

Anyone Can Be a Faithful Martyr: It Is Not So with Witnesses

By R. Magnusson Davis

Contents:

A Biblical Witness

About 'Witness'

'Martyr' Does Not Mean 'Martyr'

Three Reasons Why It Matters

Rejection of the Testimony and of the Witnesses

Tyndale's Consistent Use of 'Witness' Was Correct

A Biblical Witness

The Greek noun *martys*,¹ used in the New Testament, means simply 'a witness'; that is, a person who testifies, or is in position to testify, of a matter that is within his personal knowledge. The inaugural definition of *martys* in Joseph Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon* is "A witness – one who avers, or can aver, what he himself has seen or heard or knows by any other means". In any court of law, justice depends upon the truthfulness of the witness. Solomon's Proverbs in the Old Testament contain warnings about false witnesses who care not for truth, and who, in courts of law, or in the greater court which is this present life, will pervert justice.

Turning to William Tyndale's 1534 New Testament, we find *martys* translated by 'witness' at Acts 22:15, where Ananias is telling Saul:

The God of our fathers hath ordained thee before, that thou shouldest know his will, and shouldest see that which is rightful, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth: for thou shalt be his *witness* [*martys*] unto all men of those things which thou hast seen and heard.²

In modern English, this might read:

The God of our fathers appointed you beforehand – to know his will, and see that which is rightful, and hear the voice of his mouth; for you will be his *witness* to all men of those things which you have seen and heard.

From this passage we learn that Saul, who later came to be known as the Apostle Paul, had been chosen by God to receive great revelations from Him, and then to testify to all men of the things he would see and hear. And it came to pass just as Ananias had foretold: Paul testified in person widely in Asia and parts of Europe. He then also testified by letters to Christian congregations, which letters comprise a large portion of our New Testament; through them, Paul has continued to testify to the world for almost twenty centuries. He was a very special witness, who gave unusual testimony of things that he came to know through spiritual visions and supernatural revelations. Paul himself, speaking about one such revelation, said he did not even know if he was in the body or out of the body (2 Corinthians 12:2).

The Lord's other Apostles were witnesses who walked with Him during his earthly ministry – eye-witnesses who had looked upon Him with sight of flesh, and heard His voice in their ears day upon day while they kept company with Him. They supped with Him both before

He was slain and after He was raised up from death in His new body. They received miraculous powers from Him, including the ability to cast out demons. We find Peter alluding to the importance of a personal testimony about these things at Acts 1:19-22, where he is praying to God about replacing Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve. He emphasizes the need for a man who had seen everything, because such a witness is undeniably competent to testify:

Wherefore of these men which have companied with us, all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning at the baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained *to bear witness* with us of his resurrection.

The KJV renders this “*to be a witness [martyrs]*”. Tyndale preferred an action verb here.

About ‘Witness’

Funk and Wagnall’s gives two definitions for the English noun ‘witness’: “1) *An act or fact of attestation to a fact or an event; testimony, evidence, and 2) A person who has seen or knows something, and is therefore competent to give evidence concerning it; a spectator.*”⁸ The first sense concerns the testimony itself a concept rendered by other Greek words. The second concerns the person who brings the testimony, rendered in Greek by *martyrs*.

Following are examples of ‘witness’ used in differing ways in Tyndale’s New Testament:

- The night following, God stood by him and said: Be of good cheer Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou *bear witness* at Rome (Acts 23:11. The Greek is *martureo*, a verb- Strong’s # 3140);
- The chief priests and the elders, and all the council, sought false *witness* against Jesus (Matthew 26:59. Again, the Greek is *martureo*);
- For God is my *witness*, whom I serve... (Romans 1:9; Greek, *martyrs*);
- But when the comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the father, which is the spirit of truth, which proceedeth of the father, he shall testify of me. And ye shall *bear witness* also, because ye have been with me from the beginning (John 15:26,27; Greek, *martureo*);
- Grace be with you and peace, from him which is and which was, and which is to come...and from Jesus Christ which is a faithful *witness* (Rev 1:4,5; Greek, *martyrs*).

While ‘witness’ can take different, related senses in English (and, of course, can also be a verb), the Greek *martyrs* is uncomplicated. In his New Testament, Tyndale consistently translated *martyrs* by ‘witness’, its simple meaning.

Martyrs Does Not Mean ‘Martyr’

The straightforward meaning of ‘a *martyrs*’ as a witness was later obscured in three New Testament passages as a result of revisers substituting the word ‘martyr’ in its place. A witness is a different thing than a martyr. *Funk & Wagnall’s* defines ‘martyr’ as (considering the relevant definition only), “*A person who submits to death rather than forswear his religion; specifically, one of the early Christians who suffered death for their religious principles.*” Thus ‘martyr’ has to do with dying for one’s faith, not with bringing a testimony. Furthermore, over the years it has lost its connection with the Christian religion.

