

How to Share a Personal Testimony

Introduction

Your testimony is the story of how you personally came to Christ. It has the power to enchant, disarm, engage, delight, touch and transform. Such is the power of story—your salvation story. Stories can get through to people by emotional connections to deliver meaning much more strongly than just teaching principles. The telling and retelling of stories, and retelling a story your way, are all part of forging meaning and sharing meaning.

Sharing Your Story

Your unique experience in coming to Christ can be an effective tool in communicating the gospel to others. A carefully prepared testimony adapts well to either group situations or casual one-on-one conversation. It enables you to speak confidently, knowing that your words are well-chosen, biblically accurate, and appropriate to the situation.

The main part of an effective testimony generally includes three parts: what your life was like before you received Christ, how you received Christ, and how your life is different as a result of receiving Christ. This is sometimes referred to as the Before/How/After format. Then you would only need to add an attention-getting introduction and a brief concluding thought.

Before You Start

Ask the Lord to guide your thoughts and written words. Then trust Him to do so. Remember, your story can bring glory to Him and also be a plan for the salvation of others. Write as if you were sharing with just one person. "Many first-time speakers make the mistake of speaking to a group instead of an individual. But if you write as if you are talking to one person, your testimony will be more direct. Each person in your audience will feel that you are sitting beside him or her personally to share your life.

Keep your testimony brief. Three minutes (about 1½ - 2 pages typewritten double-spaced) gives you enough time to explain your experience and include a clear presentation of the gospel. That length causes you to be very selective about what you communicate.

Consider using a theme such as a phrase or idea (loneliness, insecurity, fear etc.) that is stated in the introduction, woven throughout the body of the testimony, and then restated in the conclusion. It helps to keep the testimony on track and aids in the listener's understanding and retention. The Bible itself provides a good example to follow in Acts 22, 23, and 26. There Paul utilizes the "Before/How/ After" format which we will follow.

Putting It on Paper

Start with the body of the testimony. Later, you will add the introduction and conclusion. You will proceed by writing each of the five sections in the following order:

- Introduction
- Before you received Christ
- How you received Christ
- After you received Christ
- Conclusion

Because you are trying to be concise, the following tips may help you as you begin to put your ideas on paper:

- Before actually writing the body of the testimony, jot down ideas, thoughts, and events as you go through the questions that follow in the sections called "Before you received Christ," "How you received Christ," and "After you received Christ."
- Decide what is most important to your testimony. Avoid being too explicit or sensational.
- Arrange your events, ideas, and thoughts in a logical order of presentation.
- Develop these brief thoughts and ideas in sentences.
- Tie them together with other sentences in a concise, meaningful way.

The Introduction

Consider two different versions: one to use in a group setting and one to use with individuals. Both introductions need to be memorized word for word so that getting started is made easier and smoother.

If sharing your testimony with a group, your opening sentence will be more formal than it would be in a conversation with a friend. Consider using an interesting quote, a startling question, or an illustration that really captures their attention. An example would be, "One of the richest men in the world, John D. Rockefeller, was once asked, 'How much money would it take to satisfy you?' Smiling, he quickly replied, 'Just a little more.'"

If sharing with an individual, the opening statement should relate to where he or she is and include a teaser that piques his or her curiosity about the gospel. Examples are: "Bringing up children in this world can be difficult. Apart from one factor, I would be lost as to knowing how to raise mine." "When I was in college I had everything a person could want, yet underneath, I was dissatisfied."

Before you received Christ

What things were most important to you? What did your life revolve around? (Examples: money, marriage, career, etc.) Why were they so important? What basic need were you attempting to fulfill? How did you try to satisfy that need? Start at a time in life which relates to your experience with Christ. Remember that this is not a biography from childhood.

If you became a Christian as a child, but cannot remember making a specific decision to accept Christ, concentrate on describing your life before it began to change and use that material as the "before" portion.

People do not like to identify themselves as sinners. Therefore, emphasizing your depth of sin as a non-Christian probably will not relate best to your audience. Rather, point to your outward "goodness" (e.g. church attendance, morality, generosity, etc.), as well as to your inward inadequacies. An example would be to say, "Even though my life looked all together, I knew something was lacking."

