

*“But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you.”—John 15:26-16:4.*

**CHRIST’S WITNESSES**  
*A Sermon by Theodor Zahn*

TO-DAY we keep as a quiet Sunday between Ascension Day and Whitsunday. Many, satisfied by the numerous services of the past weeks, either stay at home or go into the country preparatory to the Whitsuntide services, while those who do go to church do not expect a festival sermon, but rather a few words of quiet meditation. When the apostles returned to the city from the Mount of Olives, after the Ascension of the Lord, they did not begin at once to praise the mighty deeds of God, as they did so soon after, or, like our community on Ascension Day, sing songs of triumph to their Heavenly Father, but they all continued with one accord, with the brethren, the mother of Jesus and a few other women, in quiet prayer and supplication. Then it was said to them, “Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye here gazing up into heaven?” Look at the road which will lead you out over the earth: ye must soon set out. Therefore they prepared themselves by careful thought and unceasing prayer. The power from on high, also, which had been promised to them for their work, was to be looked for and prayed for. If this Sunday between Ascension Day and Whitsuntide does not of itself rouse in us similar thoughts, the Gospel for to-day which has been read, must surely awaken them in us.

The Lord Jesus, in whose Name we are gathered together, gives us a commission which we are to carry out in this world, while He does not conceal from us what we have to expect from the world, if we carry it out faithfully. This would be a hard saying if it were not combined with the promise of Whitsuntide. If we find it to be a hard saying, let it arouse in us a longing for a new and full measure of the Pentecostal blessing.

I.

Jesus said to His disciples: “Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning.” This, I say, is a commission, and a commission given to all Christians, and therefore to us also. Or ought this saying to have been otherwise expressed in order to be understood? Ought the Lord to have said: “Ye must be My witnesses”? Jesus said this, too, on many occasions and in many ways. But it seems to me that by expressing His confidence that it will come to pass, He shows still more forcibly that it must be so. Men who had passed through all that the disciples had experienced in common with their Master, could not help bearing witness of all that they had seen and heard. As long as it lived in them as the treasure of their hearts, it would force them with irresistible power to let their mouths overflow with all that filled their hearts. And again, in another sense, those who had known and experienced that Jesus was the Saviour, would be obliged to testify of Him. The Lord who had said of Himself, “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth,” that faithful witness even unto death, did not make the twelve apostles only sharers of His calling, but all His disciples. They could no longer be scholars who followed the Master, unless in some measure they bore witness to the truth. Jesus needed men also to carry on His office as witnesses if His work on earth was to be continued after He had departed thence. When the men in authority required Him on Palm Sunday to command His disciples to be silent, and to put an end to all the loud

rejoicings amid which He made His entry into the Holy City, as though all were only noisy uproar, He replied: "If these should hold their peace, the stones would cry out." It was necessary that He should be acclaimed; the loud witness of men must resound, when this King made His entry. It is true that men are not the only witnesses to Christ and His truth on earth. Jesus said: "Ye also must bear witness"; therefore it was not only the disciples who were to do it. A higher power lives in the community; a power from on high reigns here below which outlives all the generations which pass away—this is the Spirit of truth which Jesus promised, and which He has also really sent. This Spirit has created forms for Himself in which He also comes, and bears witness to men who know little or nothing of Him. As witnesses to saving truth, the so-called Christian world possesses the Holy Scriptures, the History of the Church, the Creed of the Fathers, and the most glorious Church hymns of all times. It is surrounded and hedged in by institutions and ordinances, which bear witness that Jesus created something new on earth which will not die, in spite of all the over-hasty announcements of its death. By the side of all these things stand the words of Christ: "Ye also must bear witness," and ye will do it. It could not, in fact, be otherwise, for the kingdom which Christ established is a kingdom of individual spirits. It maintains itself and grows by no other means or powers than those by which it was first rooted in earth. Our Lord did not bring a new doctrine, a New Testament, or a Catechism to us men that we might be made holy thereby, but He Himself, the living Man and the Son of God as a Person influenced other persons, drawing, winning, yea, overcoming and transforming them. By His personal witness in word and work, in deed and in suffering, He convinced men of the truth which had in Him become a Person, and He thus made them citizens of a new world, whose Head He is Himself. This is the kingdom for which all men must be won, and to which we, as members of Christendom, have already been called.

