

How to Witness – Acts 17

Acts 17.

Paul is in the middle of his second missionary journey (**Map, ESV Study Bible, 2118**), having just left Philippi on his way to Thessalonica, and eventually Athens. And similar to many passages in Acts, it's an example of how to witness. Jesus said you will be my witnesses, and this speaks to how. *How* to spread the Gospel. *How* to talk to people about your faith. (**Outline**)

And make no mistake, it starts with a burden and a zeal. A burden, that people would be saved from an eternity of darkness . . .
And a zeal, that God would be worshipped by more and more.
Short of that, all the how-to's in the world won't work.
So let's dig in and see what God has for us. Acts 17:1-15.

➤ [1] *Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. [2] And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures [the Old Testament], [3] explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ [the Messiah] to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."* [He's the one we've been waiting for.]
No doubt turning to passages like Ps 22 and Is 53 to prove it.
He reasoned, explained, proved, and proclaimed. Apologetics. Something we do every single week.

[4] *And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks [God fearers themselves] and not a few of the leading women.*
Because the Gospel impacts everyone: rich, poor; Jew, Gentile; male, female; everyone.

[5] *But the Jews were jealous [those who didn't believe], and taking some wicked men of the rabble [the unruly crowd], they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. [6] And when they could not find them [Paul and Silas], they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, [7] and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."*

[8] *And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.*
[9] *And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest [security to assure the authorities that Paul and Silas would leave], they let them go.*

[10] *The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue [again]. [11] Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*

Not that they had a critical spirit, or thought they knew better, but that they were passionate about truth.
So much so, that they *anticipated* the preaching of God's Word. They received it *with all eagerness*.
And then studied the Word itself, *daily*, to confirm what they heard.

It's one of the reasons I love preaching to *you*. Because you lean in. Taking notes, nodding your head, even saying "amen" at times; just like the Bereans.
You receive the Word *with all eagerness* (11); soaking it up like a dry sponge.
And one of the biggest reasons for that, is that you read it on your own both before and after; during the week. Comparing it to all you heard on the weekend.
God bless you for that.

➤ [12] *Many of them therefore believed [v12; because they received it and studied it], with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men [same as Thessalonica; because the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to *all* those who believe]. [13] *But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds [again].**

[14] *Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there.* [Evidently they weren't in danger. Only Paul. Probably because he was the primary spokesman.] [15] *Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens [200 miles south], and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.*

➤ The first key to witnessing, is to . . .
Keep trying! (v1-15)

Keep on keeping on. Keep at it. Try, try again. That's what Paul did in Thessalonica. V2.
He went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures. After, being beaten and imprisoned in Philippi.
Not to mention stoned in Lystra, threatened in Iconium, and persecuted elsewhere.

Didn't matter. He just kept trying. Over and over again. Undeterred by closed minds *or* closed doors. If *one* was shut, he approached another.
And instead of focusing on those who *wouldn't* listen, he focused on those who *would*. Instead of fixating on green apples, he looked for red ones; ripe ones.

➤ In his later years, Becky's great grandfather made a commitment to the Lord to share the Gospel with at least one person every day.
Sometimes going to the mall to find somebody to talk to.
Like the time around Easter when he was there with Becky and her parents, and before they knew it, he was praying with the Easter Bunny. Right in the middle of the mall.

Did he lead *every* person to the Lord? Not at all. But he tried. And he kept trying, over and over again. And probably met with more success than any 10 of us. Why?
Because the key to witnessing is not so much the method, as the persistence. (**Summ**)

➤ Second, is the opportunity; from v16-23.

[16] *Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.*

A city home to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. A city that birthed democracy and medicine. A city that boasted philosophy and architecture.

And yet it was full of idols and false religion. Proof positive that even *smart* people get it wrong. Even *advanced* societies are deceived.

And it *bothered* Paul. It didn't sit well with him.

How about you? Does the lostness and sinfulness and empty religion of *our* advanced society bother you? Or have you grown calloused? Even accommodating it?

I hope not. Because if you have, or do, you'll never witness.

His spirit was provoked . . . [v17] So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. [He went looking for people to talk to. Looking for opportunities.] [18] Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. The gurus of their day.

The *Epicureans* being agnostics and hedonists – thinking the gods could care less about us so we might as well live it up.

And the *Stoics* were naturalistic moralists – what you see is what you get, so just draw on who you are and be good.

Agnostic hedonists, and naturalistic moralists. Sound familiar?

And some [of them, v18] said, “What does this babblers wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. [19] And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus [(Mars Hill) an open area where people would gather to hear the latest; probably referring to Mars Hill, pictured here, just below the Acropolis.]

They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? [20] For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” [21] Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

[22] So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. [23] 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.

➤ A second key to witnessing, is to . . .

Take advantage of opportunities (V16-23)

We saw this last week and we'll see it again. Paul took advantage of opportunities.

Not because it was easy, but because his burden was great and his message greater. He was compelled.

➤ When we were on vacation in Florida recently, we went to an outlet mall.

And as is often the case, I made the rounds to the 3 or 4 stores I was interested in, and then sat on a bench to read and wait for Becky and the girls.

