

Guidelines for Preparing a Testimony



Peter Cheyne

Guidelines For Preparing A Testimony

Testimonies can be extremely powerful. We are called to be witnesses. A witness is simply someone who tells it as he or she experienced it. People might argue with your theology but they cannot argue with your experience of God.

What is more, people will often identify with you. As human beings we share a lot in common. Things you talk about will parallel things in their lives. Your testimony is about Jesus in your life and allows people to think about the possibility of Jesus in their lives.

Romans 10:9 says, *"If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."*

Some Biblical Examples

Luke 8:39: Jesus said to the healed demoniac, *"Return home and tell how much God has done for you."*

That could be a good definition of a testimony. Tell how much God has done for you.

"Tell how much God has done for you."

It raises the Number One Rule: *Let it be a testimony to Jesus*. Tell how much God has done for you, not how much you have done. That means being very humble about your neediness and about the changes that knowing Jesus has made. Some people suggest that you should use the word "I" only once on each page. That is a good safeguard against blowing your own trumpet.

On the other hand, a testimony must be *your personal story*. A testimony is not teaching or preaching (although your story can lead into a challenge to other people). It is what God has done for you.

Luke 8:47: the healed woman *"came trembling and fell at His feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed."*

That verse reminds us of:

1. the humility (*came trembling*)
2. the focus on Jesus (*fell at His feet*)

- A challenge to the hearers
 - Structure
 - Opening
 - Clear progressions
 - Finish
 - Length
 - Use of interesting stories, illustrations, anecdotes, humour etc
 - Use of jargon
 - Any hints for better presentation
4. Pray.
- Give thanks to God for what He has done in this person's life.
 - Give thanks for this person.
 - Pray for him/her to be able to have opportunities to share his/her testimony in ways and in contexts that can influence other people in their walk with the Lord.

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August 2000

2. Work through the section "Planning Your Testimony" step-by-step. You should then have a complete first draft of your testimony. Do you want anyone else to read it or hear it at this stage, to give you some pointers?
3. Work through the section "Refining Your Talk" step-by-step. You should then have a version of your testimony that you are happy with (or, at least, is the best you can do so far.)
4. Discuss with your group leader (or whoever is appropriate) when you might have a trial run at sharing your testimony in a context where you can receive helpful feedback.
5. Work through the remaining portions of this leaflet. By this stage you should be ready to give it a go.

Group Support

1. Give members the opportunity to share their testimony within the group
2. Give loving feedback. Remember that it is always a privilege to be allowed into someone else's life. Respect the person's vulnerability. Remember also that the role of the group is to encourage and support. At the same time, maximum growth will be achieved through genuine assessment.

Remember to give more commendations than recommendations. Make sure you affirm the positives.

Being accountable and vulnerable is scary and requires considerable courage. This is a time when group love is important. Do speak the truth but speak it with genuine love for the person who has shared.

3. Comment on
 - What bits had the most impact on you?
 - Did God receive the glory? Would people conclude, "Wow! What a wonderful God!"
 - The clarity of the main elements
 - Life before God acted
 - How God acted
 - Life after God acted
 - The speaker's response to God now

3. the need to testify publicly (*in the presence of the people*)
4. the need (*she told why she had touched Him*)
5. what God had done for her (*how she had been instantly healed*)

Deuteronomy 6:20-25. Moses, very concisely, gives the testimony of the nation. You might structure your testimony to answer these same questions.

1. What were you like, and what were your circumstances, before God acted?
We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt.
2. What did the Lord do?
"But the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders - great and terrible - upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household."
3. How has He blessed you? How is your life different now?
But He brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that He promised on oath to our forefathers.
4. What is your obligation to Him now? What does He ask of you now?
The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today
(blessing again)
5. What is your challenge or invitation to your hearers?
If we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as He has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.

Note, how little Moses talked about the people (only the first 7 words and they are very humble) and how much he talked about what the Lord had done, and what He requires.

In testifying to the Lord's goodness, the main question is: In what ways are you different as a result of Jesus in your life? Basically that means

- What was your life like before?
- What brought about the change?
- What is your life like now?

What changes has God made

- in you
- in your attitudes
- in your circumstances

**What was your life like before?
What brought about the change?
What is your life like now?**

In describing how God acted you will want to describe

- key events
- key people
- key lessons

This is where you tell the actual story of God's goodness. What did He do?

Planning your testimony

You might be tempted to think that you know about yourself and you can tell your story with little preparation. Don't be fooled. That will probably lead to disorganised waffle!

