

Witness to Christ

What are you living for? What's your purpose? What's your mission?

What drives most people in our city is the goal of building our own personal kingdoms. We live with a mission to gain influence, expand our territory, and look impressive to the world. But as followers of Jesus, we're called to something so much greater. Our purpose is not to build our own kingdoms but to live for Christ's kingdom. It's not to make a name for ourselves but to magnify the name of our savior.

The biblical word that captures what I'm talking about is "witness." A witness is someone who sees or experiences something and then shares what they saw. And while we often think of that word in a courtroom setting, Scripture uses it to describe the posture of our whole lives. We are called to witness to Christ—to let the world know about the renewal that we've experienced in Jesus and is available to all.

But Christians aren't the only ones who are witnessing. People do this all the time. We all experience things in life and then immediately want to share them with others. Maybe it's the latest show you found on Netflix, or the new CrossFit gym you go to. Or your new favorite album that others just have to listen to. This is why social media exists. Because we experience something and immediately think "I have to let other people know about this." We're witnessing.

But for followers of Jesus, we are called to witness to Christ and his kingdom.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus gathered his disciples together and told them, "You are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Those geographic references go from a central city to the surrounding region, then the rest of the world. It would be like me saying that we're to go from Hollywood, throughout Los Angeles and California and to every nation on the planet. But what are we called to do in that mission? Witness to Christ. And as we see from the rest of the book of Acts, we are called to witness to Christ in word and deed.

Word and Deed

One of the most important words in that statement is the little word “and.” Because, unfortunately, there are a lot of Christians who focus primarily on witnessing to Christ in word or in deed, as if God only cares about people's souls or he only cares about their bodies. But we're following Jesus, who Luke 24 tells us was “mighty in word and deed.” He satisfied people's physical and spiritual hunger. He healed people spiritually and physically. Our aim is to bring the whole gospel to the whole person throughout the whole city. So when we think about pointing people to Jesus, we need to make sure that we're doing so with our words and our actions. But before we get practical with how to do that, we need to make sure that we understand how our mission fits into God's mission.

When Jesus said, “Follow me,” he was calling us into a mission that is so much bigger than ourselves. One that actually began at the dawn of time. On the first page of the Bible, the first recorded words of God to humans are, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

As God's stewards, humanity's mission was to fill the earth with blessings of God's reign. But when sin entered the picture, Genesis 6 tells us that, rather than spreading God's mission humanity's multiplication spread sin across the face of the earth instead. It says here, Genesis 6:1,5 “When human beings began to increase in number on the earth... The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth...”

God would not give up on his mission, though, and in Genesis 12 he made a covenant with a man who would become known as Abraham, that he would bless him and his descendants in such a way that they, in turn, would bless everyone on earth. “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Eventually, God himself entered history as one of those descendants of Abraham and as the only possible answer to sin. Through his death on the cross, Jesus bore the curse of sin so that we can receive the blessing of God. And rising from the grave, he revealed that the blessing God had promised to Abraham was the greatest blessing imaginable: the restoration and healing of all the earth under God's good reign.

After his resurrection, in Matthew 28, Jesus gives his disciples what we now call the Great Commission, telling them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The word “commission” literally means “to entrust with a mission.” Jesus was entrusting his followers with his own mission to spread the blessing of the gospel across the world.

Then, in the passage we looked at earlier in Acts 1, Jesus reiterated his commission, saying, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

So what we see in all of this, is that God is accomplishing *his* mission of renewing all creation, and he gives *us* a specific mission within that to make disciples by witnessing to Christ in word and deed. We do not build the kingdom. We witness to a better kingdom.

Reflect

Everyone’s an evangelist. People talk about what they love, so what do you often find yourself talking about?

Witness in Word

All right, now let's get practical. What does it look like in everyday life to witness to Christ in word and deed? How can we point people to Jesus through what we say and do? First, let's talk about witnessing to Christ with our words, which is often referred to as "evangelism."

We're *all* called to tell the story of Jesus. We have good news to share. We have a gospel to proclaim. We have a message that answers people's deepest questions and satisfies their greatest longings.

But it can be awkward and difficult to talk with people about Jesus, especially in a city like Los Angeles where people have all sorts of presuppositions about Christianity. So how do we do this? Well, there's no single way. If you read the New Testament, you'll see that the gospel is shared in many different ways in many different environments in many different contexts to many different people.

But let me lay out one approach based on Acts 17 that can be effective in our context. The idea is that we're not coming at people combatively, telling them that they're wrong and we're right. But rather showing how their longings are good, but they're looking to fulfill them in the wrong place. Let's follow how Paul does this in Athens. I'll break it down in three steps. And the first step is: Affirm the longing.

