

Christian witness exists in the context of “dawning light” (1 John 2:8) – light that is progressively dispelling the darkness unto the noonday brightness of Jesus’ great appearing and the fullness of His kingdom in the new heavens and earth. In the present age, Christians are the light in the darkness and this light manifests itself as a new way of being human, not simply a new message (2 Corinthians 4). This is because Jesus is the true light and His people radiate His light as sharers in His life by His Spirit. In a very real way, Christians are Christ in the world; they bear His fragrance and their lives make Him known in a world alienated from Him.

In one sense, then, witness to Christ is the most natural thing for Christians – it accords with their new life and nature as sharing in Christ’s life. Their witness is nothing more and nothing less than their authentic day-to-day existence as those who’ve been resurrected in the Messiah and whose lives are hidden with Him in God. Christians *are* light in the Lord, but the light exists in the darkness and this makes witness to Christ a foreign thing: It is foreign to those who are darkness, but it is also alien to the darkness that yet remains in the regenerate mind. And so true Christian witness is the result of *Christiformity* – of “learning Christ.” And this is a work in which the believer has full responsibility in the ongoing obligation to “put on Christ” and “walk in the Spirit” according to the reality and power of new creation (Galatians 5; Ephesians 4-6).

Christ’s people must “learn” Him, and thus the central place of the Scriptures in the Christian life. The Spirit imparts *Him* to His people by renewing their minds and forming His mind in them (Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 2:12-16; Ephesians 4:20-24), and this renewal occurs as the Spirit reveals Him (His person, work, purpose) through the Scriptures (cf. Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 5:39 with 15:26, 16:13-15). The Spirit illumines the truth of the Scriptures, thereby revealing the Son and enabling people to know Him in truth. But this presses the question of how one knows that his insight is coming from the Spirit. *How can a person be confident that his understanding of the Scriptures and the Messiah they reveal is true according to the leading of the Spirit?* After all, doesn’t every Christian believe this about himself, even while recognizing that others have a different understanding and approach to the Scriptures?

Answering this question must begin with the nature and function of the Scriptures and the relationship of the Spirit to them. The Scriptures are not a catalog of principles and truths intended to function as a manual for successful living. Neither do they embody a theological treatise or present a systematic theology. The Scriptures tell the story of God’s purposes for the world, accomplished through His own interaction in the world through the processes of human history. They record history as it is the “salvation history” – the history of God’s work of salvation (deliverance and renewal) – not of human beings only, but the whole creation. This salvation has Jesus, the Messiah, at its center, and this is the sense in which all of the Scriptures testify of Him. The Old Testament scriptures recount the salvation history as it predicted and prepared for God’s saving work in His Messiah, while the New Testament scriptures reveal Jesus of Nazareth to be that Messiah by virtue of Him fulfilling all that the Old Testament disclosed and promised. *Put most simply, the Old Testament constructs the case for God’s kingdom rule over His creation, and the New Testament proclaims that that kingdom has been inaugurated in Jesus the Messiah.* Thus the gospel writers present Jesus as the son of Abraham and David, the messianic “seed” whose presence in Israel heralded the “good news” – the *gospel* – that the time had come for Israel’s God to fulfill His word and establish His kingdom as promised in the Scriptures (cf. Matthew 1:1, 18-23 and Luke 1:26-33, 57-79, 2:1-32 with Mark 1:1-15).

This testimony to Jesus the Messiah is the overarching message of the Scriptures, and it is this message that the Holy Spirit illumines in human minds as the Spirit of *Jesus*, the Spirit of *truth*. This, then, provides general instruction for how a person can know that his understanding of the Scriptures corresponds to the truth as the Spirit conveys it:

- 1) The first evidence of a true knowledge of the Scriptures is that the Scriptures are understood as thoroughly *Christ-centered*; the person recognizes, not just the *fact* that all of the Scripture (Old Testament) testifies of Him, but *how* that's the case.

