

“If you are looking for a practical guide to help you or your church to understand how to evangelize within the natural rhythms of life, then you will find no better guide than *Witness* by Jonathan Dodson. Rather than giving us a set plan or method of evangelism, Dodson gently helps us to unleash the natural and compelling beauty of the gospel in hundreds of small but profound ways.”

**TIMOTHY C. TENNENT**, Professor of Missions,  
Beeson Divinity School

“Jonathan Dodson’s *Witness* is an uplifting and practical resource that the church really needs! Throughout the book, Jonathan thoughtfully tackles common misconceptions and unhelpful approaches to sharing Christ, as well as giving clear gospel insight and real-life wisdom, making it easier to sensitively speak of your faith. As part of the Love Your Church series, this book feels like a friend by your side, encouraging you to share Jesus with humble confidence. Perfect for anyone wanting to grow as a witness for Christ—whether just starting out or feeling weary and looking for fresh encouragement.”

**DAN STEEL**, Principal, Yarnton Manor, Oxford

“Some books on evangelism feel like watching a professional BMX bike rider at the X-Games. We’re inspired—awed even—but rarely do we think we could ever imitate what we’re seeing. For many of us, stepping out of our comfort zone to share the gospel with others often feels more like a child learning to ride with the training wheels off. *Witness* is the kind of book that lands on you like the hand of a patient father on your back, guiding you forward despite all the wobbles, spills, and self-disappointment—into an encouraging rhythm that every believer can enjoy. Every chapter is biblical and beautiful! Jonathan has written a refreshing, practical, and gospel-saturated book that I can confidently put into the hands of every believer in my church to deepen their own confidence for living faithfully on God’s mission.”

**ADAM RAMSEY**, Lead Pastor, Liberti Church, Gold Coast,  
Australia; Director for Acts 29 Asia Pacific;  
Author, *Honor and Truth on Fire*

“What I most appreciate about Jonathan Dodson’s instruction on evangelism is his attentiveness to the person who needs Jesus: a posture of kindness and care that shines through the clarity and compassion in his conversations about the saving grace of God. This book will equip and encourage you to listen in love and speak the truth of Jesus.”

**TREVIN WAX**, VP of Resources and Marketing, North American Mission Board; Author, *The Thrill of Orthodoxy* and *Gospel-Centered Teaching*

“Warning: this warm, practical book will invite and encourage you to practice evangelism with joy, as it did for me. Whether you’re scared to talk to others about Jesus, enthusiastic, or somewhere in between, *Witness* will equip you and your community to take real-life steps in sharing the good news.”

**RACHEL GILSON**, Leadership Team,  
Theological Development and Culture, Cru

“As the body of Christ, we have been called to share the reason for our hope and our certainty in him. *Witness* is a must-read, then, for all of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus. Through the pages of this short but powerful book, Jonathan Dodson urges each of us as individuals to think both practically and prayerfully through what it means to be faithful witnesses for Christ in our everyday lives.”

**VANCE PITMAN**, President, Send Network

“In *Witness*, Pastor Jonathan Dodson skillfully guides readers into a holistic understanding of the church’s missional work, anchoring our witness in the beauty of the gospel and the posture and practices that emerge from being captivated by Christ. Don’t be fooled by its size—this small book is rich in insight and tangible application. It is a gift to the church.”

**REV. CLAUDE ATCHO**, Pastor, Church of the Resurrection,  
Charlottesville, VA; Author, *Reading Black Books*

“*Witness* is a gem of biblical equipping, insightful illustrations, and practical examples for evangelism. Dodson can encourage you and your church to continue in the tradition of the early church.”

**J.A. MEDDERS**, Director of Theology and Content, Send Network;  
Co-author, *The Soul-Winning Church*



# witness

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JONATHAN K. DODSON

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# FOREWORD

BY ED STETZER

Once upon a time—maybe about a generation ago—many churches intent on making disciples lacked the resources they needed to equip their people for the task. In response to that need, denominations and parachurch ministries responded with a profusion of programs, tools, and methods to help churches and individual believers share Christ and grow disciples. Today we no longer lack resources. We are blessed with multitudes of them, from plans of salvation and presentations of the gospel to strategies for planting churches and tools for teaching the Bible.

