

# Witnessing Without Words

## Leader's Guide

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**Goal:** To gain insight from Scripture (specifically, 1 Peter) about how witnessing for Christ involves more than knowing what to say. According to Peter, a crucial part of our “testimony” is the witness we give without words—the way we live our lives every day as those who have been redeemed by Christ, our crucified and risen Savior.

**Leaders:** This study is intended to be user friendly. Most of the Bible passages, quotations and questions are fairly straightforward and self-explanatory. However, the background information and commentary below may be useful.

### Introduction

The wit and wisdom of the maxim attributed to St. Francis of Assisi is rooted in its irony. It presumes, probably rightly, that we tend to think of “preaching the Gospel” primarily (if not exclusively) as something done with words. As a result, another important aspect of “preaching the Gospel”—i.e., with our *deeds*—often gets short shrift. The quotations from Romans 10 and Augsburg Confession V make the point that words certainly are *necessary for* and *fundamental to* our witnessing efforts. The study, however, encourages us to reflect on and discuss how words and deeds go hand in hand in our witnessing efforts.

### Witnessing Without Words in Close Relationships

Peter is writing to Christians who find themselves in an uncomfortable and even precarious situation because of increasing social and political hostility to the strange and “threatening” presence of Christian faith and behavior. A believing wife of a non-Christian husband would feel especially vulnerable and powerless in this context, knowing that her faith in Christ may well jeopardize the future and stability of her marriage and family. Why should he embrace the faith that—due to his marriage to a believer—was already jeopardizing his friendships, finances, career, social standing, and perhaps even his safety?

It's not hard to understand, therefore, why Peter would suggest that a direct verbal “attack” by an “alien” (i.e. Christian) wife might not be the wisest or most effective evangelistic strategy. So Peter advises “softening up the front” by barraging non-Christian husbands with Christ-like kindness and gentleness and patience, until the opportunity arises (for the wife, or perhaps someone else) to storm the stronghold of Satan directly with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

As our own culture and society grows increasingly hostile toward Christianity, this more subtle approach to witnessing seems more applicable than ever—not only in the context of “mixed marriages” but also “mixed” family relationships, friendships, and work relationships.

Peter's words in 3:1 certainly do not contradict Romans 10:17 or AC V. Peter is referring to wives winning over the hearts of their husbands through kindness and love, so that those hearts become more open to hearing the necessary verbal witness to the Gospel spoken of in Romans 10:17 and elsewhere.

### Witnessing Without Words in our Increasingly Secular Public Square

Leaders may want to spend some time engaging participants in a discussion of the increasing secularization of American society and the evidence they see of this in their own circles and settings. At the same time, leaders are encouraged to move this discussion in a positive and hopeful direction—as a challenge that also presents itself as a wonderful opportunity. Peter, like Jesus and other New Testament authors, speaks of Christians as “lights” shining in the darkness (see 1 Peter 1:9). Make the most of this analogy: as the world grows “darker” because of sin

and unbelief, the greater the opportunity Christians have to “let their lights shine” for Christ and the Gospel.

After reading 1 Peter 2:11-12, engage participants in a discussion of the “strangers and aliens” theme in 1 Peter. In a sinful and godless world, Christians *should* feel “strange” and “alien” often! Others, then, can notice their “strange” (i.e., Christ-like) behavior, and to wonder—and perhaps even ask about!—its source and rationale (cf. 1 Peter 3:15-16).

On the surface, this may seem like a relatively simple and painless witnessing strategy: all we have to do is live like “good Christians” are supposed to live, and let people flock to us wanting to know more about what we believe and why we believe it! But as Peter reminds us, “witnessing without words” is far from easy. Our sinful desires, egged on by Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh, constantly “war against our soul.” In addition, non-Christians are constantly finding ways to “accuse us of doing wrong” even when we are striving to do what is good, right and loving (1 Peter 2:11-12). We trust in the power of God’s Spirit, not our own power, to strengthen and equip us to live holy lives that glorify God and leave a “positive impression” on our non-Christian neighbors. Our ultimate hope is that God may use the witness given by our lips and our lives to lead those who do not yet believe to “glorify God on the day he visits us.”

The silent suffering of Christ is a powerful example for us at those times when, perhaps, the best witness is to say nothing at all—at least until a more opportune time arises to share the Gospel message more directly or explicitly. 1 Peter 3:8-10, like many passages in the epistle of James, reminds us how easy it is to use our tongues in wrong and sinful ways to speak words that should never have been spoken and that detract from our witness to Christ.

### **Witnessing Without Words in Our Everyday Lives and Vocations**

Lutherans sometimes get nervous talking about the nature and role of sanctification in the Christian life. This is, of course, a challenging and potentially complex topic, but Peter does a beautiful job of connecting justification and sanctification in his letter in very straightforward and practical ways. Peter clearly and repeatedly affirms the truth that our full and free redemption comes *only* by means of the holy and precious blood of Christ (see 1 Peter 1:18-19), not, in whole or in part, through our own striving after “holiness.”

In response to this gift of God’s grace, however, and by the power of God’s Spirit at work in us through Word and Sacraments, we do strive to live holy lives as a way of pleasing God and serving our neighbor. Although we will never attain perfection in our lives of sanctification here on earth, God promises to bless and use our striving for holiness, even in the most ordinary contexts (e.g., marriage, family, public life, Christian citizenship, congregational life and service), in ways that serve the proclamation of his Gospel.

The Luther and Althaus quotations speak for themselves, but may generate some very fruitful discussion about the importance of seemingly “simple” acts of friendliness, generosity and compassion, as individuals and as congregations, that enhance the “credibility” of the church’s proclamation of the Gospel through which the Spirit works to create faith. (The Althaus quote is in John Doberstein’s *Minister’s Prayer Book* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, n.d.] pp. 262-263.)

### **A Final Word about “Witnessing Without Words”**

1 Peter 1:22-25 brings us full circle: back to the truth of Romans 10:17 that faith in Christ comes only through God’s Word (v. 23, 25), *and* to the truth that our response to that Word involves “loving each other deeply and sincerely from the heart” (v. 22). We love because God first loved us in Christ. At the same time, God’s incredible love for us in Christ constrains us to bear witness to others concerning the truth and power of the Gospel—with and without words.

Don’t forget to close in prayer!

April 2007. Dr. Joel D. Lehenbauer is Associate Executive Director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Accompanying Participant’s Guide is also available from the Center for U.S. Missions.