

Take the Witness Stand!

Often I am deeply provoked by, and sometimes guilty of, the statement that goes something like this: "Now, here's the straight story on this situation, but don't quote me." You will recognize the type of person: the one who is always trying to impress you with his knowledge of the truth, but who never wants to be quoted. This is the kind of timid soul who knows that so-and-so is either guilty or not guilty, but who will never take the witness stand to say so. His timidity reflects a kind of craven weakness of character that ought to concern our thought this morning.

We are living through a time in which people are quick to witness for their prejudices but reluctant to speak out for their convictions. The atmosphere of our present society is so laden with the weight of fear that people are getting afraid to express themselves on anything. Recently the Capitol-Times newspaper of Madison, Wisconsin, made a startling discovery. It conducted a survey to see how many people would say outright that they believed in the Declaration of Independence. 111 out of the 112 persons they interviewed refused to sign. The New York Post, conducting a similar petition, found that out of 161 persons selected at random only 19 would sign up to the fact that they believed in the Declaration of Independence. This is convincing proof of the fact of fear that pervades our society. We are so stricken with witch hunts and heresy trials that few people are willing to stand up and be counted for anything.

This is a symptom of deadly peril to our society. For when people are so overcome with intimidation and fear that they stand up for nothing they have thereby created a moral and spiritual vacuum into which the forces of evil quickly move. This is precisely what happened in Germany as the Nazis rose to power. Many people in Germany saw what was happening and disapproved, but they had not the courage to stand up and witness against what they knew to be wrong. As we met some of these people in Germany last summer and heard their excuses that there was nothing they could have done to stop Hitler they appeared in a rather pathetic light.

This morning I am speaking to Christian people who say they believe in the truth of the Christian Gospel. I wonder how many of us in days like these are willing to



take the witness stand for our faith. The necessity of witnessing in these days should be a source of grave concern to people who call themselves Christian. Taking the witness stand regularly has two important aspects for the Christian.

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For one thing taking the witness stand is a sure way to gain personal integrity. The wishy-washy, weak-kneed, spineless type of person commands neither the respect of others nor the respect of himself. No one, least of all the person himself, admires the weak self that won't take a stand on anything.

Howard Thurman tells of a friend, a teacher in a certain divinity school, who became involved in a school controversy. The issue had to do with a colleague and student. The faculty became split over the issue. Eventually the board of trustees was brought into the situation and it was established that each faculty member would have to take a stand for or against. As things developed to be "for" was to stand with the trustees. The issue could not be dodged and everyone had to take a stand. Thurman said that for the first time in his life his friend took a stand that involved him in a situation vital to his own security. He decided to stand with minority. The next fall, he was teaching in another institution. In commenting on the situation he said: "For the first time in my life, I felt that I was a man. It was the first time that I could not hedge, but instead I had to take sides in accordance with the integrity of my convictions without regard to possible consequences. I became a new person, way down deep." (DEEP IS THE HUNGER, P.7) This is the way, evidently, to personal integrity/

Without attempting to solicit your sympathy may I say that this is the position in which a preacher constantly finds himself. Preaching is a hazardous occupation for it requires that a man take a stand. No one would care to listen continually to innocuous utterances that failed to reveal inner conviction. But often when a preacher takes a stand he faces the danger of incurring the wrath and disapproval of certain persons. On the one hand it would seem that the preacher should avoid touching on controversial issues. But Christianity, if strictly applied, will inevitably strike controversy with many interests. This is for the simple fact that our world is not Christian. And yet continuously the preacher must lay his convictions on the line where they are open



to the fire of people who do not have to take stands themselves in such a public way. Everyone has heard of the typical church member who quits the church in anger when the preacher says something he doesn't like. ~~Thank~~ Thankfully there are few of this kind of brethren. I have an idea that <sup>you</sup> ~~you~~ would not appreciate the preacher who submitted all of his sermons and ~~convitions~~ to a kind of pulpit censoring committee before he preached them to see if ~~they~~ would offend anyone. I am sure that you would have little respect for the personal integrity of such a preacher, and it is certain that he would despise himself. Actually as a Christian preacher I do not feel sorry for myself because I am involved in a hazardous profession.

There are some people who <sup>(Nicksman)</sup> stoutly maintain that it is impossible for a true Christian to engage in politics. Against this idea I vehemently contend. I know that many of the rules of the game in politics preclude Christian virtue, and I know that a Christian <sup>no life</sup> in politics hangs by a thread. Maybe he can't even be elected. But he can take a stand, and if he is defeated because of the stand he takes he at least has earned his personal integrity and the respect of many others. Let him go down to defeat; but he has taken the witness stand for what ought to be right in politics.

Actually a person of integrity is a responsible person. And, in the words of Howard Thurman, "Responsibility means, essentially, standing up to be counted. It means the ability to look things squarely in the face and pay the price for what one does."  
(DEEP IS THE HUNGER, p. 127)

The person who never takes a stand exposes himself to a perilous position because he may become the victim eventually of something that is terribly wrong. Peter Marshall, the late Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, caught this idea in a famous prayer before the senate: "God give us the courage to stand for something lest we fall for everything." Sooner or later a person has to take a stand, But far too often he falls for someone else's stand which is wrong.

Personal integrity is not confined to any one class of people. The lack of integrity is often the mark of educated, so-called refined and cultured people. A recent writer, Roger Hazelton, laments the fact that our age has lost its intellectual conscience. "A wise teacher of the humanities," he writes, "has rightly complained that education



gives the student no sense of what he has to stand for in life. As if to underline this indictment a well-known scientist in one of our larger universities recently confessed to a friend: 'I don't know why I'm here or what I'm for.' (RENEWING THE MIND, p.33ff)

Students may study communism, socialism, democracy, fascism, atheism, and Christianity all in a quite dispassionate and objective light. But when they have finished their intellectual examination they may still stand for none of them. But we might ask, Which one will you stand up for?