However, the substitution was made in the following Scriptures (in all cases, the Greek is *martys*):

- **Acts 22:20**: regarding the stoning death of Stephen, Tyndale had, “And when the blood of thy *witness* Steven was shed, I also stood by, and consented unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him.”
 - In the 1599 Geneva version *martyr* was substituted (though it read ‘witness’ in 1557), and this was followed in the KJV in 1611.
- **Revelation 2:13**: Tyndale put, “And in my days Antipas was a faithful *witness* of mine, which was slain among you where Satan dwelleth.”
 - The 1557 Geneva and the KJV put *martyr*.
- **Revelation 17:6**: Tyndale had, “And I saw the wife drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the *witnesses* of Jesus. And when I saw her, I wondered with great marvel.”
 - Wycliffe in 1380, the 1557 *Geneva*, 1582 Rheims, and KJV all have *martyrs* here.

James Strong, in his truly great work, the *Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible* of 1890, explains the translation by ‘martyr’ in the above passages. He defines *martys* as meaning “A witness (*literally [judicially] or figuratively [general]*); by analogy, a martyr.” It is in this analogy he draws that we find the problem: by ‘analogy’ is meant *an apparent agreement between things that are otherwise entirely different*.⁴ But the “analogy” or apparent agreement in between ‘witness’ and ‘martyr’ appears to have arisen in the minds of men after the scriptures were written. The original Greek did not carry such an analogical meaning. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains the development in our language:

The original meaning of the Greek word *martys* was ‘witness’; in this sense it is often used in the New Testament. Since the most striking witness which Christians could bear to their faith was to die rather than deny it, the word soon began to be used in reference to one who was not only a witness, but specifically a martyr.⁵

Although martyrdom is certainly a witness of sorts, and a significant one, that does not mean it is correct to translate *martys* by ‘martyr’. Neither the fact that death is a “striking witness”, nor the fact that over time *martys* came to be popularly used with reference to martyrs, really justifies this translation. Further, the substitution of ‘martyr’ for ‘witness’ was not needed to signify the death of the witnesses, which was clear from the contexts. Quite simply, this substitution does not appear to be true to the original.

To be fair to earlier revisers, the on-line Oxford English dictionary supports the early use of ‘martyr’ as “one who testifies for Christ or the Christian faith,” in a sort of specialized sense. However this sense is unknown today, and so really ‘martyr’ does not belong in modern bibles, even if it might have been justified in older ones. But in any case, the New Testament authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, did not use a different word in any sort of specialized sense, nor did they distinguish between witnesses who suffered death and those who did not.

Three Reasons Why It Matters

Other issues arise from the substitution of ‘martyr’ for ‘witness’. For one, ‘witness’ is a neutral, secular word, but ‘martyr’ is emotionally charged in religious context, where

martyrs are honoured heroes. We can speculate that the authors of the Geneva, Rheims and KJV were moved to alter the Scriptures as they did to honour the men and women who died. The *1936 Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ‘martyr’ reflects such a spirit:

Martyr: Eccl: A designation of honour (connoting the highest degree of saintship) for: One who voluntarily undergoes the penalty of death for refusing to renounce the Christian faith or for obedience to any law or command of the Church.

But this describes how ‘martyr’ came to be used in the English language as it developed, not how *martys* was used in the original Greek of the New Testament, which bestowed no special designation of honour. Of course the idealization of martyrdom can lead to grievous error. Some are seduced by the apparent glories of it, even seeking such an ‘honourable’ death, and manipulated to ruinous ends.

Another problem is that the change from ‘witness’ to ‘martyr’ shifts attention away from the identity of Jesus’ disciples as witnesses who brought rejected truth. ‘Martyr’ emphasizes instead a person’s identity as a steadfast hero, loyal to his faith. The concept of allegiance to a Church or doctrine, rather than the concept of bringing truth, comes to the fore. This emphasis is reflected in *Funk and Wagnall’s* definition seen above, which defines martyrs as those who die for religious principles, but says nothing about witnessing to truth. It can be seen, also, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* explanation that “*the most striking witness which Christians could bear to their faith was to die rather than deny it*”.

My concern is that this misses the point: the Lord’s disciple Stephen died because he bore witness to truth, and men rejected his testimony and him. The stoning of Stephen was not reported in the book of Acts to give us an example of “striking faith”, as if we might be moved to greater personal devotion ourselves. Rather, from it we can learn how a faithful witness might be received. Israel’s religious leaders could not abide Stephen words, and they resisted him, and sought ways to condemn him falsely (Acts 6). In the end, when he spoke of his vision of heaven and the Lord, they angrily stoned him (Acts 7). From such examples, the faithful can learn how their own testimonies might fare before men.