1. Affirm the longing

In Acts 17, the apostle Paul walks through the city of Athens and observes the many objects of worship in their culture. He's then brought before the Aeropagus, which was a Greek theatre where people would present different ideas and teachings. And Paul says,

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

Paul was affirming their religious longings. We are made for worship. We must have community. And we need rituals that help make sense of life.

But you might think, “Well, people are less religious today” and “when I walk down the streets of Los Angeles, I don’t see wooden idols or ‘gods’ all over the street. Oh but don’t be deceived. Religion hasn’t disappeared in our country, it’s just reappeared in different forms. In our city, we worship image, we worship reputation, we worship inclusivity. These are our objects of worship. And while there are many different religious expressions we could talk about, I would say that politics is America’s new favorite religion. That’s where people are finding identity, community, and purpose that’s worth fighting for.

So our religious longings are good. It’s good that we long for worship, community, and rituals. It’s good that we search for identity and want freedom and peace. But while our religious longings are God-given, they get misdirected, which leads to the second step. After we affirm the longing, we have to challenge the means, the way in which people try to fulfill those longings.

2. Challenge the means

After Paul affirms their religious longing to worship, he begins to expose the inconsistencies within their own beliefs.

Your “gods” live in temples that you had to build. Why would you worship something that needs you and that you have to take care of?

Paul is showing us that anything we look to in the place of God cannot ultimately save us, and will—in the end—let us down.

So for us, after we affirm the good longings of people in our city, then we have to try to show them how their route to finding that is ultimately misdirected. Take for example, the search for identity. This is a good desire, to understand who you truly are. But if you follow our city’s standard path and try to build your identity through accomplishments and reputation, then your identity will be fleeting. As soon as you experience failure, you won’t know who you are anymore. If someone tarnishes your reputation, your identity will be crushed.

But this is where we come to the third step. After we affirm the longing and challenge the means, then we get to show the fulfillment in Christ.

3. Show fulfillment in Christ

Paul tells the people of Athens that the God they are searching for is the God who created heaven and earth and sent his son to be the savior of the world. He proclaims the resurrection of Jesus and invites people to turn from their sin and trust in Christ as savior.

Paul tells the people of Athens that the God they are searching for is the God who created heaven and earth and sent his son who rose from the dead and is reigning over all. All their longings can truly be satisfied in Christ.

This means that for us, we get to tell people the good news that Jesus is the fulfillment of all their longings. In Christ, we have an identity that is unshakeable. In Christ, we have community that's like family. In Christ, we have a purpose to live for everyday. But this is a subversive fulfillment because it exposes all the things we've been looking to in place of Christ.

This is why we have to be honest with people about sin. Sin is the bad news that makes the good news necessary. We've rejected God and looked to created things in place of our creator. That's sin. It's a heart posture that leads to rebellious and broken lives. But God responds to our rejection of him by relentlessly pursuing us with grace.

Jesus died on the cross for our sin so that our guilt and shame can be removed and we can be reconciled to God. He rose from the grave so that we can experience abundant life today.

Now, we can't control how people respond to the gospel, but we can let them know of God's love for them, invite them to turn from their sin and trust Jesus as savior, and pray that the Lord works in their hearts to make them new.

Reflect

What would you say has been your purpose—or mission—in life so far? How does it relate to God's mission?

Witness in Deed

But not only are we called to witness to Christ in word, we also have to witness in deed. Words are necessary, but they're empty if not coupled with meaningful action. In James 1, right after saying that we shouldn't just be hearers of the word but also doers of the Word, Scripture says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

Both proclamation *and* demonstration are crucial. We must proclaim the gospel and live in a way that demonstrates its implications in every aspect of life. The church taking care of one another witnesses to Christ's love. The church taking care of widows and orphans witnesses to Christ's compassion. The church standing up against oppression witnesses to Christ's justice. The way that we live our lives should witness to who Jesus is.

Let's look at a few practical ways that we can witness to Christ through our deeds.

First, love one another.

As brothers and sisters in Christ the way we care for and serve one another tells those around us what God is like. 1 John 4 says, "No one has ever seen God," so they don't know what God is like. How can we tell them? It goes on to say "...if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." It's through our love for one another that the world sees what God's love for them is like.

Care for the hurting and unseen

A second way that we can witness to Christ is through caring for the hurting and unseen among us. Scripture repeatedly shows God's heart for the marginalized, but it also reminds us that God shows his care for the hurting through his people who reflect his heart.

