



EQUIPPING FOR... **EVANGELISM & MISSION**

Can I Get a Witness?

*The Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart, Associate Professor at St. Andrew's Hall
and Director of The Centre for Missional Leadership, Vancouver*

I was visiting a friend several years ago in Chicago, where he served as the pastor of a historic African-American church. The pews filled quickly on a Sunday morning as the choir led God's people in praise for a full hour before my friend began preaching. As he preached from the Word of God, emphasizing the gathered community's identity in Christ, he encouraged the congregation to evangelize in their ordinary, everyday lives. "Can I get a witness?" my friend bellowed. "Amen, brother!" came the response again and again from the congregation filled with the Holy Spirit.

I believe that God is asking all of us the same question that my friend asked his congregation. As we emerge from a time when Christianity held a privileged position in western society, God is asking us to be witnesses in a new way. Can I get a witness? Here's the good news – the answer is yes. And the answer begins with you.

I fondly recall shopping at the downtown Eaton's store in Winnipeg as a child with my beloved, kindly grandmother. When someone would hold the door for her she would smile and turn to me saying, "What a fine Christian that person is, Ross." I still recall feeling uncomfortable with that statement and saying with curiosity, "Grandma, how do you know that person is a Christian? Maybe they're just being polite."



When the church enjoyed a privileged place in western society it was easier to attribute acts of random kindness to a stranger's Christian faith. But being "nice" is more about being "Canadian" than it is about being Christian. Many people have escaped the calling of evangelism over the years by quoting St. Francis of Assisi's phrase, "Preach always and when necessary use words." In Christendom, that logic held firm, but surely not in our own time and place. No, in today's pluralistic society where Christianity is one of many voices, you can hear God's gentle question above the cacophony of competing truth claims, "Can I get a witness?"

Witness Protection Program

Many people feel ill equipped to engage in evangelism in today's pluralistic world. We worry that we won't have the answers to people's questions or that they may react negatively to beliefs that we hold dear. We also fear rejection or misunderstanding. Because of these fears, we think to ourselves, isn't it best to just stay silent and let our actions speak for themselves? It's almost like we've encouraged people to stay hidden by creating a "witness protection program."

1 Peter 3:13-16 (NRSV)

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

1 Peter encourages us to always be ready to give our defense, our witness, our testimony to the hope that is within us. What hope is within you? If you only had a couple of minutes to tell someone about Jesus, what would you say? Many people have been hurt over the years by questionable evangelism practices. Note how 1 Peter 3 insists that we share our witness to Jesus with "gentleness and respect." What does that look like in your story of faith?

Imagine a new restaurant opens in your neighbourhood. You go for dinner and the meal is delicious and the service is superb. What would you do after trying it out? Are you going to keep that experience to yourself? No way! Of course, you are

going to tell friends and neighbours about your excellent experience. You might make a comment on Facebook or tweet about your meal inviting others to check it out. It is unlikely that you would stay silent for long.



If sharing an experience of a great restaurant seems like an easy idea to you, you are an evangelist waiting to happen! Welcome to the Christian practice of testimony. American preacher and professor Tom Long once described testimony as “talking ourselves into being Christian.” Here’s the thing: you cannot offer testimony about something or someone that you haven’t experienced firsthand. You can’t tell neighbours about how amazing the food is at that new neighbourhood restaurant if you never visit the new location. That would be impossible!

I live five minutes away from the infamous “Grouse Grind”— a three kilometer hike up Grouse Mountain – and I can tell you (testify) what it is like to climb it. However, I cannot tell you what it’s like to climb Mount Everest. What’s the difference? Climbing Grouse Mountain is a regular experience of mine, while climbing Mount Everest is outside of my experience (and my fitness level!).

As ordinary, fallible, fragile, sinful human beings who have been redeemed by the grace and blood of Jesus through

the cross, we have experienced something that is worth telling about. The most powerful form of testimony is when we say something concrete and personal about who Jesus is to us and what he has done in our lives. It doesn’t have to be complicated. Simply sharing what drew you to church in the first place, what kept you there, or how faith has added meaning to your life is a form of evangelism. Can I get a witness?



Shouting Stones

Luke 19:28-40 (NRSV)

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

*“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”*

*Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”
He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”*

Jesus spoke of the need for his disciples to find their voice and offer witness as he made his way towards Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday. Imagine the excitement of the crowd outside of Jerusalem that day as Jesus passed by! People were shouting praise and making a confession of faith from God’s Word, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Now hear the Pharisees speaking to Jesus. Why are they so upset? They tell Jesus to hush the crowd. Why? Jesus responds that even if people were silent the very stones on the ground would shout out with praise.

What do you learn about giving a testimony or witness to God’s active presence in the world through this passage? When have you been tempted to stay silent rather than speak the truth of God’s redeeming presence in the world in your own life?

For those of us who are nervous about evangelizing, there is some good news: God helps us find our voice so that the stones don’t have to shout praise for us. Our testimony is found in the wonderful things that God is doing in our own lives and in the world around us. It is also found in the hope we have for tomorrow. Like the crowd gathered on Palm Sunday, we too see Jesus as the bearer of a life-giving freedom for individuals and the world.

Evangelism is about inviting others to come and see the joy that is found in a life of faith. Sadly, for many, the practice of evangelism is rooted in fear-based tactics involving judgment and condemnation. This is not what Jesus called us to do when he said, “Go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19). Our role as missionary disciples is clear. We are to describe, to animate, to testify in words and actions to the ongoing redemptive work of the Triune God in the world. As Vancouver missiologist Alan Roxburgh says so nicely, we are to be “detectives of divinity” where we live, work and play. So let’s get to work not only sleuthing out with delight where God is actively restoring and repairing this fallen world, but also telling others about the amazing things we find. Can I get a witness?



Canadian Ministries wants to hear from you!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your story of mission and evangelism! Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 Ext. 271. Find more great ministry ideas through our weekly Facebook post *Take it Up Tuesday*. Follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/pccconnect.