

IMPACT

-THE

POWER

OF YOUR

PERSONAL

TESTIMONY

By Michael Graham

Impact: The Power of Your Personal Testimony

By Michael Graham

©2015 Michael Graham

Contents

Introduction

1. Why Tell Your Story?
2. A Sample Testimony
3. Creating Your Own Testimony
4. Getting Help in Preparing Your Story
5. Pitfalls to Avoid
6. Opportunities for Conversations
7. Giving Testimonies of Different Lengths
8. Print it? Facebook it? YouTube it?
9. Conclusion

Notes

Introduction

For twenty-eight long years I was deeply involved in Eastern Spirituality that had its roots in the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the New Age and involved the practices of meditation and yoga. Then, to my surprise, through a series of events, I was given new life and salvation in Christ. The story of this twenty-eight year spiritual odyssey was then published in book form as *From Guru to God: An Experience of Ultimate Truth*.

Being immensely grateful for this salvation set me thinking about how to draw people's attention to Christ. I knew that this attention needed to be held long enough to plant seeds for the gospel – without attention I had nothing. In my own case, I had been so persuaded by other worldviews that a standard gospel presentation would not have worked. However, a story of a changed or transformed life would have grabbed my attention. This realization helped me to see the importance of personal testimony, and sharing my story became my primary means of sharing the gospel. Besides, no one argues with a story. *A story sails right passed a person's defences and plants seeds for the gospel*. And this is where the power of testimonies lies.

It was on the basis of this conviction that *Impact* was written. Testimony, I believe, is the best and easiest way to start participating in the Great Commission. Many of the reasons why I believe this is the case are described and elaborated upon in the following pages.

Impact contains several stories for the purpose of illustration. Each of the storytellers is known to me personally, discovered from within the church, on the mission field, and on travels aboard, especially in India. I am extremely grateful to each person for allowing their testimonies to be published, thereby encouraging others to spread the word of the Lord in the way that this book is designed to show.

1. Why Tell Your Story?

Most followers of Jesus Christ have a heart to promote the gospel, yet few feel able to or comfortable in doing so. Many are sitting on their hands, frustrated, not knowing how to go about sharing the good news. There's concern over fumbling for words, not quite knowing what to say or how to say it, being thought foolish or being rejected. One may drop in scriptural passages in conversation and feel discouraged when the hearer is not impressed. Some resort to being friendly and helpful and offer hospitality beyond social norms in order to leave a good impression, yet they feel too shy to reveal the source of their kindness. Further, very few among us can be good apologists. An apologist is someone who's skilfully able to influence another for the gospel through discussion, friendly debate, or verbal jousting. I have known a number of people who are good apologists. But apologetics is an uncommon skill. It requires a sound knowledge of our Christian worldview, facility with scripture, nimbleness of intellect, a persuasive and logical mind, plus a considerable amount of practice. Few of us have this aptitude, and even if we do, we may not be willing to practice enough to develop the skills required.

For these and other reasons, relatively few Christians actively participate in The Great Commission commanded by Jesus: 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:18–19). I believe that there is a simple solution to this inaction. It can bring thousands of hand-sitters down from the stands and onto the field, planting seeds for the Kingdom of God. This solution is based on the concept of the story. People love stories, and they have loved them for thousands of years. Not only that, stories have proven to be one of the most effective teaching methods. Importantly, today's postmodern culture is drawn to receiving information in story form.

§

The Bible, in one sense, is a single long story giving the account of how God seeks out people for his own glory and their salvation. Within this story are many smaller stories, including the teaching stories that Jesus told in the form of parables.

Telling Bible stories on the mission field has proven to be an effective way of getting people's attention for God's purposes, along with the use of personal testimony. In addition, research has shown that information contained in the context of a story is more readily retained than if offered directly. These are more good reasons for telling your story.

The specific purpose of this book, therefore, is to promote the value and impact of one's *personal* story and to encourage easy participation in the Great Commission. The apostle Paul certainly thought telling his story was a fitting thing to do: he told his personal testimony on two occasions in Acts 22:1–16 and 26:9–23. And the Apostle John virtually gives his testimony by telling of the things 'he saw and heard', which are affirmed in 1 John 1:1–3. Further, Jesus told the demoniac to go and tell people 'how much Jesus had done for him' (Luke 8:39). Witnessing to Christ in this way certainly puts you in the best company.

Every truly born-again Christian who has found new life in Christ has *something* to attest to – for example, a new understanding; a change of heart, mind, temperament, or character; peace or hope; renewal; a blessing; a love of scripture; a healing; a remarkable spiritual experience; a love for God and people; the discovery of meaning and purpose; assurance of salvation; rest for his or

her soul; or a profound sense of forgiveness. The list goes on and on, and it varies widely from individual to individual. The form of your personal transformation will be unique.

