

The truth about testimonies

As a child, I testified every Sunday morning. I can't do it anymore.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [February 26, 2020](#) issue



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“The-Lord-has-been-good-to-me-this-week-so-I-want-to-thank-him-for-all-of-his-loving-kindness-and-tender-mercies-because-he-helped-me-with-my-schoolwork-and-protected-my-parents-and-blessed-my-family-with-everything-we-need-so-all-I-want-to-do-is-serve-him-all-the-days-of-my-life-so-please-uphold-me-in-your-prayers-this-week-and-I-will-do-the-same-for-all-of-you-praise-the-Lord-Amen.”

This, just about verbatim, is the “testimony” I gave at church every Sunday, from age six through high school. Well, sometimes I said “Jesus” or “God” instead of

“Lord” or added a detail to spice things up: “Last-Tuesday-Jesus-helped-me-get-an-A-plus-on-my-social-studies-test-so-I-want-to-praise-and-thank-him-forever.”

During summer, I skipped the bit about schoolwork and praised the Lord for beach weekends, ice cream sundaes, or Disney vacations instead. Occasionally I threw in a memory verse or lines from a hymn. But mostly I stood up, recited the above speech at 1,000 words a second, and sat back down.

I wasn't the only kid who did this. It was a tradition at the church my father pastored. Every Sunday, after the songs and before the sermon, the congregation shared testimonies. Children went first, and I was expected “to set a good example” by popping out of my seat the minute my father invited us to share. If I was in an oppositional mood and took my sweet time, I'd feel my mother's eyes burning holes into the back of my neck until I stood up.

I no longer attend a church that does this. If asked to offer a testimony now, I have no idea what I would say. I fumble these days when asked about my faith. My palms get sweaty; all the good words disappear. My fear of giving offense or sounding stupid far outweighs any desire to share the story of who God is in my life. This even though I remain convinced that I am a Christian today precisely because someone—many, many someones—cared enough to share their compelling stories of faith with me.

Of course, I have good reasons for caution. We live in a culture reeling from loudmouthed Christianity. Yet we are still called to be tellers of the story. Every one of us 21st-century Christians is the beneficiary of loving witness-bearers and testimony-givers who opened their mouths and fed us the words of life. The Sunday school teacher with her flannel board cutouts. The youth group leader with his guitar. The grandfather who told long-winded tales about where and when and how God showed up when things got desperate. The pastor who wove her own trembling story of salvation into her sermons.

The tellings weren't flawless. They weren't always even well intentioned. They required a whole lot of sifting and sorting. But somehow, despite the faults and failings of the storytellers, their stories took root within us and grew.

So I'm taking a fresh look at the concept of testimony. What does it mean to bear authentic witness to God in our time and place? Is it possible to be reverent and honest at the same time? Can I offer testimony respectfully, in ways that honor

diversity? Must faithful testimonies always end in uplift?

I ask these questions because my childhood recitations were unerringly pious but very often dishonest. They hid a great deal of uncertainty, fear, brokenness, and anger. They jumped to praise before honoring pain, and they resorted to platitudes that fell flat even to my own ears, because they cost me nothing.

They were also, I see now, spoken in a voice that wasn't mine. I don't use phrases like "loving-kindness and tender mercies" in everyday conversation. Nor do I say "praise the Lord" or "amen" when I talk to my friends. So why did I feel compelled to use this kind of affected speech in church? And can I now find a truer voice, one that reflects who I really am with God?

The expressions I used as a child were given to me by faithful and earnest adults. But they served as placeholders, as shortcuts. As long as I could rely on them, I didn't need to pay the close attention to my spiritual life that genuine testimony requires. To give testimony is to bear witness to what one has personally seen and heard. It is to tell the truth one has come to know, even when that truth isn't convenient, neat, or pretty.

So I'm slowing down. No more 1,000-words-a-minute. No more clichés or platitudes. I'm trying to listen both to the world around me and to the world inside of me. What can I say about who, where, and what God is in my life? Is there anything about my experience of Christ that is beautiful, provocative, or troubling enough to share? If not, why not?

What I couldn't have understood as a child is that the movements of God in our lives are subtler than anything a canned testimony might capture. What I've forgotten as an adult is that genuine testimony is powerful and vital. We dare not treat cheaply what other Christians have suffered so much to tell. The martyrs didn't die for something hasty and prepackaged. They died for telling hard, powerfully undeniable stories about themselves and God—stories they had lived.

Perhaps the invitation is to first live deeply into the faith I'd like to relearn to share. To pay attention, and to speak from places that I have truly earned. To listen even more carefully than I speak, because no single story will ever capture the whole. I need your testimonies as much as you need mine. Only in our collective and courageous telling will the story we love endure.

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