But many churches still aren't thriving, especially in evangelism. We have the tools; what we need is people—people who are ablaze for God, on a mission to show and share the good news we have received. People who are filled with the Spirit and changed by the gospel. People who are burdened to pray and ready to proclaim the good news.

I think of the powerful little book *Power Through Prayer*, where E.M. Bounds wrote, “What the church needs today

is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use ... The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men ... He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer.”

I agree. But I would add this: we need men and women who are given both to prayer and to proclamation, to seeking God for people and to seeking people for God.

In other words, we need models: people who go beyond the lowest-common-denominator approach of most methods to help believers share Christ effectively today. Jonathan Dodson is such a model. His writing on the gospel, both in explaining what it is and in describing how to show and share it, comes at a time when the church needs his mind, example, and heart.

When Paul recounted the powerful witness involved in establishing the church in Thessalonica, he said this: “We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8, CSB). Our lonely, distrusting, and divided culture needs the gospel. People also need the kind of evangelism that involves us giving our own selves.

Yes, we can distill the good news down to a very simple tool, but what we need—and what those we seek to reach will be helped by—is more of our lives invested in the gospel and people, not less. We need to move from

a little-as-possible witness to the sharing of our whole lives. You will find out how to do that in this book.

You will read about our search for beauty, as well as helpful metaphors to explain the gospel, and what Jonathan calls “shameless prayer.” Bounds would have liked that phrase. Yes, there are actions steps—we need those. But we need more. Jonathan recognizes that we need help with having conversations that aren’t immediately awkward for us or for those with whom we share.

I especially love Jonathan’s phrase, “we talk about what we’re taken with.” Maybe this describes why we are in such a lull of personal evangelism in our day. Maybe we are taken with other things.

If you are ready to be taken with Jesus afresh—to be astonished at the wonder of Christ—keep reading. Your life and the lives of those you meet will be changed.

*Ed Stetzer, Ph.D.*

*Talbot School of Theology, Biola University*



# 1. TRUE WITNESS

*“When I see a garden in flower, then I believe in God for a second. But not the rest of the time.”*

**Svetlana Alexievich**

**W**hen my British cousins visited us in Texas, we took them to the Fort Worth stockyards to give them a real Texas experience. The city is nicknamed “Cowtown” due to the millions of cows that cowboys drove through it along the Chisholm Trail in the mid-to-late 1800s. When the railroad arrived, Tetris-like, wooden cattle pens were created to funnel cows into 2,600 cattle stalls. But after the cattle industry dried up, some cattle pens were converted into a maze for tourists.

All eight of us paid the admission fee to enter the Cattlepen Maze, where the goal was to gather five punch holes in a scorecard and exit the maze as fast as you could. As I was

gathering my punch holes, I crossed paths with various family members and asked them to point me to another punch-hole station. Sometimes they pointed me in the right direction; other times they tricked me by pointing me in the wrong direction!

Even after I gathered all the punch holes, I kept reaching dead ends in the maze. I began to end up in the same place where I had been before. I was lost. Anxiously searching for an emergency exit, I wondered if I would ever make it out of the maze. When I finally found the real exit, I breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for the “witnesses” who pointed me to the truth. And I won!

Most of us experience life like a giant maze. Sometimes our choices feel like an adventure. New experiences can be thrilling: falling in love, discovering insights through higher education, an intriguing career, inspiring world travel. But inevitably, the thrill wears off. A relationship dissolves, the career fizzles, disillusionment creeps in. A sense of lostness emerges. Will I ever find my way? How do I get out of this mess? Is there someone who can point me to the truth? We need real witnesses. Those who are spiritually lost need to hear from those who know the way, the truth, and the meaning of life. The world is desperate for true witnesses.

