IN DEED AND WORD

Excerpts from "The Vocation of Witness"
***in* The Company of the Committed**

Elton Trueblood

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that all witness necessarily involves the use of the first person singular. My testimony bears, I believe, on something independent of me, something objectively real, but I cannot escape the necessity of my personal affirmation. It is never somebody in general who bears witness; it is always an individual with an individual consciousness. "Some person" is a highly generalized expression, perfectly suitable in abstract discussions, but far removed from the only concrete reality which we know. In the long run I cannot possibly speak for another. All that I can do is to say humbly, yet courageously, "I was there; it happened to me; I experienced such and such at such a point in historical time." To be meaningful, testimony must be both personal and historical.

Though it is widely supposed that natural science shows us a realm in which we are free from personal involvement, this conclusion is manifestly false. We use the intricate machines which we have made, but at the end of every scientific road is a person, the individual scientist, who affirms that he has observed. The machine facilitates the sharpness of observation, but cannot avoid its necessity. What we call natural science is possible as a reliable discipline because a number of people, with adequate and relevant preparation of their powers of observation, often succeed in corroborating the witness of one another.

Astronomy becomes a science when a fellowship of careful and honorable searchers "see" what another of their number has "seen." The success of the science depends upon the cumulative agreement of the personal testimonies.

When we begin to apply this analysis to religious experience the similarity of pattern is obvious at once. The ultimate thing which anyone can say about the Living God is "I have encountered Him: He has reached me; He stood at my door and knocked, and, when I opened the door, He came in and communed with me." The person who provides such a witness could be wrong; he could be lying; but his is the ultimate evidence. We can, by careful reasoning, provide systematic support for what he reports, or we may undermine it by introducing what seem to be relevant negative considerations, but his evidence is the basic stuff of our entire enterprise. This is the point of Pascal's well-known distinction between the God of philosophers, on the one hand, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, on the other. The God of the philosopher can never be a substitute for the God of faith and experience. In short, philosophy may perform a useful service in *discussing* the testimony, but it is not itself the testimony.

In the long run the only answer to unfaith is the witness of those whose lives are of such a character that their witness is listened to by honest men and women. Millions of people, as in Christ's time, are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36), and they are really waiting to hear someone say, both

humbly and bravely, "This I have learned. Here I stand." It is slightly shocking to some modern men and women to realize that when Christ said the laborers were few, He and those to whom He spoke were surrounded by large numbers of priests and semi-professional religious men. The priests in Jerusalem were so numerous that they had to take turns in performing Temple ceremonies. The dearth was of persons who could give the only kind of witness that counts with those looking for help, the kind that is couched in the first person singular. The great need is for men who can say with the man who had been blind, "One thing I know" (John 9:25).

Because modern man will not listen to mere speculation but may listen to the record of experience, whether in science or religion, we may confidently assert that the theology which stresses the trustworthiness and importance of religious experience is likely to return to general favor. Increasingly, the best theology moves from the impersonal to the personal, and, even more importantly, from the third person to the second, so far as the Living God is concerned. The only God worth discussing is the "Absolute Thou," the One to whom men can pray, the One who can meet us on the way in the breaking of bread, in the recognition of our need for penitence, and in the labor of remaking some little sector of God's world. It will not be surprising if, in our troubled time, we return again and again to Marcel's memorable phrase, "a theology which is not based on testimony must be looked at with suspicion."[1]. . .

[1] Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Pt. II (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1960), p. 139.

Part of the paradox of our time lies in the double fact that we are now ready to listen to witness but are hesitant to give it. We avoid the witness stand insofar as our religion is concerned, with the odd result that although religion is popular its dominant mood is apologetic. Christian colleges want, in many areas, to hide the basic Christian commitment of their institutions, for it is something of which they are slightly ashamed. Many persons are terribly fearful of seeming pious. Something must have occurred in their childhood for them to develop what is essentially a phobia on this point. The strangest result of this phobia is that great numbers of people continue to fight against a danger which may once have been real, but is so no longer. A little realism in observation would teach us that the genuine danger *we* face, whatever our ancestors may have faced, is that of a mood in which people are so terribly apologetic that they refuse to witness at all. A part of wisdom about life is willingness to fight on contemporary rather than on outworn fronts.

The apologetic mood, which resists the making of personal testimony on the grounds of modesty, is surprisingly inconsistent. People defend their failure to testify by reference to their tenderness toward others, but it is easy to observe that such gentility does not extend to other areas of experience. It certainly does not extend to economics and to politics, where we express our opinions endlessly and forcefully. We are not reticent in saying which athletic teams we support and in announcing our support vociferously. How odd that it is only in regard to the spiritual life that we are reticent! It is hard to avoid the conclusion that

what poses as a virtue is really a vice. A little self-analysis reveals the fact that what we call humility is actually fear of involvement which is costly in time, in money, and in peace of mind. We avoid witnessing because we recognize that it comes at a high price!

