) as witnesses against his people (Deuteronomy 4:25–26). In this case, the heavens and the earth are incorruptible witnesses that stand on the side of truth and justice. The firmament is thus a kind of preacher, declaring to humanity that both the heavens themselves and everything enveloped by them proceed from Elohim's hands. Thus, the heavens and the earth, indeed the entire cosmos, are witnesses (*ed-'ud*) of God's existence, power and majesty.

The theological meaning of creation arises both from an understanding of the *arché* (source) of all material existence and from an eschatological perspective, in which creation is brought to completion and all material existence is transformed. According to the Letter to the Ephesians, creation is brought to fulfilment when it exalts God's glory. God has created us so that we worship him and submit to his sovereignty. He has created us for the praise of the glory of the ineffable Trinity. Creation exists by him, in him, and for him, by him it will be transformed and recreated. In this sense, creation is God's witness (*ed-'ud-martyr*).

As the owner of the earth (Psalm 24:1–2), God loaned it to us so that we could live here responsibly. Thus we live in a planet that we don't own, loaned to humanity so that on it we fulfil the project of salvation that God has delegated to our species.

The redemption achieved by Christ does not only apply to humanity, but it has a universal scope since the entire creation benefits from it. The Apostle Paul confirms this truth in Romans 8:18–23. The world will be recreated for God's glory and honour. To this end, the Holy Spirit is making a tremendous effort to bring creation back to the perfection ordered by God.

Thus, the salvation offered by Christ will also redeem the entire creation. This means that nature will no longer suffer the effects of sin and it will be freed from destructibility. When Paul speaks about the corruption of creation, he is not speaking of moral, ethical, and spiritual ruin but of the destructibility and deterioration of nature. The cosmic recreation will imply the perfecting of nature. We have been appointed as Christ's witnesses of this deep and impacting truth.

There is one more matter I wish to address: there is a solemn and sublime Christological reference in the reality that the terms "witness" and "testimony" evoke. In the servant's poems, Isaiah addresses this issue. The shoot of the house of Jesse is appointed as witness to the nations about Yahweh's portents and about his project of salvation (Is 55:4). From the Exodus onward, the entire history of Israel is a powerful testimony of God's project of salvation. This is why God declares to his people as a Yahwist society and a precursor of the Messiah that they are his witnesses (Is 43:10; 44:8). Most of the texts in the New Testament that allude to the concepts of witness, witnessing, and testimony are highly Christological: the Church is the indubitable, reliable witness of Christ. Jesus himself gave the church a vocation when he entrusted her with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). The community of the saints is Christ's witness and testifies throughout the earth.

3. Social and political responsibilities

Today, witnesses of the Lord Jesus have the prophetic responsibility of promoting and defending the business of the King in various social, political, and economic spaces. Witnesses must intervene as prophets in violent contexts, exhorting aggressors and creating within them an awareness of their responsibility and social commitments so they might cease their violent actions against the weak. They must intervene as prophets so that various governments protect their citizens from violent acts, both internal and external, and commit to seeking the common good. They must intervene to protect and claim rights and goods that have been expropriated from communities that are vulnerable or have been displaced by violence. As contemporary prophets, with respect to these three groups (states, victims, and aggressors), witnesses of Jesus Christ must have as their top priority the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom that includes the elements stated here.

Many of the churches of Christ in Colombia have worked strenuously and courageously among these three groups (states, victims, and aggressors) to promote conditions of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation among the conflicting parties. With this purpose, they

have ministered in prisons, through church organisations, through theological institutions, and through churches turned into sanctuaries of peace. Restorative communities have been created. Processes of evangelism, discipleship, and mercy missions have been used to make possible reconciling encounters between victims and aggressors. At the same time, they have made the Colombian government aware of its responsibility in propagating conflict, whether by action or omission. In a Colombia of armed conflict, the church of Christ has been a reliable and faithful witness.

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About the author

Fernando Abilio Mosquera Brand is a philosopher who holds bachelor's degrees in theology and philosophy, a master's degree in theology, and a doctorate in political philosophy (civil and canonical), graduating *magna cum laude* from the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana of Medellín in Colombia. He is a former constituent of the Constituent Assembly of the Department of Antioquia, Emeritus Professor at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia (FUSBC), and the author of seven books combining philosophy, theology, and biblical studies. Two of these relate to the theme of this article: *Exposición de Efesios (An exposition of Ephesians)* and *Utopía, ética y esperanza (Utopia, ethics, and hope)*. He is married and has one son and two grandchildren.

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Discussion questions

Read Psalm 19:1–6.

1. In what sense are the heavens God's witnesses?
2. What relationship is there between mission and Christian witness?
3. What challenges does today's society pose for witnesses of Christ?
4. What social and political function should witnesses of Christ play today?

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