The Lord has now ascended up to heaven. We lack the perceptible impression made by His powerful personality, and to many who bear His name He is dead. The apostles, who, as witnesses, continued His work on earth with such wonderful results, are dead, and learned men dispute to what extent we still possess the uncorrupted witness of Christ and His apostles in the New Testament. The Fathers have long since passed away to whom our Evangelical Church owes her Confession and the forms of her services, and their times are not our times. Many find it as difficult to accept their Confession as the written words of the apostles. Again, is it not true that only the living are considered to be in the right? Jesus does not deny this. He, the Living One, says to the living: "Ye must bear witness." The witnesses of the days of old still speak to those who are willing to hear them, and when we wish to explain to ourselves how it is that now and then a verse of the Holy Scriptures, or a hymn, stirs our hearts, we shall always find the cause in the personal form of the true Life. It is above all the Person of the Lord Jesus who comes in the flesh to meet us in the Gospels, and who looks at us in such a way that we cannot escape His gaze. It is the personal form which Christ has taken in a Paul; it is the personal and courageous faith of a Luther; the loving Christian joy of a Paul Gerhardt, which lays hold of us. But yet how feeble is the influence of these witnesses now upon us, the men of to-day! How far from us and how high above us they stand! Like a cloud of witnesses, they look down from heaven upon us on this earthly stage where the struggle has been ordained for us. It is as though they asked us: "Are ye also witnesses, as we were in our time, and as the Lord expects and demands of you?"

No other words are needed to show that the demand of Jesus concerns all Christians of all times. Here most certainly the words of our Lord hold good: "What I say unto you, I say unto all." But unquestionably the demand first of all concerns preachers by profession, and young students of theology who are preparing themselves for such a calling. There are some such among us. Let me say to you, my young friends, ye also must bear witness. I will not stop to speak of the sad sight which may be seen now, as in olden times, of not a few who enter on theological studies and the clerical office, who do not seem ever to have given it a thought that they have chosen a solemn, holy, and even difficult calling. I am thinking of those more noble-minded men, whose hearts are sincere, and who consider it a noble aim in life to be able hereafter to serve God by proclaiming His Word to the

community. May they indeed all hear it and take it to heart that they must be witnesses for Christ: nothing more and nothing less than this. To be a witness is not to be a judge, who must first find out the truth and then give judgment. In the great lawsuit between Christ and the world, between Christianity and anti-Christianity, right and truth have long since been found, and the Judge has been appointed long ago who is to bring right and truth to light and to enforce them. We are to be witnesses, but that does not mean that we are to be the impeachers or the accusers of unbelievers and of the wicked world. They have accusers enough; they have laws enough which will accuse them as transgressors; they accuse each other. In their hearts, too, thoughts rise up which accuse and excuse one another. We are to be witnesses, but that does not mean that we are to play at being advocates, so that by the skilful marshalling of proofs, or even by the art of rhetoric, we may assist justice and truth to gain the victory. The office of a witness is a much more modest one. The witness ought to say what he knows of the matter, what he has seen and heard, and has, in fact, himself actually experienced, and of which he is therefore as sure as he is of his own existence. Therefore no one can be a witness for Christ who has as yet known and experienced nothing of that to which he is to bear witness, but who only repeats what he has heard said, and only teaches others what he has learnt from other men. And though he were to expound correctly the profoundest doctrines of the Church, and to take the most glorious texts of the Bible and the most spiritual verses of hymns and weave them into a wreath, with a few flowery sentences of his own invention, he would still be only as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal; he would be like a blind man who praises the splendour of colour.

But are we then so poor in truth that we have known for ourselves, that we can no longer be witnesses? There are many even at the present time of whom the Lord can say, in a certain sense, what He said of His apostles, "Ye have been with Me from the beginning," many who have grown up in faith from childhood, and who, by the grace of God, have kept the faith to the present day. Has nothing then been experienced in such a life? To others light has only risen late in life. After a life of thoughtless indifference, or even of antagonistic unbelief, the Gospel has laid hold of them. They ought therefore, like Paul, who was converted late, to be able to testify all the better, from their own conscious experience, that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Not as though we ought to relate our personal experiences to others: we must preach not ourselves, but Christ, but still Christ as we have known Him. The great witnesses and heroes of olden times, to whom we latter-day Christians look up wonderingly and thankfully, must not deter any of us from being conscious of our calling as witnesses, but neither should they betray any one into saying more than his heart and conscience allow. Even the words of the prophet in the Christian community must be regulated by the measure of the prophet's faith. Woe to that witness who says more than he knows from his own experience: he also is a false witness. Blessed is he who does not shut up within himself the truth that he has made his own. It is less important for us at all times to embrace all that belongs to Christianity, than to have the kernel of the Gospel really in our hearts and to confess it whole-heartedly with our mouths. A sacred poet once said—

"One thing I know that comfort gives,  
All else is insecure:  
I know that my Redeemer lives;  
His faithfulness is sure."

