

HOW TO DEVELOP A MORE POWERFUL TESTIMONY PRESENTATION

by Derek Gentle

How would you define a successful testimony presentation? Your concept of a "good testimony" will determine much about how you go about preparing to tell your story. Success, of course, relates to how well a function fulfills its purpose. The purpose of a basketball coach is to recruit and prepare players to win games. Thus, we measure coach's success by their won/loss records. There are two purposes of a testimony: first, to give God the credit for coming to our rescue when we were helpless. A testimony's second purpose is to give others a concrete example of the power of God and His ability to change lives. To successfully fulfill these two purposes be certain that you:

Have Jesus Come Out The Star

Since a testimony is telling the story of how God came to rescue us when we were unable to help ourselves, it would seem obvious that Jesus should come out the hero. Yet, we have all heard "testimonies" which are really a tribute to a person's own grit and determination. I can't convince you what a clever and charming and good person *I* am and glorify Jesus at the same time. Neither is a testimony a tribute to the church nor to some person who has been helpful in our lives. While it is good to describe how God used others to bring His word to us, they should not be the leading characters. One such testimony boiled down to this: "I was lost, but then I joined the youth group." A testimony is about how we were at the end of our human resourcefulness, at the end of our rope, and how Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. Either Jesus is the hero or our testimony grades a zero.

Tell One Testimony at a Time

Most anyone who has been a Christian for any time has more than one testimony. He has his salvation testimony, of course, or he isn't a Christian. However, a Christian should also have growth testimonies. A person may be able to share her testimony about how the Lord taught her the importance of a consistent personal devotional time and one about how God is helping her overcome an unforgiving spirit. Sometimes a person tries to tell all of his testimonies at once and goes on too long for the occasion. A testimony should be more like a television commercial-one theme, tightly developed and packed into a short time-than a mini-series.

Hammer Out a Theme

Your testimony has a plot. Perhaps, you were searching for something. Maybe, you looked for it in the wrong places. God spoke, you resisted. Finally, you were brought to a point of crisis. Either dramatically or in a quiet and low-key way, you submitted to Jesus Christ. He began to work changes in your life and you found that the deepest needs of your heart were being met. What were you seeking? Why were you so stubbornly resisting God? These are the themes of a salvation testimony. One deacon told how he had been raised in an unchurched home, but which was honest and had the work ethic. He was told growing up that one always had to work and earn everything he had, that one should never expect to be *given* anything. He traced the theme of how he was brought to realize that salvation was a free gift from God. Growth testimonies have similar themes concerning how the Lord showed us our need for growth in a specific area and how, as we submitted to His will, we were empowered by His grace. An effective testimony traces such a theme through your experiences in life.

Tell the Key Stories

Certain events epitomize whole periods in our lives or entire struggles. As you prepare, think about the key event which pretty much sums up the whole point. How did you come to stop feeling self-sufficient? What was the key turning point for you? Specifically, how did you come to realize your need of Christ? What caused you to take spiritual matters seriously? Name the things which attracted you to Jesus Christ. How were you brought to the point of crisis? What finally clinched it for you?

Use Thought-provoking Sentences

In thinking through your life and preparing your testimony, develop succinct sentences which sum up the main points of your story. Fine tune these sentences. Word them in such a way they will help others to get the picture and will cause them to think. These sentences will prove helpful, not only when you use them in presenting your testimony to a group, but they will also enable you to quickly make your point in personal conversations. In conversations you won't have the time to tell your entire life story. Nor can you say, "Hold on a minute and let me think of a good response to that." So have a few sentences figured out to go into your "tackle box", ready to use when needed. The point isn't to have everything written out and memorized, but rather to give your listeners a few "handles" with which to get a better grip on what you are saying. Some examples might include: "I used to feel like I was my own God until the heart attack," or "Growing up, I was always the kid who had 'cooties'; my self-esteem suffered a lot until I came to know Jesus Christ."

Sometimes people have trouble knowing how to conclude their testimony. Usually, because how to stop is the one part they haven't thought about. When you ride the wild horses, it's hard to know how to get off. So, here is one place where a good thought provoking sentence can be a big help- to you as the speaker, as well as a way to help your listeners continue thinking about what you have said.

Relate Human Emotion

No one has had your exact experience, but we have all tasted of the same basic emotions: love, hate, fear, hurt, confusion, confidence, embarrassment . . . One mark of an effective testimony presentation is that it tells your unique story in such a way that others can relate to your feelings. They imagine how it must have been for you and identify with you. For example, a man whose wife came to the Lord before he did, might tell how at first he felt threatened by his wife's faith and he feared it would cause her and the children to lose respect for him.