One way we do this as a church is by serving meals at the Hope Center. As a church, we preach the word every Sunday, but then Monday through Friday we serve warm meals to image-bearers of God who are in tough times. But it's about more than a meal. It's about acknowledging the dignity of every single person. It's

about recognizing our own brokenness and how there's no "us and them" when it comes to our need for grace.

But it's not just the Hope Center. We're surrounded in our city by people who are hurting. And we can witness to Christ's compassion by caring for them. The world will take notice of our message only when they first see it embodied in our actions.

Befriending Unbelievers

Another way to witness to Christ through our deeds is by befriending unbelievers. In fact, investing in relationships is one of the most profound deeds you can do. We're following Jesus, after all, who was a "friend of sinners and tax-collectors." In other words, Jesus deliberately built relationships with people who were opposed to his message and who were seen as outcasts by society. And he showed them love not only with his words, but also with his deeds.

So these are just a few practical ways that we witness to Christ with our deeds. And there are so many more. But the point is this: The only sermon most people will hear is the way we live our lives. Because we are transformed by grace, God makes us a people who are, as it says in Titus 2 "zealous for good works."

A powerful example of witnessing to Christ through deeds was the British politician William Wilberforce. Wilberforce lived a scandalous lifestyle up until his mid-twenties when he encountered the grace of God in Christ and became a Christian. He questioned whether he should leave his government job in order to work for a church, but then he learned the importance of different work callings and saw that God had work for him to do as a politician. Wilberforce, along with a group of other Christians, worked tirelessly to abolish the slave trade in Britain and were successful in doing so. Wilberforce stood firmly on the foundation of Scripture and was driven by his convictions, but it led him to witness to Christ through meaningful action in the place God had called him.

Reflect

Evangelism isn't manipulative or forced. There are more opportunities than we're aware of. Where is God already providing opportunities in your life?

Be Faithful

So we've seen the call to witness to Christ in word and deed.

Let's come back to the passage in Acts 1 to talk about how, in order to do this, we have to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Even as Jesus gave his disciples the commission to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, he told them to stay put and not leave Jerusalem *until they had the Holy Spirit*.

It's important that we understand the gravity of what Jesus was saying. He has given us a mission so big that if we try to do it on our own we'll fall flat on our faces. We need the power of the Spirit.

But we're pretty good at forgetting this. In Galatians 3, Paul wrote, "Oh, foolish Galatians!...Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" But so often that's exactly what we do. The Spirit's work in our heart changes us, sets us in a new direction, and gives us a new power, then we just go back to trying to do it on our own.

Ask yourself, "Would my life look any different if God removed the Holy Spirit from it? If your answer is no, then you're not living according to the Spirit, you're living according to the flesh. You have the Holy Spirit, but you're not living by his power.

It's easy for us to go to the Holy Spirit when times are rough, then when we're good to forget about him. The key is to learn in the midst of those difficult times how to rely on the Spirit all the time. As Christians, we need to repent daily of self-reliance and learn to cultivate a dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Whatever you're going through right now, if you have trusted in Christ, then you don't have to get through it on your own power. God dwells within you. You have the Holy Spirit in you, empowering you to live in the faithfulness of God, regardless of your circumstances.

We can't accomplish Jesus' mission on our own. We can't even come close. Without the Spirit, we're left to our own meager devices and paltry resources to live unremarkable, self-oriented lives.

But with the Spirit, Scripture is the Word of God, the church is the people of God, and our mission is the execution of a plan that was set forth before the foundations of the world.

The book of Acts is the story of the beginnings and early growth of the church, but it opens with Jesus telling his disciples to do nothing until they had the Holy Spirit.

I'll leave you with a final encouragement. As we seek to witness to Christ, Be faithful, and know that results may vary. There will be times when there's a lot of fear in your heart and you're afraid to open your mouth or follow through with a given action. And, yes, people might react in a way that is not very pleasant. Yet there might also be times where they are open to your witness.

So be faithful. Get the gospel right. Witness in word and deed. Think like an apostle—strategically, yet humbly—then speak like an ambassador, pleading, as Paul described it in 2 Corinthians 5, “that other people might be reconciled.” Be prepared to explain your hope. Listen to people and pray like crazy, serve like crazy, love like crazy, asking the Holy Spirit to open people's hearts.

But results may vary. You can be a totally faithful witness and someone may still reject Jesus. Trust God with the results. Remember that God is the one that changes a heart. Be a faithful witness and never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit.

After all, you yourself are a new person with a new family on a new mission because, at some point, someone spoke and lived as a witness to you.