

Sharing *Your* Testimony or Sharing *The* Testimony

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Sometimes we think that sharing about Jesus is mostly about sharing our personal experience. We might tell someone, “Here is how Jesus saved me” and proceed to recount our life before Christ and the story of our conversion. We often call this “sharing our testimony,” and it is a very good thing to do.



I’m not here to dissuade you from sharing your personal story as often as possible. What I would like to do is reexamine how we use the word “testimony” and see if a fresh look at it might affect what we emphasize in evangelism.

Let’s look at an example case. When Paul tells Timothy, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Tim 1:8), we may be tempted to think that he is saying, “Do not be afraid to testify about Jesus to others.”

That is because, in Christian conversation, we usually associate the word testimony with sharing personal experience about God’s work in our lives. “Bob is going to share his testimony now,” or “I witnessed to someone at the coffee shop yesterday.” We testify or bear witness about what God has done for us.

This is a legitimate use of the word. You might recognize it as a word that comes from the courtroom. A witness is someone who has seen an event and stands up to give testimony about it. A testimony, then, is the report of an eyewitness. Since we have all been eyewitnesses of things that God has done in our lives, not least our conversion, we may appropriately say that we are giving a testimony (or eyewitness report) about it.

But this is not what Paul meant to tell Timothy. Here, the testimony is something very specific—not a report of what God has done for Timothy, but the report (or message) about Jesus. We can see this in the second half of the sentence: “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ, but join me in suffering for the gospel, according to the power of God.” We can see that “the testimony” is parallel to “the gospel.”

So Timothy is supposed to hold on to a testimony, not about something *he himself* had witnessed God do for him, but about something others had witnessed.

Who were these witnesses? Jesus’ apostles. Throughout the New Testament, the original apostles are spoken of as eyewitnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. See for example Acts 1:8 where Jesus announces that they will be his eyewitnesses to the ends of the earth. Or consider Acts 2:22 where Matthias is chosen to participate with them as an official eyewitness because he had been with them from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Not only were the apostles eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry, but Jesus officially commissioned them to take their eyewitness testimony and spread it. Peter says, “We are witnesses of all the things he did . . . and he ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:39, 42). The testimony that they spread became known as the gospel. Sometimes we find it recounted in summary, like in Acts 10, and sometimes at length, like the four Gospels, which are written accounts of their testimony.

What Paul is urging Timothy, therefore, is not to be ashamed of the testimony about Jesus that he has heard and received from the eyewitnesses themselves.

So, whenever we speak about Jesus to others, we have two options. (1) We can share *our* testimony—our report about what Jesus has done in our personal lives—or (2) we can share *the* testimony—the apostles’ eyewitness report about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Really, both are wonderful to share. But let’s remember that *the* testimony of the apostles is what the New Testament calls the gospel. And so these historical truths about Jesus that we have received from the early eyewitnesses and can access in the New Testament should be the emphasis of our evangelism.