

## Some Words About...

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### ***Marturesthai (testify)***

The Greek word *marturesthai* meant to testify in a most solemn and binding way. In 1 Maccabees 2:56 Mattathias on his deathbed cited ancient heroes including “Caleb, testifying before the assembly” (see Numbers 13:21–14:10). As he was about to be captured, Josephus prayed, “I testify to you that I am not a traitor but I go as your minister” (History of the Jewish War against the Romans 3:354), and in Jewish Antiquities he wrote that Jeremiah came to King Zedekiah “testifying that he should quit his impious and lawless ways” (10:104).

#### **New Testament**

Acts 20:24–28 is Paul’s last will and testament for the Ephesians. He testifies to the gospel of the grace of God (20:24) and says in 20:26–27, “Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am clean of the blood of all. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole council of God.” It is a strange thing for Paul to say at that particular point in his address to the elders. He has just declared that he will probably see them no more, and he follows this statement with advice about how to carry on the ministry he has started among them. The phrase “I am clean of the blood of all” was probably used in that day to mean “I’ve done all that I can do.” It sounds like a judicial cliché, but whether of Roman or Jewish origin is not clear.

In Acts 26:22 Paul is arraigned before the Roman official, Festus, and King Agrippa. He says to them, “To this day I have had help from God and so I stand here testifying to both small and great saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place.” He officially goes on record to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and of his being the light of the whole world, Jewish and Gentile.

Paul writes to the Galatians, “I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep all of the Law” (5:3). Paul is saying that the one who commits to observing one Mosaic Law is bound to observing all of the Mosaic Laws. The Gentile cannot become part Jew. He must become completely Jewish or remain a Gentile. Christ has freed us from the bondage of the Law, but we must follow Jesus all the way and discard all legalism. We must give all our heart to Jesus and not reserve part of ourselves to the pride of works-righteousness. Paul does not merely suggest that this is true; he testifies that it is true.

Paul takes an equally hard line in Ephesians 4:17f.: “I say and testify this in the Lord — quit walking as other Gentiles walk, in empty-mindedness, reason obliterated, being shut off from the life of God by their own stupidity, by the blindness of their hearts.” His hammering home of this point by the use of the word “testify” is caused by the results he sees in other Gentiles as he describes them in verse 19. (He was not always so emphatic in giving advice. See 1 Corinthians 7:12ff., 7:25ff., 8:8–10.)

In 1 Thessalonians 2:11 Paul describes his relation to the Thessalonians as that of “a father with his children, exhorting you and encouraging you and testifying for you to walk worthy of God who called you into his kingdom and glory.” Beginning with the King James translation of “charged,” later translators have shied away from using the word “testify” here. The NRSV translates “pleading” (!), while NEB and NAB seem to pretend that it isn’t there at all. Paul had no such inhibitions.

(On the other hand, the NRSV translates *martureo* as “testify” where older translations have “witness.” There is only a slight difference in English between the two words, but the verb “witness” is more often used in informal situations while “testify” is generally associated with a more formal presentation. In our day the difference between witnessing to something and testifying to it is largely the difference between saying “I saw” and saying

“I solemnly testify that I saw.” In both cases you should be telling the truth, but in the latter case you had better be telling the truth!)

The dictionary definition of “testify” is “to make a statement based on personal knowledge or belief.” Paul here is reinforcing his exhorting and encouraging with his personal guarantee that God has called the Thessalonians into his kingdom and glory and that they should therefore live godly lives. He is moving from the stance of giving them his support into the position of giving them assurance of God’s grace as the motivation for their lives.

It might be noted that every New Testament use of *marturesthai* is in material attributed to Paul. This should perhaps be taken into account in considering the accuracy of Acts and the possible authenticity of Ephesians.

### **Today**

It is strange to see people testifying to the excellence of a certain brand of food or the superiority of certain automobiles and yet giving no personal testimony to things that are really important. We are solicited for our opinion on a variety of subjects from legislative proposals to the brands of dishwashing detergent we prefer. Opinions are much in demand, but testimony is avoided. Opinions reflect our current mood, but convictions represent our enduring standards. To testify to your convictions is to place yourself at a position from which there is no turning back. Saying the Apostles’ Creed is testifying to eternal truth; telling someone your opinion of a headache remedy represents an immediate reaction to a current condition.

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