

## HOLDING FORTH

Philippians 2:16

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In his letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks of them as "holding forth the word of life." The figure is very expressive. As with your hand you hold out the lamp which is to show the way for one whom you are seeking to guide, so by your testimony you are to hold forth the word of God. We can see how easy the requirement is. We are not expected to originate light. "Genius," it has been said, "is the ability to kindle one's own fire," that is to originate ideas, and to strike off sparks of thought from one's own brain. But a Christian does not need to have genius in order to be useful; for scripture testimony is the holding forth of a light that has been already kindled and placed in his hand.

It is very important that Christians should see this matter exactly as it is. "Ye are my witnesses," saith the Lord. We are not God's logicians sent to argue men into the kingdom of heaven. We are not God's debaters sent to discuss theology with men, and to convince them of the truth of Christianity. If this were so, we might well fear getting worsted, for the world is full of good logicians, and skilled debaters, men that are more than a match for us on their ground. We, on the contrary, as Christ's servants, are simply to bear witness year in and year out; using the word of God, and not our own, and our success will not depend upon our acuteness, or our eloquence, or our skill, but upon God's Spirit that accompanies and energizes that word. It takes a strong muscle to throw a hand-ball so that it shall strike a hard blow; but a child can fire a rifle-ball effectively, since the propelling force is in the powder and not in the muscle. So it takes a strong man to use an argument effectively; but a babe in Christ can use a text of scripture with prevailing force, since it is, not by might nor by power, but by God's Spirit, that that text is to be impelled. "The power of a word," says Emerson "depends upon the power of the man that stands behind it." But the power of God's word depends upon the power of the Spirit behind it, its inspirer, and its abiding energizer.

Just recall the grand promises that are given concerning the Christian's testimony. The testimony of reason, the testimony of science, the testimony of consciousness, are all confessedly untrustworthy. "The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple," says David. The mightiest armies are often defeated, when fighting with the sword and cannon and musket. There is a picture in the book of Revelations of the Christians overcoming their enemy. And this is the secret of their victory, "And they overcame him by the word of their testimony." Christians are not to allow themselves to be tempted away from these weapons, on account of their seeming importance. Shrewd men will seek them into debate; opposers will challenge as David did, "I have stuck unto thy testimonies, O Lord; put me not to shame."

And then the words "holding forth" suggest the persistency of witness-bearing on the Christian's part. What is considered a fault in rhetoric is a virtue in testimony, viz., repetition – saying the same things again and again, till it has fairly worn a hole in men's indifference, and let the light in. Sunbeams, because they fall incessantly, successive shafts of light striking the same point, blow after blow, will, they tell us, disintegrate the strongest iron in time. And that is the way of the light of the world tells on men.

It may not produce a conversion at once. It may not conquer a foothold the first time, but we must keep it up, year in and year out, saying the same thing, "God so loved the world;" reiterating the same promise, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved;" sounding the same warning, "he that believeth not shall be damned." And the fibre of the strongest opposition, and the grain of the most obdurate hatred, will, in time, be unknit and penetrated by the light of the word. We do not forget that this persistent holding forth the word, lays a strong test on our humility sometimes. Scripture preaching is plain preaching; scriptures testimony is plain testimony. And men do not naturally take to this any more than they take to plain clothes. We like to show what we can do in the way of fringes and jewelry. We like to attract attention to the ornaments of rhetoric and poetry and illustration. A gospel simplicity is about as hard to maintain as domestic and social simplicity. But this is what is required of us, "Holding forth the word of life." "Lord, I would like to serve as a polished reflector," says one, "to radiate and intensify that light, by my cultivated intellect." "And I would be glad to act as a stained glass window," says another, "to color and variegate that light, by passing it through the brilliant medium of my imagination." "And I would like to magnify that light, says a third, "by letting it through the lenses of my reason and philosophy." This is the most subtle danger to which we are exposed, of seeking in some way to use the word of God for self-aggrandizement. But the real requisite is a very humbling one. We are to hold a candle for the Lord, simply, indifferent as a stone to glory, or the radiance which it may reflect into our faces.

We remember looking at a bronze figure that stood in a public place, in whose lifted hand one of the city lamps was raised aloft, to give light to the passers-by. There it stood, in storm and in clam, under beating rain and driving wind, in mute fidelity to its trust, holding forth the light for all men. "That," said, I, "is a picture of what a Christian should be, as patient, undaunted, undiscouraged torch-bearer for Christ. If a storm of ridicule or opposition should chance to break upon him he is to stand in statue-like indifference to it all, holding forth the word of life. If blasts of ridicule dash him in the face, he is to take it as silently and as imperturbably as the bronze figure takes the tempest. It is the men that stand who rule the world. Hence the scripture are full of exhortations on this point. "Stand, therefore, with your loins girded about," etc. Of course, there are other tests which enjoin activity and aggressive effort. But if a Christian's activity must go abroad his example must stay at home. As a loving witness of Christ, men must know where to find him every hour of the day. And while his feet are swift to run in the way of God's commandments, his example must be as fixed and immovable as a light-house "that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding for the word of life."

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