The Old Testament's witness to Christ doesn't take the form of a collection of messianic predictions and proof-texts, but organically and comprehensively. Messianic revelation is woven into the fabric of the Old Testament scriptures such that God's revelation of Christ is *incarnate* in the process of history that the Old Testament records. The Christian, then, can have confidence in his understanding of any particular passage or scriptural topic when he sees how it has Christ at its center, and he's able to demonstrate that through the entire Scripture engaged as an organic whole, not in a collage of verses and proof-texts.

- 2) A second evidence is that the Christian approaches the Scripture *in its own right*, according to its language, genres, concerns, manner of speech, presentation, etc., rather than through a set of premises and presuppositions. One must hear the Scripture's own voice, not the voice of a system, tradition or confession, much less the voice in one's own head. This means that the Christian must set aside all presumptions and presuppositions and come to the Scriptures with open ears and an open mind.
- 3) Thirdly, the Christian should find that his interpretation and understanding coincide with that of Jesus and His apostolic witnesses. Specifically, he must read the Old Testament scriptures the way they did as recorded in the New Testament writings. For the Old Testament is the "Scriptures" which Jesus and His witnesses used to demonstrate that He is the Messiah – the One promised "in all the Scriptures." *The New Testament writers are the key to Old Testament interpretation, and a true understanding of the Scriptures – of both testaments – will accord with their understanding.*

This is where the "literalism" of certain interpretive traditions becomes problematic, for the New Testament writers don't use the Old Testament scriptures in this way. The Hebrews writer drew upon Psalm 2 – an enthronement psalm – to prove his argument about Jesus' *priesthood* (5:1-5), and Paul supported his contention regarding God's purpose for the Gentiles by citing a passage from the prophet Hosea – a passage that has nothing to do with Gentiles (Romans 10:22-26). So Matthew argued that a statement concerning Israel's history was a *prophecy* fulfilled in Jesus and His personal circumstance as a young child (Matthew 2:13-15). Time and again the New Testament writers (and Jesus Himself) interpret and employ Israel's Scriptures (the Old Testament) in a way that transcends their immediate contextual meaning. This apparent violation of the principle of "literal" interpretation has led some to argue that the Spirit's inspiration afforded the apostolic writers unique insight that isn't available to others. Under the Spirit's leading, they could find "non-literal" meanings in the text, but their approach is illegitimate for everyone else. Such foolishness hardly needs further comment.

Again, Christians' failure to rightly interact with the Scriptures is a significant reason that knowledgeable, scripturally-minded Jews reject the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. All too often, the "Jesus" they hear Christians describe and promote doesn't correspond to the Messiah they find in Israel's Scriptures. Jews raise many objections to Jesus as the Messiah, but the following are some common ones that draw directly on the Scriptures and their revelation of Messiah.

- 1) The first is that the Scripture describes the Messiah as a *man* – the son of Abraham and David, and not as the incarnate second person of the Trinity. Fully answering this argument goes beyond this excursus, but the answer lies, not in trinitarian doctrine, but Jesus' fulfillment of the Scriptures, including God's promise to return to Zion and again take His place in His sanctuary. This is how the gospels present Jesus' deity.
- 2) Another objection is the Christian doctrine of Jesus' "*second-coming*." Jews find in the Scriptures a single messianic event inaugurating the promised kingdom and the messianic age. Dispensationalism has encouraged this objection by its central doctrine of a delayed kingdom ("millennial kingdom") to be established at the end of the present age. In this view, Jesus came first as a suffering "lamb," whereas His messianic reign as the son of David and "lion of Judah" will commence with His second coming.
- 3) Related to the previous concern, Jews who believe in *bodily resurrection* traditionally associate that phenomenon with Messiah's coming and the messianic age. As they read the Scriptures, resurrection marks the end of the present age and initiates the *Olam Ha-Ba* – the age to come (Daniel 12:1-2). Therefore, Jews regard the claim of resurrection occurring in the first century (in the *middle* of the age), and then involving only the Messiah and not all of God's "holy ones," as foreign to the teaching of the Scriptures.
- 4) Another very important objection concerns the nature and outcome of Jesus' work and accomplishment. Jews understand the Messiah to be a *political* figure – the King of the Jews – and not merely the architect and overseer of a personal, heavenly "salvation." They see Messiah's work as pertaining to this physical world and not a spiritual deliverance that enables people to escape this world to eternally inhabit a non-physical "heaven." For many centuries, the Christian community has widely promoted a disembodied eternity in heaven as the goal of human existence and attached Jesus to this vision. But this is foreign to the scriptural vision of the messianic work and God's goal in it, so that it's not at all surprising that Jews commonly regard Christianity as contrary to Judaism and the New Testament as incompatible with the Jewish Scriptures.