This is not great knowledge, but if it is true, is it not a powerful Easter sermon? The Apostle Paul also said on one occasion, that he knew of nothing else to preach save Christ crucified. And yet, in the same Epistle, he solemnly testified that Christ could help none if He had not risen from the dead. Perhaps many a young theologian, whilst he stands beneath the Cross, acknowledges that the atonement which took place there is still an unsolved riddle to him, and perhaps he knows nothing more about it from his own experience than the heathen centurion, who said beneath the Cross: "Certainly this was a righteous man." But this, if spoken in truth, may become an edifying Good Friday sermon, just as the words,

“ No sin like ours hast Thou e'er wrought;  
Of evil deeds Thou knowest nought,"

are a sacred song. No Christian can escape from the duty of witnessing, by saying that he has no confession ready and complete. It will not do to say that he has no vocation and opportunity for witnessing to his faith, because he is not a theologian and preacher, and has no desire to become one. The words, "Thou must also bear witness," concern every father and mother who wish to leave their best to their children. And here there is no especial dread of the appearance of self-assertion to be overcome. It is true that in many, though by no means in all Christian homes, very simple forms of grace, which have been inherited from days gone by, and which bear witness to the truth, are no longer heard. But there are still many houses where a grace is said before meals, and not only as an exercise for the little ones, but as the priestly blessing of the father of the family. Perhaps a passage of the Bible or a hymn is read, and the Lord's Prayer is repeated. It is possible so to say a grace or the Lord's Prayer that none can join; but both may be said with such simplicity, that those who join by folding their hands realise that they are standing in the presence of God, and become willing to seek the face of God for themselves. When all such forms have been given up, and men are too shy to begin them again, there are still plenty of opportunities every day, even without taking part in the public worship of God, for bearing witness to the one thing needful. How a man does his work, how he bears good and bad days, how he accepts honour and dishonour from other men, how he speaks of men and things and of great events, and of all the little experiences of other members of the household—all these things, if done in a Christian way, must speak in intelligible language to those from whom we neither wish nor are able to hide ourselves. If there is any living trust in God in us, any humble Christian faith, any joyful Christian hope, we must at last make some impression on the receptive minds of those who are growing up—an impression that will never fade. We need not be either saints or angels, and yet we may be able so to live that our children can say of us when we are no longer with them: "My parents, it is true, were neither perfect people nor perfect Christians, but they sought to know the will of God in all the perplexities of life; even in dark days they believed in the love of God; and, in the presence of death, the grace of Christ, who came to save sinners, was their consolation." Would that be no effectual witness? I believe that such a witness has produced as much faith in the world as all the preaching from the pulpit. Let us begin with little things; let us accustom ourselves, when opportunities come unsought, not to conceal unnaturally all that is best in us, but to express it simply; opportunities will then increase, and strength will grow by exercise. We shall then become witnesses, according to the measure of the grace given us by God, who will not allow our mouths to be closed, even though at times our witness brings us enmity or sorrow.

## II.

The Word of the Lord and the experience of all times teach us that there can be no exemption. Jesus said: "They will excommunicate you. The time will come that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." This does not sound encouraging, and yet the disciples were so sad that it seemed as though only consoling words would be suitable for them. Jesus did not say it to discourage them, for though it did not sound joyful to them then, yet it would comfort them at a time when they would be in much greater need of consolation, even when all would come to pass that He had foretold. Then they were to remember all that He had said to them before, that they might not be offended, as though something unnatural and unreasonable had come to pass. It cannot be otherwise; wherever witness is borne to the truth, there also are contradiction, hatred, and persecution. Only what the Lord Jesus experienced Himself has been repeated in the history of the community. When He was a child He found favour with God and man; when He was a man and mingled with His people, He experienced the contradiction of the teachers and the hatred of the rulers in the same measure in which He freely bore witness to the truth. The first community in Jerusalem also rejoiced at one time in the favour of