It is one thing to recognize that there is no vital Christianity without witness; it is another to know how a valid witness is to be made. Few are superficial enough to suppose that it can be made effectively by standing up in a crowded room to declare one's allegiance to the cause of Jesus Christ. But if not that way, then how? We can begin our answer by observing that testimony must be in both deed and word. The spoken word is never really effective unless it is backed up by a life, but it is also true that the living deed is never adequate without the support which the spoken word can provide. This is because no life is ever good enough. The person who says naively, "I don't need to preach; I just let my life speak," is insufferably self-righteous. What one among us is so good that he can let his life speak and leave it at that? We should make our lives as good as we possibly can, but at the end of the day we are still imperfect and unworthy. If our expressed faith were not better than our practice, we should make practically no progress at all. Anyone can end hypocrisy simply by lowering his principles to accord with his practice, but it is easy to see that the result would be loss rather than gain.

The more we think of it the more we are shocked intellectually by the modish supposition that verbal witness is somehow evil or presumptuous. Such an idea is

always the result of shallow thinking which comes as a reaction to a supposed evil of the past, but fails to realize that the alternative to one evil may be another. There has to be a verbal witness because there cannot be communication of important *convictions* without language. "I cannot by being good," says Samuel M. Shoemaker, "tell of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection, nor of my faith in His divinity. The emphasis is too much on me, and too little on Him."[2] We must use words because our faith must be in something vastly greater than ourselves. We make a witness by telling not *who* we are but *whose* we are. Though it would be ridiculous for me to try to make a witness by telling of my own righteousness, which, after all, does not exist, it is not at all ridiculous for me to confess, with candor, to Whom I am committed. This is why the Vocation of Witness belongs necessarily to the Company of the Committed, rather than to the company of the good or the wise or the prudent. The truth is that our words, which can express something of our ultimate loyalty, can be far better than we are, yet for them we are responsible. This seems to be the point of Christ's statement, which is so shocking to our generation, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37).

The purpose of witness in the law court is justice, but the purpose of witness in the life of the Church is evangelism. By evangelism is meant the deliberate effort to extend the area of Christ's influence, both in individual lives in which this influence is needed and in all areas of

[2] Samuel M. Shoemaker, *Creating Christian Cells*, Faith at Work, p. 51.

common life. The widespread aversion to evangelism seems to rest largely on our difficulty in distinguishing between it and proselytizing. Evangelism is the effort to facilitate the growth of new life, while proselytizing is the effort to enhance the power, prestige, or numbers of one's own particular sect or organization. It ought to be obvious that we can reject the latter while espousing the former, for the former is implicit in any genuine conviction. No one whose life has been truly touched by the life of Christ is free to leave the matter there; he must, as a consequence, extend the boon. We can use many figures to make this clear. One way of clarification is to point out that we dare not let the chain reaction stop with us. No one to whom the love of Christ has been mediated so that he is in some sense a new person, is free to let this stop so long as he lives. If he has been, in any sense, liberated, he must join in the eternal fellowship of liberation. If the enkindling fire (Luke 12:49) which Christ said He came to light has in any sense entered his soul, he cannot rest until he lights as many other fires as possible. In short, a person cannot be a Christian and avoid being an evangelist. Evangelism is not a professionalized job of a few gifted or trained men but is, instead, the unrelenting responsibility of every person who belongs, even in the most modest way, to the Company of Jesus. . . .

The value of the individual story of Christ's healing power lies largely in the undeniable fact that each human life stands at a unique point in the total web of human experience, and, as a consequence, each one has an approach to others which is not identical with the oppor-

tunity of any other human being. If I do not open the door for another, it may never be opened, for it is possible that I may be the only one who holds this particular key. The worker on the production line may have an entree to the life of his fellow worker on the line which can never be matched by any pastor or teacher or professional evangelist. The responsibility of each individual Christian is to do that which no other person can do as well as he can.

While we must never minimize the value of the witness of the separated individual, we should also recognize that sometimes the best witness is that of the Church as a whole. If the Church is primarily a witnessing society, we must try to think how the joint testimony can be made. What can the group do in this regard which the lone individual cannot do? It can build a building, it can raise a spire for men and women to see as a reminder, it can hold meetings which are open to all seekers. Even the very attendance at these meetings, which seems so inadequate, may constitute a witness of a sort. Perhaps it is the only thing that very timid people can do. If so, we must never even give the suggestion of despising it. We can paraphrase Milton by saying that they also serve who only attend. Sometimes they do it with such faithfulness that others take note and follow, perhaps after years of seeming failure to be impressed.

It is in the general setting of the necessity of giving witness and the consequent fellowship of witness that the famous doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers begins to come alive. All Christians must be in the

ministry, whatever their occupations, because the nonwitnessing follower of Christ is a contradiction in terms. If we take seriously Christ's first group order, the command to let our light shine, we dare not let the witness be limited to a small group of the professionally religious. Therefore the ministry of Christ must be universal. It must be universal in three specific ways. It must involve *all places*; it must involve *all times*; it must involve *all Christian persons*, male and female, lay and clerical, old and young.