Jews who believe in a literal human messiah (many Jews don't) perceive the messianic mission as Israel's prophets described it: Messiah is coming to conquer the world powers that have opposed Israel's God and oppressed His covenant people. In that way Messiah would restore the children of Israel and regather them to Zion (the land of Israel). So also, Yahweh would forgive the nation's covenant violation that had brought judgment and exile and renew the covenant relationship. This forgiveness and renewal would see Messiah restore the sanctuary in view of Yahweh's return to again dwell in the midst of His people. Put simply, the messianic work was to usher in the kingdom of God – a kingdom filling the earth and bringing all the nations under its power and rule.

- One other objection – and perhaps the most challenging – concerns *Israel's covenant with God* and the role of Torah. The heart of this objection is the Jewish conviction that Torah is eternal and unchangeable, so that the Sinai covenant (the Law of Moses) cannot be altered or replaced by a “new” covenant. For centuries, Christianity has muddied the water with its view of “law” and “grace” in relation to salvation, and particularly the idea that the Sinai covenant is a “*law* covenant” whereas the new covenant is a “*grace* covenant.” The premise is that God requires absolute perfection of human beings, and this standard determines a person’s final destiny in either heaven or hell. People must be “righteous” (i.e., perfectly compliant with God’s law) to go to heaven, and either they meet this obligation themselves or someone else does it for them. “Law,” then, speaks to the demand of perfect righteousness, “grace” to that demand being met on one’s behalf.

And if the Sinai covenant (Law of Moses) is a “law” covenant in this sense, it follows that it obligated the Jews to “earn” their own salvation, and so rendered them “legalists.” This notion underlies the view that Paul’s arguments concerning “law” and “grace” were a polemic against legalism. So the emphasis on circumcision and Torah by some early Jewish believers is seen as proof that Israel’s “law” promoted “works righteousness” as the means of personal salvation. In reality, these Jewish Christians were grappling with the transformation of the covenant community in Jesus (ref. Acts 15:1-22; Ephesians 2:11-22; note also Galatians 2:1-21, where Paul’s first mention of “justification by faith” in any of his letters concerns Jew-Gentile *table fellowship* – i.e., the matter of the new nature of God’s covenant family and how membership in that family is defined.)

Jews differ in their understanding of “salvation” and the process of it. Many Jews reject the idea of an afterlife, while others believe in an immortal soul. The latter group hold various views about the soul and its relation to the body and what happens to it at the time of death. But Jews are united in the belief that Torah is eternal, and so reject the notion that the Law of Moses has been replaced with a different covenant based on “grace” rather than “law.” Indeed, Jews see God’s grace as a central principle of Torah (“law”) and its demand of obedience and righteousness. *Torah is heaven come to earth*; it doesn’t prescribe moral perfection, but conformity to God Himself. It prescribes authentic human existence – a life defined by love for God and conformity to His truth and ways. And where one falls short, God’s Torah provides mercy and forgiveness.

To Christians unfamiliar with the Old Testament and its storyline and vision, the Jewish messianic hope appears foreign, especially set alongside the common understanding of Jesus and His “gospel” of personal salvation culminating with “eternal life” in heaven. And yet, much contemporary Christian doctrine (particularly within American Dispensationalism) closely corresponds with Jewish understanding and expectation. Jews and Christians disagree concerning Jesus as the Messiah, and Jews reject the doctrines of incarnation and parousia, which are hugely important in Christian theology. Even so, many Christians read the Hebrew scriptures in much the same way as Jews do, and so have a similar vision of the future of the world and the Jewish people. Ironically, this way of interpreting the Old Testament (i.e., apart from the New Testament) is a primary reason Jews reject Jesus as their Messiah. This approach has Jews looking for a future Messiah and messianic kingdom; it has their Christian counterparts insisting that this future awaits them, but at a “second coming,” which Jews don’t accept.