the people; but as it grew and its witness became clearer and sharper, the blood of the first martyrs flowed. Now, it was not careless, worldly men who first persecuted the Christians even unto death, but the earnest-minded Pharisees, who made the service of God burdensome enough to themselves. They felt outraged in their holiest convictions by Stephen; they believed, in fact, that they were both serving God and doing a holy work when they spilt his blood. Then, when the Christian faith was spread abroad in the Roman Empire, it was under the emperors who possessed most character, and were, in their way, really religious, that the Christians suffered most severely. And, in later times, when the Church was so degenerate that she could no longer bear the witness of the truth, heretics were burnt in the name of the faith.

Let none among you say that these are unnecessary reminiscences of the dark ages, which have passed away for ever, and which have no practical value for us Christians of the present time, at all events in European lands. Let us thank God that He has given His community peace in our land, and let us pray to Him, as we pray for our daily bread and other earthly blessings, that He will continue to preserve us in peace. Whoever imagines that the Word of the Lord, which throughout so many centuries has been literally fulfilled, is no longer valid, is much mistaken. In German, "martyr" means "witness." Therefore the true witness for Christ must always have something of the martyr in him. A living and faithful witness for Christ will find, sooner or later, that he will have to suffer for his convictions and his testimony. It is in itself no slight suffering to see the truth, which has become a part of his innermost being, despised, or to hear it scoffed at. Neither will he be left unattacked in person. It is not necessary for a Christian to be forward and pressing in the confession of his faith before others who do not understand it; he need only speak when duty calls and silence would be a lie, to find himself excommunicated in certain circles. Yea, when he opposes the fashionable opinions of the time, because the old but eternally youthful truth of the Gospel is dearer to him than the fashionable view and its representatives, he will be excommunicated, and when possible set aside. It is still true at the present time that those who act thus think that they are doing God, or if they no longer believe in God, that they are doing truth a service. The most deadly hatred and the bitterest enmity do not come from careless scoffers, but from people who have serious convictions, and who wish to see truth, as they understand it, victorious. A Christian who expects to experience this, must not be in haste to call himself a martyr. He ought rather to prove himself earnestly, whenever he is attacked on account of his convictions or his testimony, whether he be not suffering on account of his folly or his own fault. But he must not be terrified if at last it should become plain that he has been excommunicated because he bore witness to the truth given us by Jesus Christ. Jesus said: "These things have I spoken unto you that ye should not be offended," which means, "that ye should not fail in faith, and that ye should not cease being My witnesses." In other provinces it is not considered honourable to sail with the wind, and to keep back the truth because many will not listen to it. In matters of faith many do not seem to think it a shame to begin by being timidly silent about a truth which has been declared by the leading spirits to be antiquated and discarded, then to explain it away, and finally to sail with the wind which is blowing again the last twenty and forty years, as it blew once before eighty or a hundred years ago. It is certainly more comfortable than swimming against the stream, and it is almost unavoidable for those who are greedy of the honour given by man. Jesus once said to His enemies, who were learned men: "How can ye believe who give honour one to another?" But to us He says: "Ye shall be My witnesses, and ye must not be surprised if your witness displeases many, and ye must not be offended when ye are excommunicated by men."

Would to God that many would act according to these words! Are we going to do it? The acknowledgment of duty is good, and so are good intentions. But who is able to help us to go on from knowing to willing, and from willing to doing? This can only be done by the Lord who has called us all to be His witnesses. He gave to those who clung faithfully to Him, not only great tasks, but also great strength, and He also promised them a new spirit, a spirit of power and of consolation, a spirit of truth and of witness. The festival of Whitsuntide is close at hand, when we shall thank God our Father that

He has proved the truth of this promise of His Son to the community. We pray to-day that we may not be sent empty away. Last Sunday was called "Rogate," which means "pray"; to-day is called "Exaudi," which means "hear." Hear us, O Heavenly Father, when we pray in poverty of spirit, but also in the name of Thy Son, and confiding in Thy mercy. Take not Thy Holy Spirit from us, without whom we cannot call Thee our Father, or Jesus Christ our Lord. Let Him gain power over us anew, and carry out His office as a Witness, so that we too may become witnesses to the truth. Amen.