

Evangelicals have been using testimonies as part of their evangelism for years. There is a formal procedure at evangelistic meetings for someone to come to the platform and tell of their conversion. Frequently it's so formal we do not know why we are doing it and consequently do it very badly.

The tradition of testimonies taught us that we must be a-b-c: audible, brief and concrete. These three points are right and proper. Inaudible testimonies are useless. Brief testimonies hold the interest and attention of the audience. Brevity is also important because the testimony is only one part of the evening's programme, not the main part and once people start talking about themselves they tend to go on and on. Being concrete is also vital. Vague feelings and 'waffley' ideas do not make good testimonies. Talking about the facts, saying what happened when and how, is much more interesting and effective in communicating to the audience. However, there are other aspects to giving testimony. One of the most important is being truthful. There is no point trying to persuade people of the gospel of truth by stretching the truth. What has happened to us is what has happened – there is no point trying to improve it. We were dead in our sins and trespasses and have been made alive in Christ Jesus. That's a fairly extraordinary thing. There is no need to dress it up to be greater still.

But beware, in telling your testimony there is no need to be so truthful that you're boring. It is necessary to select and arrange facts. To tell people everything that has ever happened to you will not only break the rule of brevity, it will also become intolerably boring – truthful, but boring. Likewise, to tell people the facts in chronological sequence may be satisfying to your tidy mind, but will not necessarily help the hearer. Dr Paul White says that when we speak we must: hook 'em, hold 'em, humour 'em, hang on to 'em and hit 'em! Our opening sentence needs to be arresting and interesting. The whole approach needs to have a certain air of unpredictability. There must be a 'line' along which we are telling the story. Journalists call it an 'angle'. They don't just repeat the events; they try to find some angle of interest through which they can approach the events. There also needs to be a clear conclusion to the testimony.

We need to ask ourselves why we are giving this testimony. The answer will not always be the same. It will be affected by the particular audience that we are addressing and what we are trying to achieve. Usually testimonies are given so that a concrete example of Christianity, or Christian conversion, can be shown to people. The preaching of the gospel is often academic and theoretical, but a testimony can flesh it out into real life. It works on the same logic as the old Kellogg's advertisement: "People like you like Kellogg's Cornflakes." Testimonies are not given in order to preach. It is very important not to turn the testimony into a sermon. You are to recount what has happened to you without drawing the obvious conclusion that this can happen to your hearer. The audience is drawing that conclusion already; they do not need to have the boot put in. The testimony is not a logical argument. You do not need to explain the content of the gospel in giving the testimony, nor can you use your testimony to prove the truth of the gospel. You are an illustration of what the gospel is about and your story will demonstrate that it affects lives today.

If you are organising a testimony it is important whom you pick. Some people pick great, important, significant people in our society: the champion sportsman, the university medalist, the politician, the actor. This is an acceptance of the world's value system and seeks to impress people in their terms. It is usually better to choose somebody who is most like the audience to whom you are speaking. A normal, everyday, average person with whom the audience can easily identify is what is required for "People like you like Kellogg's Cornflakes".

Sometimes it is wise to conduct the testimony by an interview. This keeps the chairman in control of the meeting. Once you invite someone to stand up and say a few words about themselves, there is no way you can stop them saying many words about themselves. An interview gives a slightly more natural context for self-revelation because of the practice on both television and radio.

Sometimes testimonies, be they monologues or interviews, sound false, artificial and corny. It is helpful to find an excuse or reason or angle as to why the testimony should be given. You can use the person who is reading the Bible as someone to whom you could ask a couple of questions, in terms of testimony. You could ask people who have become Christians to put their hands up and then invite someone up from the front row in the audience. You can welcome back an old friend who is visiting the church for a night to say a word or two. To have them on the platform in order to speak for another reason is helpful in smoothing over the introduction into the testimony. Working out your testimony and the way that you will give it is a useful exercise for Christians. We must not only think of giving our testimonies in formal meeting situations. Once you have your testimony worked out it is possible to drop it into conversation with people about the gospel in many varied contexts and situations.

### Coaching Exercise

Write out your testimony in a brief, concrete, truthful and interesting fashion and use it in a public and personal situation.