Richard Niebuhr has put it this way: "Each believer reaches his own 'final' conclusion, in resolutions that involve a leap from the chair in which he has read about ancient battles into the middle of a present conflict." (CHRIST AND CULTURE, 233)

I happen to hold many pacifists in high regard. I do not agree with them all the way through. Some I think are muddle-headed. Others are intellectually brilliant. Today they are severely chastised and condemned, often by fellow Christians, even when their convictions are rooted in the Christian Gospel. But regardless of their public condemnation I know that some of them are men and women of the greatest personal integrity. They have had the courage to take a stand as God has given them the light to stand. Though they are held in violent public disapproval they do have personal integrity. And that is very deep and precious.

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In the second place taking the witness stand is simply the only way to witness for Christ. As Christians we are called upon to witness for him but we cannot do this by shrinking away from certain stands. *you can't hide your witness under a bushel!*

There is no better example of all of us than that of Peter in the courtyard as he tried to conceal his identity during the trial of Jesus. With what biting accuracy does that description of Peter fit us: "And he followed him afar off." At the very moment when Jesus faced his accusers there was no one to take the witness stand for him. Several witnessed against him, but not a single soul stood up to witness for him! Not even the great Peter who cravenly clung to the darkness outside. Even when he was recognized and confronted with his relationship to Jesus his soul slunk down like a dog in denial. Did this mean that he had not believed in Jesus? Did he no longer believe the things Jesus had preached? Indeed, he probably still believed all of that.



But he didn't have what it takes to take the witness stand.

The famous Amsterdam Conference of 1948 issued this statement: "The world in passing judgment on the Church is perfectly entitled to turn against it the word of the Master Himself: 'By their fruits you shall know them.'" (MAN'S DISORDER AND GOD'S DESIGN, Vol.II. p.204) "What is the use," that conference declared, "of the church speaking, if people can always point to the contrast between the worth of Christianity and the unworthiness of Christians." (pibib.Vol.II p.111).

Whether we Christians are comfortable in the fact or not, it is true that we are on trial before the world - before this very community. For when you walk out of this church people expect ~~txy~~ you to witness for Christ. And if you don't take the witness stand for him they are likely to ~~take~~ you as a big joke. Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian wrote that the Christians of his day were like a flock of geese living in a barnyard. When the seventh day came they all paraded to a corner of the yard to hear their most eloquent orator get up on the fence and speak of the wonders of geese. He described the exploits of their forefathers who had dared to mount up on wings and fly all over the sky. He recalled the mercy of the Creator who had given them wings and the instinct to fly. All of this impressed the geese most deeply. They nodded their heads solemnly in assent. When he was through they applauded the eloquence of the preaching goose. But there was one thing they did not do. They did not fly. They went back to their dinners. They did not fly for the corn was good and the barnyard secure. (story told by Halford Luccock in Christ. Cent. May 11, 1949, p.584) Does that describe people who go to church?

But the world expects us, with all of our praying, praising, and preaching, to take the witness stand. I heard once of a stunt artist who was preparing to cross over Niagara Falls on a tight rope as he pushed a wheelbarrow. As he was getting poised for the start he was greeted by non-believers who heckled him mercilessly. But there was one man who called out above the crowd: "I think you can make it!" "Good!" replied the stunt artist. "Get in the wheelbarrow!" Some times our beliefs would make sense only if we responded to a challenge like that.

A Christian student is one who takes the witness stand in his school. No one laughs



or cheats him out of his ideals. Daily he takes the witness stand in his school life. A ~~Christian~~ business man does the same. Sometimes business <sup>men not</sup> are expected to be honest and trustworthy. But a Christian takes the witness stand in the name of Christ.

The times come when we are called upon to witness in the deeper realms of life. When a person suddenly finds himself plunged into the depths of sorrow he must still take the witness stand. He shows now that he still believes, in times of adversity, in the gospel he has proclaimed when the sun was shining. One of our finest ministers <sup>(Walter Dickhaut)</sup> confessed the other day that he had always regarded himself as an effective minister to the bereaved. But when his own dear wife passed away there was such an emptiness in his life that he was tempted to grow morose and bitter. But still he must take the witness stand - now more than ever.

Several years ago when the Empire Exhibition was held at Johannesburg, South Africa, many people were disappointed by a strange technical hitch. It had been planned to throw a powerful 3,000-foot beam of light up into the sky. But at the time expected the beam could not be seen, even though the 14 million candle-power beacon was in working order. The light was invisible because they had failed to take into account the climate of Johannesburg. There was no humidity, no dust, no cloud for it to be reflected against. Light is invisible unless it strikes an object. So it is with the Light of the World which is Christ. That light is still in the world, shining in darkness. But unless it falls upon lives to be reflected it will never be seen. When we step into that light with our sorrows, our convictions, our courage, and our daily examples, then the light of Christ is reflected in the world. Stepping into that light is like taking the witness stand. And that is what Christians are called upon to do. *Today Christ is on trial before the great masses of the world. Do we follow him afar off, afraid to take the witness stand on his behalf?*

Have you ever really taken the witness stand for Christ? Are you not really ashamed of your moral and spiritual neutrality, your shrinking back into the shadows to conceal your convictions when you ought to take the stand? Ah, this world is in crisis and needs our witness. Can we sing together this day:

Trying to walk in the steps of the Savior,  
Trying to follow our Savior and King;  
Shaping our lives by His blessed example,  
Happy, how happy, the songs that we bring.

How beautiful to walk in the steps of the Savior, Stepping in the  
How beautiful to walk in the steps of the Savior, Led in paths of  
light.

Light,