There is no possibility of a genuine renewal of the life of the Church in our time unless the principle of universal witness is accepted without reservation. The struggle against apathy is so great a task that if we are to achieve even a semblance of a victory we cannot be satisfied to leave Christian work to ordained clergymen. The number one Christian task of our time is the enlargement and adequate training of our ministry which, in principle, includes our total membership. This is a large order, and one which often seems discouraging in prospect, but we cannot settle for anything less and yet be loyal to the idea of Christ's revolutionary company.

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We do not have to wait until we know the whole truth about anything to make our witness. If we were to wait for this, we should wait forever. There is a paradox in the fact that we can bear witness to the truth without claiming to be possessors of it. The truth is bigger than our systems, yet we must give testimony to the little that we now see. I must risk my reputation on the point at which I am willing to stand, even though much beyond that point is hazy. Only as we are willing to declare where we *are* are we likely to go beyond this unsatisfactory point. It is in this spirit that testimony is able to reconcile the two moods which seem so deeply opposed: boldness and humility. We can never say, "This I know beyond a shadow of doubt," for that kind of certainty is not given to finite men. All we can say is that "we are persuaded." What we mean is that we are willing to stake everything upon the conviction. This is the significance of Marcel's great statement that "every testimony is based on a commitment and to be incapable of committing oneself is to be incapable of bearing witness."[3]

The evidence of the gospel is not primarily in some document but in the lives of Christ's followers. It is the modest persons who have heard Christ's call to involvement and who try, imaginatively, to respond, who constitute the proof that the gospel is true. Since the proof is never completed, each person is important. Each is important because each can add, by some unique and irrevocable act, to the cumulative evidence.

[3] Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence* (London: Harvill Press, 1948), p. 68.

D. Elton Trueblood (1900-1994), the descendant of seventeenth-century Quaker settlers in North Carolina, was born into a farming family in Iowa. A hard-working and talented scholar, he graduated from William Penn College, Oskaloosa, IA, in 1922 and went on to graduate study at Brown, Hartford Theological Seminary, and Harvard. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from Johns Hopkins in 1934.

He combined the three vocations of educator, writer, and preacher during his long career. He taught at Guilford College, Greensboro, NC, then at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, before moving on to serve as chaplain of Stanford University in Palo Alto, CA, from 1936 to 1945. Then as at other times in his life, he came into contact—and often struck up friendships—with many noted public figures, theologians, politicians and others. He also published the first six of his 33 books during this period.

With his wife, Pauline Goodenow Trueblood, and family he went in 1945 to Richmond, Indiana, to teach philosophy at Earlham College. There he was called to work towards the founding of "a seminary that would train young Friends for service to the Society of Friends in both programmed and unprogrammed traditions." Earlham School of Religion opened in 1960. On his retirement from Earlham in 1966, the College named him "Professor at Large," a position he held until his death. He was a member of Indiana Yearly Meeting.

Elton Trueblood came to Washington, DC, in 1954 to assist President Dwight Eisenhower's administration in founding

the United States Information Agency (USIA). At the same time, Pauline Trueblood was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor; she passed away in early 1955. Elton Trueblood would later marry Virginia Hodgin.

Elton's philosophy, according to biographer James Newby, was that of "a liberal evangelical. For Elton, the only reason for faith was to share it. He did not believe in individual religion." His strong concern for an ecumenical "reinvigoration of religious faith as the essential force necessary to sustain the ethical, moral and social principles on which a humane and livable world order could be built" (Landrum Bolling) led him to found the Yokefellow movement. Aimed at "strengthening spiritual values within the broader society," this international movement emphasizes the ministry of all believers. Its members include laity and clergy from a number of Christian denominations.

Although he was not in unity with many Friends on some political issues, he participated actively in the struggle against racial discrimination. His views encompassed "what some saw as contradictory beliefs and habits: liberal and conservative, traditional and innovative, compassionate and tough-minded, generous and demanding." Rigorous personal discipline and clarity of expression characterized his writing and speaking; he "had an amazing ability to translate complex philosophical concepts into simple terms." His leadership and warm friendliness touched the lives of many people.

The biographical information in this pamphlet is derived with permission from the article "A Tribute to D. Elton Trueblood" by Landrum Bolling in the March 1995 (Series XXXVI, No. 2) issue of *Quaker Life*, a religious magazine published ten times annually under the auspices of Friends United Meeting. For more information, write to Quaker Life, 101 Quaker Hill Drive, Richmond, IN 47374-1980, USA. Reference was also made to the article "Thanks, Elton" by Carol Beals and Doug Underwood in the April 1995 (Vol. I, No. 2) issue of *Sounds of Silence*, published two times a year by the Earlham School of Religion for alumni/ae, students, and friends of ESR.

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