Don't Assume

We know that a person ought to be a Christian. We know that a person ought to be a member of a good church. We know that a person ought to want to profess faith in Christ before others. However, people who were not raised in church do not even know what we are talking about, much less feel that they ought to do it. Working on the assumption that your listeners share that "sense of oughtness" is kind of like starting in the middle. So explain how you came to realize what you ought to do. You might even share some initial misconceptions you might have had. When sharing a salvation testimony, weave into your presentation truths of the gospel as they naturally fit into your experience ("I thought, 'Good grief; it is a gift!"). Lose the lingo and *describe* what you're talking about. Saying something like, "So finally on Friday night of the revival I walked the aisle and was saved" doesn't communicate enough information. Explain how, "What I heard the preacher say that night brought my previous thoughts about God into focus. I put my trust in Jesus Christ to forgive me and to change my life. The effect was so powerful that I didn't care who knew. As my first step of obedience, I joined the church that very night!" Key parts like this ought to be adequately explained and not put into "Christian shorthand" with terms like "walked the aisle." (Is that anything like walking the plank? Do we really want to give people the idea that walking the aisle will save them?) Make clear, also, the distinction between your salvation experience and subsequent growth experiences. I've heard testimonies and found myself wondering, "Was he saved the first time or the second time?" Tell your story in such a way that listeners without a church background will begin to consider, "Maybe that's the answer," instead of, "What is she talking about?"

Cut to the Chase

Unless a date or place is an interesting and important part of the story, don't tell it. Get to the point. Don't bore your listeners with extra details that do not help to move the plot forward.

Don't Preach

Sermons and devotionals are both good things. However, they are different from a testimony. Your testimony is the story of how God worked in *your* life. So tell what God has done for you, not what we should let Him do in us. Your story, rightly told, will be challenging in and of itself. Sometimes, people recommend that we always include at least one scripture passage in our testimony. I would amend that to specify *passages that are part of your story*. Don't just throw a verse in there because you are "supposed" to use one. I heard a great example where a man told about the time he fell asleep at the wheel only to wake up under a billboard saying, "The wages of sin is death." He went on to tell how it made him think about his spiritual condition and then how God later used his familiarity with the first half of that verse to show him the meaning of the second half, "But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Come Across as "In Progress"

Folks relate better to our weaknesses and struggles than to our successes. Celebrities may draw bigger crowds, but people often get more out of hearing an honest person with whom they have more in common. Humility and honesty grace a testimony. When you are able to say, "It is hard, but God is making a difference," they hear the reality of their own world. They perceive that where you are now is within striking distance for them, too. They may not feel that way about the pro football player who makes a couple of a million dollars a year.

Put in Enough Prayer Time and "Think" Time

God can and does put words in our mouths spontaneously. As a pastor, sometimes find myself listening to some really neat sentences flowing from my own lips, knowing that they came from the Holy Spirit. I refer to those times when He adds to or subtracts from what I've prepared as "Divine editorship". However, it seems that God has done this most and used me most when I have spent the most time praying and meditating on what He would have me to say and what would be most helpful for my listeners to hear.

Improve on Your Presentation

Look for ways to better tell your story. Do they seem to be hearing what you are trying to say? You may be surprised to discover the parts of your story to which people relate. If it seems to enlighten and encourage, make a point to always include it. Eliminate those things, which upon reflection, were not necessary. Smooth out the wording of the parts you had trouble explaining. Ask God to guide you.

Quick Summary

Effective communication in sharing your personal testimony takes place when a person who needs to hear it understands it, relates to it, and then continues to think about it. A testimony is for those who need it. It isn't for the purpose of *entertaining* a church "audience." It has the purpose of helping that person who needs Christ (or that fellow-believer who needs to grow in a specific area) to understand why and how that comes about. *A testimony is a story that illustrates a point.* It is about what God has done *for* you and what God has done *in* you. It is a *personal* story, so it has the power to help people see themselves and their own feelings in your experience. A testimony has hit its mark when a listener "gets it" and then finds himself considering his own relationship with God.

APPENDIX

OUTLINE FOR SALVATION TESTIMONY

(This is a commonly suggested outline)

1. My Life Before Coming To Christ
(Be certain not to make this part sound like "the good old days")
2. How I Realized I Needed Christ
3. How I Received Christ
4. The Difference Christ is Making in My Life Now

OUTLINE FOR A CHRISTIAN GROWTH UPDATE TESTIMONY

1. The Circumstances I Have Been Facing and God Has Been Using
2. What I Needed To Learn and How God Spoke To Me About It
3. How I Came To The Point of Submission to God
4. The Difference God Has Been Making In My Life Since