## **POINTING TO BEAUTY**

Many people are searching for what is beautiful and true. The band Foster The People sing of feeling “lost without

you” and being “lost in space” as they look for “signs of glowing afterlife.” The song’s lyrics suggest that our world is enchanted—embedded with neon-like signs that point to life after death. The psalms, too, remind us that creation glows with signs of “afterlife”:

*Bless the LORD, O my soul!  
 O LORD my God, you are very great!  
 You are clothed with splendor and majesty,  
 covering yourself with light as with a garment,  
 stretching out the heavens like a tent.  
 He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters;  
 he makes the clouds his chariot;  
 he rides on the wings of the wind;  
 he makes his messengers winds,  
 his ministers a flaming fire. (Psalm 104:1-4)*

This psalm depicts divine *beauty* within creation. The brilliance of billions of stars in our galaxy are God’s garment. The cosmos is depicted as a tent in which he chooses to dwell. His cosmic abode sits on the waters of the earth, and his vehicle leaps from cloud to cloud, carried on the wind of angelic wings. This is a poetic depiction of the beauty of God’s grand home, but ultimately the universe is aflame with signs of *God’s* glory. The wonders of the world beckon our attention to *his* splendor and majesty.

Beautiful things point beyond themselves to perfect beauty. Psalm 50 says, “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth” (v 1). We’re meant to trace the

splendor of the world back to the sovereign one. One way in which we can bear witness to God is by *practicing beauty*. We practice beauty by making beautiful things, like writing lyrics that capture human longing, raising children with character, or planting a colorful garden.

I saw how effective this can be with my friend Ryan. Although Ryan had recently turned from skeptical unbelief to genuine faith in Jesus, he still had some doubts about Christianity. So I invited him to join me and our family for a road trip. We did the usual things: sang along to songs on the radio, corrected the kids when they got out of hand, ate some fast food.

The trip was pretty unremarkable to me, but years later Ryan shared with me how powerful it was for him to witness our children interacting with us in such a beautiful way. He was unaccustomed to the combination of respect and love that flowed freely within our family. His encounter with a family grounded in God's authority and love dealt a blow to his skepticism and strengthened his faith. Moms and dads, what you do matters, not only for your children but also for a watching world, which is admittedly wounded by broken parents.

Beauty can be found not only in the attractiveness of a tender family but also in a well-tended garden. Svetlana Alexievich is a Belarusian author who writes investigative, literary non-fiction depicting the bleak life of citizens of the Soviet Union. She conducted extensive research and countless interviews with sufferers to write *Secondhand*



*Time: The Last of the Soviets*.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for “her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”<sup>2</sup>

Her critique of oppressive regimes also resulted in her exile. Despite the pain of depicting great tragedy, or perhaps because of it, she writes, “When I see a garden in flower, then I believe in God for a second. But not the rest of the time.”<sup>3</sup> Even someone who has suffered greatly and has documented unbelievable human anguish is provoked to believe *by the beauty* of a flower.

But why does beauty draw our attention? Because beauty bears witness to wholeness in a broken world. Beauty is a pledge of flourishing when things seem dire. The film *1917* follows two British soldiers during World War I on a mission to deliver a message that could save hundreds of lives. As they make their way across No Man’s Land, their journey is filled with horror and punctuated by beauty.

The director, Sam Mendes, skillfully draws our attention to beauty in key moments in the film: a blossoming tree against a war-torn landscape, an act of kindness while on the run, soldiers singing amid the lament of great loss. Why does he introduce these aesthetic disruptions into the derelict landscape? Because beauty in our

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1 Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (Random House, 2017).

2 The Nobel Prize in Literature 2015, [nobelprize.org](https://nobelprize.org), Nobel Prize Outreach, December 18, 2024.

3 Macha Gessen, “The Memory Keepers” *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2015.

broken world beckons belief in an unbroken, whole world. Loveliness suggests that things will not always be this bad.