Jews measure any potential “messiah” against their Scripture, so that they need to see how Jesus “fits the bill.” Paul’s own experience makes the case. He was a devout and zealous Jew, thoroughly schooled in Israel’s Scriptures. Like many in his generation, he was eagerly awaiting the Messiah, Israel’s restoration and the coming of Yahweh’s kingdom. Paul had an expectation of what that would entail, and the supposed “messiah” Jesus didn’t match his (or his nation’s) expectation. And Jesus’ crucifixion settled the issue beyond question; whatever room there was for disagreement among the rabbis, one thing was absolutely clear: the Messiah promised in the Scriptures could never die at the hands of Rome; Messiah’s work was to conquer Israel’s enemies and take his throne as Israel’s triumphal king, not perish on a Roman cross.

For all his knowledge, scriptural insight and devotion, Paul was “blind,” though fully convinced that his sight was clear. It wasn’t until he was confronted by the glorified Christ that the scales fell from his eyes, allowing him to see the truth that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah (Acts 9:1-22). Most importantly, Paul realized that Jesus is the Messiah, *not in contrast to the Scriptures, but precisely in accordance with them*. Everything the Scriptures revealed about the messianic person and work had been fulfilled in Jesus, *but not as expected*. The Scriptures weren’t incorrect or misleading, and Jesus hadn’t deviated from them in accomplishing His mission; the problem was Israel’s misunderstanding and misdirected expectation (John 5:39-47).

The Jews derived their messianic doctrine from the Scriptures, and they weren’t wrong in expecting a son of David to arise and defeat their enemies and remove their yoke. Neither were they wrong to believe that Messiah’s triumph would see Israel forgiven and regathered, the covenant renewed, the sanctuary restored, and Yahweh returned to rule over His people through His messianic king. All of this was basic to the prophets’ promises, and the Jews’ faith and faithfulness directed them to look and long for it. *But they, as Paul himself, needed to rethink God’s promises and their fulfillment in the light of Jesus and what had transpired with Him*. Hence Paul’s approach in witnessing to his countrymen (Acts 13:14-41, 17:1-3; cf. 6:9-7:53).

Jesus fought and won the great battle against the enemies of Yahweh’s people and kingdom – not with military might, but the power of self-giving love; He conquered the ultimate enemies of sin and death by allowing them to do their worst against Him. Thus He bled them of their power, leaving them defeated and emasculated (Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-15). By this triumph, Jesus liberated the captives (cf. Isaiah 61:1-4 with Luke 4:14-21; also Zechariah 9:9-12), but He also ended Israel’s exile by addressing the violation and unfaithfulness that brought it about in the first place; He restored Abraham’s children to their God by His own faithfulness as Abraham’s promised covenant son (Galatians 3). Jesus embodied Israel for the sake of Israel, in order to reconstitute Israel in Himself and so enable Israel to fulfill its calling to the world. He reconciled Father and son, bringing Israel back to Zion (God’s dwelling place) as the embodiment of faithful Israel (Isaiah 49:1-13; Matthew 3:13-4:11), but also returning Yahweh to His sanctuary as the embodiment of Israel’s God (cf. Isaiah 40:1-11 with Luke 1:57-79, 3:1-17; John 1:14-18). So He has inaugurated Yahweh’s kingdom and taken the throne of David as King over all the earth (cf. Luke 1:26-33 with Matthew 28:18; Acts 2:22-36; Ephesians 1:18-23; etc.).

Jesus has fulfilled the messianic mission, but according to God’s design of *already-but-not-yet*. This is the key to Christian witness – to Gentile as well as Jew. This is what it means for the children of light to testify to the light as it is dispelling the darkness as dawn hastens to noonday.