You may be preparing to share your testimony on some particular occasion. However, it is useful to also have a prepared basic outline of your testimony that you can share at any time that seems appropriate - and that you could, if necessary, summarise in, say, 2 minutes. Are you clear in your own mind what the Lord has done for you? You should be able to share that at any time.

Pray

Testimonies can be very, very powerful - but only when they are soaked in prayer. If you want the Holy Spirit to use you and your story then pray about it.

To whom will you be speaking?

This is very important. The message you are trying to convey, your language and your style will be very different depending on whether you are talking to a church full of largely Christian people, or to a non-Christian neighbour over a cup of coffee.

Think your way into the situation. What style is appropriate?

Other Biblical examples

You might like to also study:

- Paul's testimony in Acts 22:2-21 and Acts 26:4-23
- David testimony to God's deliverance in Ps 18:1-19 (or 2 Sam 22:2-20)
- Nebuchadnezzar's remarkably honest testimony in Daniel 4
- Jonah's testimony in Jonah 4
- The healed blind man in John 9 (esp. vv. 9-11, 15, 25)

What common features do they have?

What can we learn from these examples?

others or try to make your testimony similar to theirs. Your testimony is the unique story of what Jesus has done for you.

Be confident and enthusiastic even if you don't feel like it! Trust God.

Don't be daunted by all that has been said here! You don't have to be "perfect". God often uses a presentation that is far from perfect in ways that He could never use a more polished performance. It is your genuineness that will speak loudest. That is not an excuse for sloppy presentation but, if you have done what you can, simply put the results in God's hands. He will do the rest. The battle belongs to the Lord.

Group (or Personal) Application

To think about

1. Can you think of some testimonies that you have heard, or read, that have made a particular impact on you?

What was it about those testimonies that contributed to that impact?

2. Study together one of the Biblical examples mentioned in this leaflet.
 - a Identify the elements that are included
 - b Identify the structure
 - c Are there any features that are present because of the particular situation or audience?
3. What do you consider to be essential in any testimony?
4. How might your testimony, spoken to a neighbour enquiring about your experience of Christianity, differ from your testimony delivered to a large audience that is largely Christian?

Individual Testimony Preparation

1. Choose to prepare one (or more) of the following:
 - a A five-minute testimony of your conversion
 - b A twenty-minute testimony covering the major things God has done in your entire life.
 - c A five-minute testimony to your most recent experience of God that has changed your life in some way.(Groups may choose to cover each of these over a period of time.)

- a glass of water?
- music (e.g. before or after you speak)?
- ability to play a tape or show a video?

Are you dressed appropriately for your audience? You do not want your dress to become a barrier to communication e.g. if people are distracted/offended by its inappropriateness.

Have you got:

- your notes/script?
- any transparencies or other resources you need?
- your Bible?
- Have you prayed?

Go for it!

This is your story. Tell it like it was. You don't need a lot of theological knowledge. This is your story of your experience of Jesus.

Testimonies are powerful. People identify with them. God can use your story.

"A young man shared his testimony at a three-on-three basketball tournament sponsored by our church. In his five-minute talk, he told of the tragic murder of his brother, his ensuing depression, and his encounter with a church that made it safe to be honest. These forced him to deal with a God whom from childhood he had dismissed. He never made it clear when or how he came to faith. What he did do, however, was to tell an authentic story of his struggle. One listener, who had refused to darken the door of a church since starting college, responded to the testimony. He had grown up in a pastor's home, seen a lot of show-time church, and was not interested in the hype. Now, through the honesty of this testimony, he became open to the gospel. Sometimes the good news is simply the testimony that we can be honest before God and his people, that we no longer need to hide."

"Shading The truth?" by Jim Abrahamson in Leadership, Summer 1997, p.33

It doesn't have to be dramatic (e.g. gang membership and 3 murders). Growing up in a Christian home is just as much a miracle! Don't compare yourself with

Where are your audience in terms of spiritual growth (e.g. use the Engel's Scale to identify their position). Not everybody is ready to take the step of making a commitment to Christ. Some may be a long way from that. Your task is simply to move them one step closer. You will need to consider how you can do that.

Some, of course, have already made a Christian commitment. You might want to challenge them to take a further step towards Christian maturity. To always focus on conversion would be wrong. Even if the focus is conversion, we need to be realistic about the fact that becoming a Christian is a process of many steps besides the one crucial step of putting our faith in Jesus as our Saviour and following Him as our Lord.

We should not assume that people are Christians. They may not be.