Yet another problem with the use of the word ‘martyr’ is that the Christian significance that attaches to truthfulness is lost. We can make a distinction between a faithful and a false witness because the tacit issue is willing fidelity to known truth. But we cannot distinguish between a faithful and a false martyr because the tacit issue is not truthfulness; rather, the issue is devotedness – devotedness with suffering. There is no such thing as a ‘false martyr’. Truthfulness in the character of any martyr, though praiseworthy, would be incidental. Anyone who dies for any Church, faith, or cause is a martyr, regardless of his or her veracity: indeed, any liar can be a faithful martyr. But only a person who cares about truth will be a faithful witness. Jesus said that he came for those who love the truth, who would hear His voice (John 18:37).

Rejection of the Testimony and of the Witnesses

Witnesses for the Lord, therefore, testify of what they have seen or come to know – if only through eyes of faith since Jesus went to be with God. When men accept the testimony of the Scriptures as true, God, by His Holy Spirit, will teach them, and establish them as witnesses who will then go forth to share what they know. Of course, from the Scriptures we understand that the world at large will not receive God’s witnesses. Nonetheless, justice requires a testimony.

The greatest testimonies might be expected to evoke the greatest wrath. We are aware what happened to the Master, the Lord Jesus, Himself. History reveals that in the most terrible times, His witnesses will also suffer great persecutions. Such were the times when the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jerusalem, after their murder of Jesus did not silence the testimony of His word, went after His disciples. Stephen was first to be killed; then Peter and Paul and many others were slain. Subsequently many more were to die down the centuries: the great cloud of witnesses referred to at Revelation 17:6.

William Tyndale was, of course, one of the cloud of witnesses, one of the martyrs. His unique and greatest testimony was his faithful translation of the Scriptures into English: a testimony which has endured and has witnessed to millions – nay, hundreds of millions⁶ – of English-speaking peoples for more than four centuries.⁷ This was a significant testimony, for which he would greatly suffer at the hands of men: hunted, forced to live in exile and in poverty, betrayed, imprisoned, ultimately strangled, his body burned, and suffering many accusations.

Tyndale's Consistent Use of 'Witness' Was Correct

We submit that 'martyr' was not the best translation of *martys* – perhaps influenced by, among other things, a natural admiration of sacrificial devotedness to faith. But it obscures a pure understanding of the importance of the full Christian testimony, whether spoken, written, or in suffering, and it alters the sense of the Greek. Therefore Tyndale was right, and fully faithful to the original, when he used 'witness' consistently in his New Testament.

© Ruth Magnusson Davis, 2010. Minor corrections 2016.

¹Or *martus*, Strong's # 3144.

² New Testament quotations are from David Daniell's modern-spelling version of *Tyndale's New Testament*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1995.

³ *Funk and Wagnall New Practical Standard Dictionary*, 1946.

⁴ *Consolidated Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary 1940* (1954 edition). This is the only definition of 'analogy' that could apply here. 'Analogy' is now popularly understood as meaning a likeness or correspondence in certain respects, which might further confuse modern readers.

⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 200th Anniversary Edition, 1969, "Martyr", Volume 14.

⁶ David Daniell writes, *William Tyndale's Bible translations have been the best-kept secrets in English Bible history...Yet no other Englishman—not even Shakespeare—has reached so many...In 1611 there were six million English speakers; there are today at least six hundred million.* (Daniell, Introduction to *Tyndale's New Testament*, p. vii). Over the centuries since 1536, when Tyndale was strangled and burned, the numbers will greatly add up.

⁷ Tyndale's witness lived on in the King James Bible, which was based on Tyndale's translation of the New Testament, and as much of the Old as he could complete before he was captured and killed. Professor Daniell explains: *A computer-based American study published in 1998 has shown just how much Tyndale is in the KJV New Testament. New Testament scholars Jon Nielson and Royal Skousen observed that previous estimates of Tyndale's contribution to the KJV "have run from a high of up to 90% (Westcott) to a low of 18% (Butterworth)". By a statistically accurate and appropriate method of sampling, based on eighteen portions of the Bible, they concluded that for the New Testament Tyndale's contribution is about 83% of the text, and in the Old Testament [that is, as much as Tyndale was able to complete before he was killed] 76%. (Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2003), p. 448.) It is believed that Tyndale completed all the Pentateuch, the book of Jonah, and Joshua through Chronicles.*

~~~