THE WITNESS PAPERS



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PROLOGUE

The Witness We Keep Explaining Away

The world is not silent. We have just become very good at explaining away the sound.

I used to think evidence for God had to arrive loudly. A miracle I could not explain. A voice. A sign. Something dramatic enough to corner doubt and leave it nowhere to hide.

Most of life does not arrive that way.

It arrives as ordinary things that refuse to be ordinary.

A child wants to know what is behind the door, under the rock, past the edge of the yard. A mind closes its eyes and sees something that does not exist yet, then spends years trying to build it. A father holds a sleeping child differently than he holds anything else. Betrayal hurts because faithfulness matters. Grief empties a room because someone mattered enough to leave an absence. We laugh. We make music. We get angry when something cruel is called good. We look at the night sky and, for reasons no telescope can measure, feel small without feeling meaningless.

We usually treat these things as facts about us.

What if they are also clues?

That question started this book.

If human beings really are made in the image of God, resemblance has to mean something. If creation really declares its Maker, learning how the world works cannot silence that witness. And if God made the world and called it good, some trace of that goodness should remain recognizable even after sin bends it.

The witness should be somewhere.

Maybe everywhere.

None of this turns feeling into revelation or creation into God. The human soul is not divine. Sincere desire is not automatically holy, and science does not secretly prove whatever theology we prefer. Truth has boundaries because without them a claim can become whatever we need it to be.

But boundaries can also become hiding places.

Christians can become so afraid of saying too much that we begin saying less than Scripture does. God is everywhere, yet our imagination puts Him mostly somewhere else. Humanity bears His image, yet we can reduce the image to a polite statement about human worth. The Spirit lives in believers, yet our language can make Him sound like encouragement sent from a great distance. An ordered world becomes something to defend the Bible from. Creation is called good, then ordinary pleasure makes us suspicious.

The doctrine survives.

Sometimes the imagination does not.

I am not proposing a new Christianity, a private revelation, or some secret key the church missed for two thousand years.

The more I read, the more obvious it became that I was arriving late to an old conversation. Augustine looked for traces of the Trinity in human life. Irenaeus fought against any idea of salvation that treated the body as disposable. Athanasius defended the staggering claim that God really entered human flesh. Christians have been talking about creation as something that points back to its Author for a very long time.

I am arriving late to an old conversation.

That is part of the point.

We all arrive late.

We arrived after matter already held together, seasons already returned, numbers already behaved reliably, living things already reproduced, and causes already kept producing effects. The world did not wait for us to teach it how to be a world.

Then we started taking notes.

Science did not make the world readable. It is one disciplined way we answer a world that was already there, already ordered, and already capable of being understood before we showed up.

The same is true of us.

Love, moral outrage, beauty, and grief were not human inventions later assigned upward to God.

We encountered them before we understood what they might be telling us.

Christianity claims the direction runs the other way. God is the Original. We are the image.

That claim does not put us on a throne. It knocks us off one. What is best in us is received, not self-made. The world had order before we measured it, so discovery is not ownership. Pleasure can be enjoyed without becoming a god. And if Christ shows us humanity without the usual distortion, He gets to contradict the versions of ourselves we would rather keep.

The Fall makes the witness harder to read. Love can become possession, anger vengeance, desire authority, intelligence pride, work identity, freedom self-rule, and a gift a god.

The distortion matters precisely because there was something good to distort.

That is the thread holding these papers together. Creation points beyond itself. Humanity reflects its Maker. The Fall bends what was good. Christ shows us what humanity was meant to be and begins restoring it. The Spirit makes His home in His people. The world can be studied without becoming godless. Good gifts can be enjoyed without becoming gods.

The evidence is not only above us in the stars. It is around us in order. Within us in personhood. Between us in love and betrayal. Beneath us in the strange gift of existence. And before us, finally, in Christ.

The world is not silent.

I think we have just become very good at explaining away the sound.

CHAPTER 01

The Distance We Invented

God is not far away simply because He is not creation.

There is a strange way Christians sometimes talk about God.

We say He is everywhere.

Then we pray as though the words have to travel.

We say He sustains creation, then picture the universe like a machine He built, switched on, and occasionally comes back to repair. God’s ongoing care starts sounding like an interruption. Miracles become God breaking into a system that normally runs without Him. Heaven is up there. We are down here.

You do not need the theological label for that picture to feel distant.

I know the language because I have used it.

Scripture gives a different picture once the feeling of distance is named.

The Son is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:17). God upholds all things by His powerful word (Hebrews 1:3). He gives life, breath, and everything else; in Him we live, move, and exist (Acts 17:25-28).

That is not a universe God abandoned after construction.

It is a universe receiving existence.

Right now.

A mountain is not God. A stone is not divine. A tree does not contain a piece of deity. But none of them is self-existent either. They stand inside a creation that does not carry itself.

The universe is not running on borrowed machinery.

It is living on borrowed breath.

That moves the question.

God’s relationship to creation cannot be reduced to occasional intervention. Creation has never existed for one instant apart from His will, knowledge, power, and sustaining word. He does not have to break into a universe from which He has been absent.

There is no abandoned machinery waiting for Him to return.

Sin does create real distance: hostility, hiding, exile, judgment, and a broken relationship with God. Scripture does not soften that. But being alienated from God is not the same thing as becoming independent of Him.

Adam hid from God while still breathing air God gave him.

We do the same.

Prayer is not a flare fired into empty space. It is the creature answering the One in whom the creature already lives.

We can resist His presence.

We cannot become the source of our own existence.

Maybe the distance is not where we thought it was.

Maybe some of it is the distance we invented.

The boundary remains. Nearness does not make us God, and dependence does not make creation divine. God can remain truly God without being imagined as far away.

A photograph of my wife is not my wife.

That sounds almost stupid to say.

The photograph can resemble her without becoming her. It can tell the truth about her face while remaining paper, ink, or pixels. Resemblance does not require identity.

Christian language sometimes gets nervous at exactly this point.

We are right to insist that creation is not God. A tree is not divine. A mountain is not a piece of God's body. The human self is not a buried god waiting to wake up. God was not created, cannot be contained, and depends on nothing.

That boundary matters.

The boundary does not leave us with an empty universe.

Creation is distinct from God while depending on Him for every moment of its existence.

A photograph can resemble the person without becoming the person. A word can reveal the speaker without being the speaker. Creation can likewise tell the truth about God while remaining creation.

That lets two claims stand together:

God does not need creation in order to be God.

Creation needs God in order to be anything at all.

The world points to God without becoming God. Humanity reflects Him in a way the rest of creation does not. And those who belong to Christ receive something more personal still: Scripture says God’s Spirit actually lives in them. That is not the same thing as God sustaining everything He made.

Confuse them and the argument collapses.

Keep them distinct and the world does not have to be emptied of God.

One error erases the boundary by turning creation into God.

Another guards the boundary until creation looks abandoned.

Scripture permits neither. Distinct does not mean divorced, and dependence does not mean divinity.

Truth does not need distance to remain holy.

Continue Reading

Essays on creation, human nature, faith, and the ordinary goodness we sometimes fail to recognize.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Hernandez is the author of The Testimony Papers and The Witness Papers and the founder of OUTPOST 27, an independent press.