But neither should we assume that people are not Christians. People are sometimes offended when others treat them as non-Christians, without having taken the time or effort to find out where they are really at.

Reflect on your own life

In this busy world we may not have much time to reflect. Take time to recognise the hand of God in your life. Have you been still enough to hear what He is teaching you?

Identify the milestones on your journey towards making a lifetime commitment to Jesus. Be sure to include events and circumstances that were clearly initiated by the Holy Spirit, times of need when God was faithful, answered prayers etc. If you identify the milestones, you will have a basic structure for telling your story whenever the opportunity arises.

Keeping a journal will enable you to look back and remember what God has done.

Angie's Story

—in three different styles

The website <http://www.brigada.org/today/articles/testimony.html> contains a very useful guide to writing a testimony. It includes Angie's story written in different styles:

- Mainly for Christians
 - Completely rewritten for non-Christians
 - Using the style of a magazine feature
- It also has critique notes after each presentation.

This is also available in leaflet form from the church.

Make notes. Write down everything you can think of. You may not use all of this material but at least you will have pondered again what the Lord has done for you. And the more you have, the more you can choose those aspects that are particularly useful.

For how long will you be speaking?

Is this a two minute testimony, or have you been given an hour? How can you best present the important parts of your story in that time.

What will you include?

Remember, your testimony is not necessarily the story of your conversion. Nor is it necessarily your whole life story. It may be about a recent change or a change in one particular area of your life (e.g. victory over anger, or your attitude to money...) or a recent difficulty when God stepped in. It might be saying what Jesus means to you, and why.

Christians love to hear conversion stories but non-Christians might be far more interested in the relevance Jesus, for you, *now*. What is it about your experience of Jesus that makes a difference in your life?

Actually, it is good for Christians to hear a current testimony too since many Christians need to be encouraged to think about their day-to-day relationship with Jesus, not just something that happened long ago.

Prayerfully identify the essential points that you want to cover this time.

What is the one main point you want to get across? Can you express it in one sentence?

What response would you like?

How are you going to communicate that? How are you going to give opportunity for that? You should always give that opportunity. To encourage people to do some particular thing but not give them the opportunity to do it, is irresponsible. There are many ways of letting people make some appropriate response

- an altar call
- asking people to indicate a response by standing or raising a hand
- leading people (everybody or those who have responded) in prayer
- encouraging people to pray for the people around them

Making Sure You Are Ready

Decide whether you will take with you

- a full script
- notes
- headings
- a diagram of the basic structure
- nothing

If you don't plan to use a full script, will you take it as a back-up, in case of emergencies?

The advantages of a full script are that it provides security and is a guard against waffling.

On the other hand, reading from a script can sound artificial. There can also be a lack of contact between you and your audience. You can hide behind your script. Looking up, eye contact, and engaging people, are all important.

If possible, check out the venue beforehand so that you don't feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings.

- Where will you stand? Where will you put your notes?
- Where will people be seated?
- What sound system is there? What do you need to know about using it?
- Can you wander around (if that is your style)?

Do you need:

- an overhead projector? (Who will operate it? From where?)

Useful Web Sites

<http://www.brigada.org/today/articles/testimony.html>

Do not give the impression that becoming a Christian will mean the end of all their troubles. It won't! On the other hand, knowing Jesus does make a huge difference.

Have you been honest about the cost? It is a decision to trust and follow Jesus. See, for example, Luke 14:26-27, 33. In Luke 14:25-35 Jesus talks about counting the cost before embarking on discipleship. You need to help people do that.

Have you said anything about another person that would embarrass that person? Never publicly embarrass another person. Do not criticize other Christians or any Christian church. There is enough negativity about the church. Don't help the enemy by adding to people's prejudices. Show loyalty. Be gracious. Be generous. Be positive.

Rewrite it. You might have to do this several times before you get it right.

Read it onto a tape, then listen to it. Better still, video yourself presenting it.

How long was it? Many people can waffle. There is a discipline in saying what you want to say in a certain time and then leaving it at that. Having the opportunity to tell your story is a privilege you have been given. Don't abuse it and risk annoying (or boring!) people.

Was it your natural talking style?

Was there sufficient expression (changes of pitch and speed) **in your voice?**

Was there too much repetition of certain words or phrases (e.g. "um", "OK?", "You know")

Were there any annoying or distracting little mannerisms e.g. swaying backwards and forwards, often repeated hand movements, nervous mannerisms?

Read it to another person who will be honest with you?

