Witnessing Without Words

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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 in a particular situation. According to Peter, a crucial part of our "testimony" is the witness we give without words—the way we live out our lives each day as those who have been redeemed by Christ, our crucified and risen Savior.

Introduction

Perhaps you've heard the maxim often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times—and if necessary, use words." What do you think of this statement? What truth is it attempting to express?

We know from Scripture that the saving, faith-creating Gospel of Jesus Christ *must* be communicated through the use of the written or spoken word of God. Paul says in Romans: "Faith comes from *hearing* the message, and the message is heard through the *Word* of Christ" (10:17). "Through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel" (*Augsburg Confession,* Article V).

We also know from Scripture, however, that what we *do* (or do not do) as Christians impacts our Christian witness in important ways. Our attitudes and actions often play a crucial role in how our verbal witness to Christ and his Gospel is heard and perceived by others.

As a disciple, Peter was not exactly shy about expressing himself in words. As he grew and matured in his faith, however, he also grew in his understanding of the importance of "witnessing without words"—especially in specific missional situations. Let's see what we can learn from the letter of 1 Peter about the nature and importance of "witnessing without words."

Witnessing Without Words in Close Relationships

Read 1 Peter 3:1-5. What situation is described in this text? Do you know someone in this (or a similar) situation? What witnessing "strategy" does Peter suggest in this situation? Why do you think he suggests this approach—especially in a social and cultural context which did not view Christians and Christianity in a favorable light?

Discuss possible applications of this witnessing "strategy" to other scenarios involving close relationships—e.g., a husband with a non-Christian wife; children with non-Christian parents; close friends, etc. How have you seen this strategy "work" in real-life situations?

What exactly does Peter mean when he says that "if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives" (3:1)? Does this contradict what Romans 10:17 and Article V of the Augsburg Confession have to say about faith being created by the Holy Spirit *through* the Word of Christ? Discuss.

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Witnessing Without Words in our Increasingly Secular Public Square

It's impossible to deny the increasing secularization and moral pluralism of American culture. While interest in various forms of "spirituality" appears to remain high, we certainly cannot assume that a majority of those with whom we work, socialize and interact on a daily basis will share our Christian faith and values. Many people, in fact, may outwardly ridicule those beliefs and values and express hostility toward those who attempt to express them.

While this may be discouraging to Christians, it is reassuring to know that the early Christians—like those to whom Peter is writing—faced very similar challenges. Not only that, but Peter saw in those very challenges a wonderful opportunity for bearing witness to faith in Christ—both with and without words.

Read 1 Peter 2:11-12. How does Peter describe his readers in v. 11? Why do you think he wants them to see themselves in this way? (See also 1:1; 17). Can you relate to his description of Christians as "aliens and strangers" in this world? How?

What "witnessing strategy" does Peter propose in 1 Peter 2:11-12? What factors mentioned in this text make this strategy so challenging for Christians? If we persist in our witnessing efforts, what does Peter say the final outcome, by God's grace and power, will be? (See the end of v. 12.) What additional counsel does Peter give in vv. 13-17?

Now read 1 Peter 3:15-16. Peter says we should always be prepared to give a verbal witness to those who _____ us to give the reason for the hope we have. What does this witnessing strategy imply? Why do you think someone would be interested in learning more about the hope we have in Christ? Can you share a personal story of how your "witness without words" led to an opportunity to witness *with* words?

Read 1 Peter 2:21-25. How did Christ "witness without words" when he was insulted and persecuted by a hostile and unbelieving world? Is there a sense in which Christ's very silence, his refusal to defend himself, helped to accomplish our salvation? Explain your answer! Can you think of certain situations when the best possible form of "witnessing" might be to remain silent? See also 1 Peter 3:8-10.

Witnessing Without Words in Our Everyday Lives and Vocations

1 Peter is often called "the epistle of *hope*" because of its strong emphasis on the "living hope" that we have through Christ's resurrection from the dead (1 Peter 1:3). It might also be called "the epistle of *holiness*" because of its emphasis on the importance of our living holy lives as a way of bearing witness to Christ in an unholy, unbelieving world.

Read 1 Peter 1:13-15. Discuss how these words of encouragement and admonition apply to the church today. In your opinion, is there a need for more preaching and teaching regarding the sanctified life that we are called and empowered to live once we are led by God's Spirit to believe that we are justified through faith alone in Christ alone? How do the verses that follow (vv. 17-21) help us to understand how we are able to call ourselves "holy" in God's eyes? Who gives us the power to strive to live holy lives out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us? (see 1 Peter 1:2; 5:10-11).

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Read once again 1 Peter 2:13-17, 1 Peter 3:1-2 and 7, and 1 Peter 3:8. In what ordinary ways and situations does Peter encourage us to "witness without words" in our relationships and in our daily vocations? Commenting on 1 Peter 3:8, Luther says: "If you want to be certain . . . that you are doing a precious and God-pleasing work, have sympathy, be tender-hearted, and be friendly. These are truly precious, golden works, gems and pearls that please God." Can our "friendliness," in and of itself, bring a person to faith in Christ? Why, then, does Luther (and Peter!) regard it as such a "precious and God-pleasing work?" How is our "friendliness" and "tender-heartedness" related to our high and holy calling to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light?" (See 1 Peter 2:9-10.)

Reflect on and discuss this statement from Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus: "The witness of Jesus went forth not only in words, but in the way he dealt with people. [So also] the credibility of the church when it preaches God's love for the lost depends on whether the church goes out to people in their lostness, identifies with them, and in a priestly way makes their predicament its own." How, specifically, might your congregation do a better job of "going out to people in their lostness" as a way of giving more "credibility" to the message of the Gospel that it proclaims?

A Final Word about "Witnessing Without Words"

Read 1 Peter 1:22-25. How have we been "born again," according to Peter? How is it possible for *anyone* to be born again? In light of these words, why is it so important for us never to separate our "witnessing without words" from our "witnessing *with* words"—and vice versa?

Close with a prayer asking God's blessing on our efforts to engage in *both* kinds of witnessing by the power of his Spirit working through the Word of Christ.

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