And a minute later I heard a guy in front of me ask me something like, “Do you think it's interesting that God has some gender qualities?”

And as I glanced up, I surmised that they were Mormons, and thought, “Should I say something and respond, or tell them I'm not interested and keep reading?”

At which point my mouth opened, and said, “Are you implying that God is somehow feminine?” Because I knew what they were getting at. It's a Mormon belief.

And in that moment I thought “There's no way I'm going to let them say such heretical things.” There were people sitting behind me, people standing around . . .

And my spirit was *provoked*.

So I engaged them over the next 5 or 10 minutes, pointing out the error of their statements and Scriptural interpretation, until they said never mind and walked away.

And I sat there wondering if that was for *them*, to plant a seed of truth in *their* heart, or for the people on the bench *behind* me. I don't know.

But I sure am thankful for the filling of the Holy Spirit to take advantage of the opportunity.

I haven't *always* done that. And those *missed* opportunities are some of my greatest regrets. But this time I did. And it's the second key to witnessing.

➤ Third, is to . . .

Talk about God (v24-29)

Now, you might be thinking “duh,” but I think it needs saying. Because we often talk about anything *but* God. Even in the midst of an opportunity to witness.

We're afraid of what people might think. We don't want to risk any backlash. And we certainly want to avoid anything “awkward.”

So we don't even mention him. Or anything about him.

Instead, we make witnessing all about us. *Our* story. *Our* testimony. *Our* circumstances.

Not that we shouldn't *use* our testimony in witnessing, but that we should make it more about God than us.

Like Paul did. All he *talked* about was God. God, God, God.

Alluding to no less than 11 different attributes in 6 verses. Take a look. V23b.

[23b] What therefore you worship as unknown [as the force in our day, the big guy, cosmic good, intelligent design], this I proclaim to you.

*[24] The God who made the world and everything in it [aka the **creator**; that's the first attribute he alludes to], being Lord of heaven and earth [he's **supreme**; #2], does not live in temples made by man [he's **transcendent**; other than us and beyond us], [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything [he's **self-sufficient**], since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything [he's **benevolent**].*

*[26] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth [he's **purposeful**; intentional; we're not here by accident], having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place [he's **sovereign**; raising nations up at a particular time and particular place according to his plan; which means he's also sovereign over when and where we live, those who populate the nations.], [27] that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him [he's **accessible**; #8].*

*Yet he is actually not far from each one of us [he's **immanent**; near.], [28] for “In him we live and move and have our being” [we're in his presence; Coram Deo]; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.” [In other words, he's **life-giving**.]*

[29] Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man [like all the idols that surrounded them].

His point being, that if *we're* alive, being made in his *image*, then *he's* **alive**. The *final* attribute he alludes to.

➤ Given the opportunity, Paul talked about God. And we should too.
Whether you start with the Scriptures and talk about God *incarnate*, like Paul did with the Jews; because they knew and *respected* the Scriptures . . .
Or start with God the Father like he did with the Gentiles, who *weren't* familiar with the Scriptures. Either way, he talked about God, and we should too.
If we're going to witness, we have to talk about God, and get *comfortable* doing so.

And notice that *both* approaches Paul took, whether it was God the Son or God the Father, ended up at the same place – the Gospel.

Talk about God when you witness, but get to the Gospel. V30-34. (Summary)

➤ [30] *The times of ignorance* [where people made God in their *own* image] *God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent* [to admit their sin, confess their sin, and turn from their sin; including their sin of worshipping some-one or some-thing *other* than God; he commands us to repent],

[31] *because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed* [Jesus; on the day of his return]; *and of this* [this judgment by Jesus] *he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*"

Because he *lives*, he will judge. Condemning those who *don't* believe to an eternity of hell, and welcoming those who do, to an eternity of heaven.

[32] *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."* [We're not really sure.] [33] *So Paul went out from their midst. [34] But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

Probably the *same* Dionysius who became the first *bishop* of Athens, and was martyred.

You never *know* who you're talking to; and you certainly don't know their future.

Which makes this last key so crucial:

Urge people to seek him and repent (v30-34)

Seek God and turn. Like Paul says in v27. God created us and placed us in this world, *that* [we] *should seek God, and perhaps feel* [our] *way toward him and find him*.

That's God's design and desire for our entire existence. *That we should seek him*, and find him (27). That.

And find him you will, if you seek him with all your heart. If you seek him through his

Word. If you seek him among his people. If you seek him in prayer.

Encourage people that way when you witness.

➤ And urge them to repent. Because judgment is *coming*. And after that, it's too late. V31. [God] *has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness*.
Meaning he will give us what we rightly deserve. Death and separation for those who *don't* seek and *don't* repent, and life and love for those who do.
Those who believe in *Jesus*, and turn from themselves; from *their* way, *their* truth.

That's how to witness (Summary). Urge people to seek him and repent. Talk about God and get to the Gospel. Take advantage of opportunities. And above all, keep trying.

Pray – God, give us a burden for those around us, so that we can't help but witness. And use these principles to spur us on. For your glory, and their joy.