If this is true, then those who possess the hope of the new creation should bear witness to this divine beauty. Plant beautiful gardens; cultivate families rooted in love and respect; write lyrics that capture hope; tend your life and mark out plots that may spark belief, even if only for a second. Who knows what God may do with it.

## **TELLING THE TRUTH**

People are not only searching for beauty but also for where its glow comes from. Even if the beauty of character and creation suggest an afterlife, these witnesses are insufficient. Psalm 19 says, “Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard” (v 2-3). Although creation speaks, it doesn’t tell us everything we need to know.

Beauty may compel belief in God’s existence, but only the good news can conjure saving faith. Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck writes, “Art in all its works and ways conjures up an ideal world before us ... But art cannot close the gulf between the ideal and the real. It cannot make the yonder of its vision the here of our present

world.”<sup>4</sup> So what bridges the gulf between ideal beauty and our gritty reality? How do we get the lyrics of creation into people’s hands?

Through a witness. A true witness tells people where to go. She uses verbal testimony to get her point across. This is why Svetlana Alexievich’s writing is so powerful. Her writing isn’t a personal reflection on Soviet sufferers, but their *verbal witness* captured and transcribed to writing for us to read. When I was in the maze, beauty could not tell me how to escape. I needed a witness to tell me where to go in order to get out. How much more do the spiritually stranded need to hear a message of rescue? The lost need witnesses to tell them how to be found. Paul writes:

*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Romans 10:14-15)*

Almost daily someone will say to me, “Have you heard of so and so?” Very often, my answer is no. But in that moment, I am made aware of a person made in God’s image that I never knew existed. Then that person will

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<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God* (Westminster Seminary Press, 2024), p. 5.

elaborate on some quality about this stranger, and I learn about a good person. How much more do people need to hear about the greatest person that has ever walked the earth? Has something about Jesus struck you lately? Have you been surprised by his grace, encouraged by his forgiveness, struck by his beauty? Tell someone! When someone asks how you are doing, tell them about this great person.

Someone recently asked me how I was doing. Instead of giving them a pat answer, "Fine!" I told them the truth. Over the span of several weeks, I had contracted a painful case of the shingles, suffered a considerable financial setback, and lost my dear aunt to a heart attack. I was overwhelmed, my emotional capacity thin, and I felt like I was freefalling into despair.

I cried out to God and told him what I was feeling. I felt heard by God but still sad. I wrestled with dark thoughts all morning. Then I read Psalm 55:22: "Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you." The freefall stopped. I was buoyed by God's promise not only to shoulder my burdens but also to sustain me. I was reminded that all things are held together in Jesus (Colossians 1:17). In my despair, I encountered a great person who lifted me up, and I've been telling people about him all week.

Chatting with someone who confided in me that he had been depressed for weeks, I listened and empathized with him. Then, because I had experienced God's comforting promise, I was able to point him to the

God who promises to sustain us. I received a text from another person who confessed they were exhausted. When I shared the news about our burden-lifting God, they were immediately encouraged to trust Jesus.

Because the Scriptures bear witness to the truth, and I bore witness to others about Jesus, we experienced God's comforting grace. And that's what everyone needs to experience—but they can't if they don't hear about the person and promises of Jesus! We don't have to walk people through a whole gospel presentation or lead them through a Bible study. We can just describe an encounter with or a good quality of the greatest person we've ever met.

### **WE TALK ABOUT WHAT WE'RE TAKEN WITH**

Hebrews describes Jesus as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3). The Greek word for radiance only occurs this one time in the Bible. The author pulls it out for a special occasion. But what is radiance?

When we say to a bride on her wedding day, “You look radiant,” what are we saying? You clean up nice? No, what we mean is she's *beautiful*. The radiance of the glory of God is the beauty of the person of Christ.

How do we respond to beautiful things? A fiery sunset, snowcapped peaks, a stunning painting, or a striking person? Do we agree or disagree with them? Do we inquire after their atomic composition? No, we *gaze* at them.

