**Establishing Truth by Credible Witnesses**

*by Harry Osborne*

Both the Old and New Testaments affirm the validity of two or three credible witnesses to establish fact. Two points are essential to note in considering this principle:

**First**, the God who cannot lie is the ultimate author of both testaments and demands that His people speak only and always the truth (Deut.32:4; Psa. 33:4; Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2; Prov. 12:19; Zech. 8:16; Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9-10). No fact can be established by one or a host of false witnesses, so it is essential that we seek testimony only from those showing a pattern of truthfulness.

**Second**, God has always required more than one credible witness to establish fact. For instance, the old law required more than one witness to establish the fact of guilt and execution in capital crimes (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; Heb. 10:28). In fact, two or three witnesses were necessary to establish guilt and dispense justice of “any iniquity” (Deut. 19:15). Jesus appealed to this principle in establishing fact when an accusation of sin exists between two brethren (Matt. 16:18). Accusations against an elder must not even be given an ear unless there are two or three witnesses to the accusations (1 Tim. 5:19). Paul used this principle to warn of how he would determine in his coming trip those who had yet to repent in Corinth (2 Cor. 13:1-2).

**Applying the Principle Today**

Our society uses the same principle every day of establishing fact by a plurality of credible witnesses. We use it in our court system. We use it to get information and act upon such in various matters where we have no firsthand evidence. Legitimate business uses this method to make accurate records of trade and financial activity. One who demanded firsthand evidence in order to establish fact in these realms would rightly be considered irrational. Refusal to accept fact established by a plurality of credible witnesses and act upon that fact would throw our system into sheer chaos.

When it comes to religious matters, however, some fail to apply the same means to establish fact that they repeatedly use in other aspects of their lives. Skeptics of the resurrection of Jesus often admit that Jesus and the apostles were “good men,” but refuse to accept their testimony on the fact of Christ’s resurrection. They cannot have it both ways. Either they were credible witnesses speaking the truth, or they were liars seeking to mislead the world! Which is it? The facts show that the twelve apostles all claimed to be witnesses of the bodily resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:32). All of those apostles maintained that witness despite repeated torture, even unto death.

There unanimous and unrelenting witness to the fact of the resurrection, rather than recanting their testimony, lends great weight to their credibility. Yet, it was not only the twelve that were witnesses to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Paul appealed to the witness of “*above five hundred*” in addition to himself who testified to the fact that they saw the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Paul’s former denial of this fact, change of life upon accepting it and the great cost it brought upon him in persecution and deprivation strongly argue for his credibility in advocating the fact of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Indeed, if the resurrection of Jesus cannot be believed as fact on the basis of the credible witnesses presented, no fact of history or justice stands a chance of being sustained.

Most brethren would accept the above principles as right and would teach them strongly, but may balk at consistent application of the principles in properly establishing fact and acting upon it in the church. For instance, when one is marked for sin and fellowship is withdrawn after a plurality of credible witnesses (such as the elders and/or other faithful brethren) have attested to the brother or sister’s unrepentant sin, it is sad to see supposed Christians undermine or critize the discipline because they were not personally involved as witnesses. When we see this kind of action, it suggests one or a combination of three factors: (1) an indictment of the credibility of the witnesses whether intentionally or unintentionally, (2) an overestimation of self and one’s ability to ascertain fact more accurately than all others, or (3) ignorance in failing to grasp the principles of Scripture noted above.

Another area in which brethren sometimes fail to accept and apply this principle is in noting the teacher of error or one causing faction. Some profess, “I don’t want to get involved because I have no firsthand knowledge.” Does that excuse them of determining the facts of the matter? No, it requires them to seek out and separate credible testimony from false teaching or deception. We are required not to receive those guilty of false teaching or faction (Rom. 16:17; 2 Jn. 9-11; Titus 3:10). Make no mistake about it, when we are among brethren divided over matters wherein is a charge of false teaching or sinful action, ***we can and must determine the facts under dispute***. We cannot merely say, “I was not personally involved, so I am not going to decide and take a stand either way.” The fact is, we **do** decide and we **do** take a stand **by where our fellowship goes**.

When problems over charges of doctrine and sinful conduct arise, the principle of credible witnesses can help point us in the right direction. When we have seen the repeated truthfulness and willingness to suffer for truth of one element versus the questionable character and deception of the opposing element, this principle is manifesting itself to us. When the most spiritually mature and biblically knowledgeable go in one direction, while the less mature and knowledgeable go in the other direction, we need to note the difference. It is another measure of credibility.

In our time, these principles are evident to those who are seeking the truth and desiring to know the facts. Let us not bury our heads in the sand, but follow the same biblical principle to which Paul appealed in 1st Corinthians 13:1-2 and properly establish fact. Truth can and must be determined and we must take action accordingly.