Don't be discouraged or intimidated by other testimonies you may have heard involving dramatic conversions and radical lifestyle changes. Vonette Bright and Barbara Ball, in their book *The Joy of Hospitality* write:

A personal testimony is not simply a story of how God rescued someone from a life of horrible sin. It is an account of how God transforms lives—no matter where the person comes from or what circumstances the person has experienced. Many people are encouraged by the testimony of someone who was introduced to the Lord at an early age and who then avoided many pitfalls of growing up. God uses each of us as we are, created in His image and transformed by His power.

How you received Christ

When did you first hear the message of Christ and what was your reaction? When did you first begin to feel positive toward the gospel and why? Why did you make the decision to trust Christ and how did you specifically do that? In answering these questions you are seeking to identify specifically the process that brought you to the point of receiving Christ. This is the best moment of your testimony.

It is important to emphasize that this is a decision that one makes as an act of his/her will. If you came to Christ as a child, your "decision" may have been more of a process. For you, the "when" is not as important as the assurance that Christ is now in your life.

In this "How" portion, attempt to present the basics of the gospel clearly and concisely. This may be the only opportunity for a person to know how to become a Christian.

After you received Christ

How did Christ specifically satisfy the basic need you stated in the before section? What changes have occurred in your life as a result? How do you know Christ is in your life? Be practical in describing the changes in your life since you became a Christian. Describe how God is helping you learn how to trust Him more. Give examples of ways you have changed or principles you have discovered in God's Word and how you have applied them in your daily life.

Be sure to mention that you are not perfect now! You still have many problems every day, but Christ enables you to face them realistically and to solve them God's way. You are not perfect, but you are forgiven and progressing.

Practical areas that Christ has changed might include relationships, goals and priorities, good or bad habits, attitudes, the atmosphere in your home, etc.

The Conclusion

Your conclusion should be a summary statement of one or two sentences referring to your initial basic need and the fact that Christ now fills that need. An example would be, "I made this decision over nineteen years ago. It was the most important decision I have ever made. During this time I've had a growing sense of purpose, peace, and fulfillment based on my personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not based on my successes in life."

Remember that your goal is to explain what Christ has done in your life and to stimulate them to think about their own lives. Do not preach. Leave those listening to you with a challenging thought. Keep in mind that they will generally comment on the last thing you say.

Some Do's and Don't's

- Do consider writing more than one draft. Ask others to critique it.
- Do rehearse your testimony until you are able to give it naturally.
- Don't use "Christianese." Words or phrases familiar to a Christian may be strange or nonsensical to a non-Christian. Examples are "Brother," "Sister," "Amen," "Ask Jesus into my heart," "saved," "converted," "convicted," "born again."
- Don't be too wordy. Have a clear point and direction to your words.
- Don't emphasize how bad you were.
- Don't speak in glittering generalities, such as "wonderful," "glorious," etc.
- Don't speak critically or negatively about any other group or individual.
- Don't mention churches or denominations by name.
- Do be realistic. Share how Christ enables you to walk through your problems, rather than removing them from your life.

Remember that a personal testimony is dynamic in that it is constantly changing. From time to time you may want to change your theme or update your specific details. Seasons of life change what we emphasize in our testimony.

The goal is to communicate effectively with your audience, whether it is a college student or a roomful of faculty wives. Preparation is the key. That is what this information is meant to do—equip you to share confidently in a well-thought out way as God opens doors of opportunity especially for you.

A Final Check

To aid in refining what you have written you may want to use the following questions to help you make a final check.

How does this testimony come across? Do any parts of it sound patronizing, preachy, cutesy, etc.?

Is the introduction attention-catching if speaking to a group and realistic if speaking to an individual?

Is the "before" portion of the testimony understandable? Do I specify a clear need?

Is the gospel so simple and clear that a non-Christian would be able to receive Christ as a result of hearing it?

Is the "after" portion of my testimony realistic or does it sound as if my life is now problem-free?

Is my conclusion a good synopsis of my testimony or does it leave the listener hanging?

If I used a theme, was it woven throughout my testimony?

Does it avoid or explain religious terms that would not be understood by a non-Christian?

Do I say anything in my testimony that would be offensive to a particular person, group, or denomination?

How would my testimony make a non-Christian feel about Christianity?