Gawk. Admire. Beauty is for beholding. We're made to behold the beauty of Christ—to gawk at his glory. Puritan theologian John Owen says, "One of the greatest privileges the believer has, both in this world and for eternity, is to behold the glory of Christ."<sup>5</sup> Why is beholding the glory of Christ one of the greatest privileges? Because Jesus is the exact imprint of God's nature.

The Greek word for imprint is *charakter*. Jesus Christ is the exact character of God. When we get our eyes checked, we sit down and look through a machine that alternates lenses until the perfect lens is found, making the letters on the eye chart crystal clear. Jesus Christ is the perfect lens, bringing God into focus. If you want to see God, look at Jesus. He is "very God of very God" as the Nicene Creed says. Jesus is *not* a forgery, a copy, or a knock-off. He is *divine* beauty.

So, to behold his glory is the privilege of all privileges. But how are we supposed to behold someone we can't see? We can observe the beauty of the mountains and the sun. Consider for a moment the reason why the mountains and the sun are there. Creation is meant not only to be seen but also to be seen through. Let me explain.

We used to live in a mansion on the North Shore of Boston (in the garage apartment) that faced the Atlantic Ocean. When the owners were gone, I would sneak

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5 John Owen, abridged by R. J. K. Law, *The Glory of Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1994), p. 2.

into their living room and stand in front of two huge, gorgeous windows. But I didn't stare at the window frames or gawk at their size; I looked through the windows to soak in the expansive view of the Atlantic Ocean, the curling tail of Cape Cod, and the Boston skyline shooting up in the distance. I didn't look *at* the window; I looked *through* the window.

Similarly, we're meant to look not merely *at* creation but through it in order to apprehend the beauty of Christ. To trace the sunbeams back up to the radiance of the Son. To let our eyes climb up the mountains and off the peaks into the grandeur of Christ, through whom the world was made. Jesus is *the* beauty worth beholding—the glory worth gawking at.

Everyone talks about the things they love. If you see a movie you enjoy, you don't think to yourself, "I shouldn't tell anyone about this great movie." That would be weird. No, you tell people immediately. You announce the good news of a great film. If you loved the football game last night, you don't think, "I need to keep that news to myself." You blurt it out to your coworkers. "Did you see that pass?!" If you read a deeply satisfying novel, you tell others, "You should really read this book." We all talk about what we're taken with. If we're taken with Jesus, we will talk about Jesus.

The key to being a true witness is to be taken with the truth about Jesus. Many things distract our attention and call for our affections, but only one thing is worthy

of all our attention and affection. Perhaps we would be more faithful gospel witnesses if we slowed down long enough to truly absorb the goodness and beauty of Jesus.

When I create space to reflect on my wife's incredible character, I find myself falling in love with her again. My thoughts drift to her kindhearted joy, her attentiveness to our three children, her strong work ethic, and her persistent grace with my stubborn sin, and I'm just taken with her all over again. Maybe you need to pause now and consider the beauty and kindness of Christ in your life, to find yourself taken with Jesus yet again.

A true witness shares the gospel with others, not only because it's true but also because it's beautiful news. The eternal Son of God, who could have judged us for our sin and unbelief, *chose* not merely to be judged but slain on our behalf. He did this out of great love for us, so that we can experience life-changing forgiveness and undying belonging, and enjoy eternal life with him. My goodness—that is good news!

But how do we faithfully express the gospel in the busyness of life? What does it look like to be a true witness in a city filled with what is false? Our next chapter explores what it means to be a *faithful presence* where God has placed us.

### **ACTION STEPS**

- Think about your relationships, the gifts or resources God has given you, and the places



where he's planted you; how can you "practice beauty" in those areas to draw the attention of others to the Lord?

- Who were the people in your life that acted as true witnesses to bring you to faith in Jesus? Take a minute to thank God for them and send them a message of thanks too.
- Reflect on the things you are taken with. How could you cultivate being more taken with Jesus?