Rewrite it again!

Think about what is appropriate. It is not always an altar call. If your testimony was about child abuse you might want to have trained counsellors available privately. If it was about forgiveness, you might want people to privately write some confession on a piece of paper which they then watch being destroyed.

Maybe you are going to hand over to another person who is going to give people the opportunity to respond. Are you and he/she both clear about the expectations?

Structure

How will you start? You really want to grab people's attention at this point.

How will you finish? You need to know where you are heading. Don't just meander aimlessly. Have a clear, planned finish. Don't dribble on not quite sure how to wrap it up.

Think about how you will progress from the start to the finish. There needs to be a clear, logical progression. You want people to be able to follow your thinking, not get lost as you jump around from one point to another.

This does not mean that the progression must be chronological. One recommended structure is:

- 1 Lead anecdote: humorous or key incident in life
- 2 Present status: what person is doing now
- 3 Big flashback - the newsworthy situation (in our case - finding Jesus)
- 4 Closing anecdote: often relating to person's present attitude to past events

(See <http://www.brigada.org/today/articles/xxx>)

Look at some personal stories in magazines and note the structure used.

Write an outline. Then fill in the gaps. Unless you are very confident about your own ability, write your testimony out in full.

This doesn't mean that you have to read from a full script at the time, but it does mean that you are willing to be careful and disciplined about your preparation.

Refining your talk

This is very important. Be absolutely ruthless with yourself.

Check:

Is the introduction a good one?

Is the sequence of events, or the progression of thoughts, clear? Can people follow where you are heading and how the different parts are linked together?

Is your main point clearly made? Will people go away knowing exactly what you were saying?

Is there any irrelevant detail that adds nothing to the story and only adds confusion? Chop it out. Evaluate every sentence. For example, don't mention the names of a lot of people who aren't important to your story and possibly aren't known to your audience anyway.

Prune ruthlessly. You may have a good story or a good joke that you are dying to tell, but if it doesn't actually contribute to what you are trying to do, miss it out. That is not to say that everything has to be serious, or even relevant. A completely irrelevant (but not irreverent!) joke may be a good way to relax your audience. Just be sure that you have thought about why you are using it, and that it does help you achieve your goal.

Are the sentences too long? A spoken sentence needs to be shorter than a written sentence, because people don't have the opportunity to go back and read it again. It has to be understood the first time. Break long sentences into two or three shorter ones.

Are you using Christian jargon that Christians understand, but others don't?

Do not under-estimate this. We live in a surprisingly secular society where concepts such as "sin" or "salvation" (let alone "omniscience") are not understood. Those words are very convenient for

"In my early years as a believer, I felt many Christian testimonies gave an inflated view of Christian experience. I discovered the people giving testimonies often felt pressure to shore up what was, in many cases, a lackluster encounter with God."

"Shading The truth?" by Jim Abrahamson in Leadership, Summer 1997, p.31

communication between Christians, but they might be useless in trying to communicate with someone else. A good communicator will work hard to express things in a way that is clearly understood. That sometimes means having to use the language of the listener, rather than your own preferred language.

Is there sufficient interest? People find it much easier to listen to stories or illustrations rather than abstract theory.

Have you used humour, or visual aids (Overhead projector, video, relevant objects...)?

Have you included relevant scriptures? Do you want to? (e.g. scriptures that have helped you or scriptures that illustrate your point).

Who gets the glory? Who features most prominently - you, Jesus, other people, or Satan? Will people go away saying, "Wow! Jesus is wonderful!" and wanting a closer relationship with Him?

Is it honest? Christian testimonies aren't always honest. Sometimes we try to over-dramatise the seriousness of our situation. Maybe we think that gives God more glory. However, exaggerating is lying. God is not glorified by dishonesty. In fact, your audience may even see through it and it might result in God being dishonoured!

Sometimes too we try to shape the story, or tell it in a certain way, so as to make it something it wasn't or to glamorise ourselves. Your honesty and humility will speak more powerfully than a good story.

Be realistic about failures or embarrassments. They are precisely the sorts of things people identify with. We mustn't give the impression that Christians don't fail. Instead we can show how faithful and forgiving God is, or how a Christian, with Jesus' help, copes with failure.

Have you given the impression that you have now arrived, or is it clear that God is still working on you, and changes are occurring?

Is it realistic?

Do not suggest that becoming a Christian is simply a matter of having your sins forgiven and receiving eternal life. It is actually choosing to serve Jesus Christ in all things for the rest of ones life, because of what He has done for us.