There are testimonies of restored family relationships or marriage; physical and emotional healings; and recovery from destructive life circumstances, personal abuse, or financial woes. There are testimonies of deliverance from bad habits or addictions to alcohol, drugs or gambling; of conversions from non-Christian religions such as the New Age. There are testimonies of turning away from Buddhism, Hinduism, Yoga, Wicca, Scientology, and guru cults of many types. There are also testimonies of conversion from sinful lifestyles such as crime or prostitution. Others have been involved in wholesome activities and professions like sports, business, medicine, education, and so forth, but still experienced emptiness in their lives or feelings of being spiritually unfulfilled. Clearly, there are many back stories to a changed life in Christ.

If you are a genuinely born-again Christian, there will be changes and benefits for which you are grateful – ones that you can attest to, ones that are interesting to other people. Each of these can form the anatomy of your story.

Your experiences need not be spectacular or charismatic – *this is an important point*. Never be intimidated by another person's testimony. Your experience will be unique to you. It will be meaningful and encouraging, and it will attest to the intervention, blessing or influence of the Holy Spirit of God, giving you cause for gratitude. Right here is the reason to give an account of your experience to others. Sharing your testimony often makes others want to embrace this source of fulfillment, meaning, and grace that you have enjoyed or even seem to reflect.

Be confident that your audience *will* listen to your story with attention and interest, if it is shared in a real way – authentically, accurately, and well. The same applies to testimonies given on the fly, provided there is enough time and an appropriate conversation opening (see Chapter 6). They will listen, because everyone is reaching for change, hope, and meaning, whether they know it or not.

In my case, over the last seventeen years, I cannot remember a time when people did not listen with interest (except for one Christian). People have been brought to the edge of their seats; listener's meals have gone cold. I have told long versions and short versions – one minute, five minutes, ten minutes, and forty minutes in duration. In book form, my testimony *From Guru to God* is a six-hour read. I have told this story in seminaries and churches, at businessmen's luncheons, at bus stops, on mountain passes, in cafes, on planes, under trees, and from outside the cell bars of San Quentin prison. I have told it through every media – including radio, television, and print – on five continents, and I have told it to atheists, agnostics, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, gurus, monks, and nuns of different religions. And it has not been so much because of the particular *content* of my story that people listened, but because it was a story of genuine renewal that laid out hope for others, was relevant to life and therefore to all, and was pictorial and tight in the way it was told. (More on the significance of the way we tell our stories later.)

Experience shows that nearly everyone loves a story. People do not argue with stories. They sail right passed a person's defences and plant seeds for the gospel.

It needs to be emphasized that everyone is seeking: decisions relating to marriage, having children, a change of career, getting involved with gurus or cults, clinging to friendships, and pursuing hobbies are all reflections of the search for fulfilment or satisfaction. People make

decisions based on the belief that their choice has the potential to make a difference for the better. No one deliberately chooses unhappiness. Everyone is looking for happiness, although they may seek it in different places and describe it in different ways – for example, satisfaction, fulfilment, significance, meaning, freedom, and peace of mind. We are on a treadmill called ‘I’ll be happy when ...’: when I get married, when I have a child, when I get that job, when I retire, and so on. After ‘when’ shows up, we experience gratification; restlessness is placated until the next ‘when’ arises, then off we go again, placing hope where hope cannot be truly found.

Clutching at hopes, reaching for change, and the quest for meaning drive all people, *even though most are not aware of it*. It is everyone’s primary motivation. This is the universal quest of human beings. In the fourth century, In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine declared, ‘Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee’ (Book 1).

Unfortunately, most people blindly seek fulfilment through material possessions – money, food, sex, marriage, power, friends, status, and fun. In the end, however, it becomes self-evident that no pursuit *in itself* can bring the peace or fulfilment hoped for. Ultimately, seeking can only find its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, who urged us to ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you’ (Matthew 6:33). This truth points to the proper order of things and exposes the back-to-front way in which most people hope to find fulfilment – even Christians.

So if the telling of your story catches this universal hope and need for change – the change that really makes the difference, you have a listener.

Your role

In the process of outreach, some of us plant, some of us water and God brings in the harvest (1Corinthians 3:6–8). Some of us plant *and* water, but each separate role is crucial.

I do not consider myself to be a skilled apologist, and even though I have a basic grasp of teachings across the spectrum of many ‘isms’, I have yet to find a better way of exciting people’s interest in the gospel than through a personal story – a story of how God changed me, and you, and brought us back to him, giving new meaning to our lives.

Personal testimony is the medium of witness available to every born-again Christian. And it is your own God-given means to plant seeds, thereby participating in the Great Commission as Jesus commanded. Telling your story is one of the better ways of getting people’s attention. Again, *without getting their attention you have got nothing!*

At the very least, by telling your story you have planted a seed that falls into one of the four soils in Jesus’ Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1–23). No seed, no possible *fruit*. Where would the watering disciple-maker be without the planter? Perhaps that planter is you, a testimony-teller. You may serve in both roles. But to have only planted the initial seed is a great contribution.

God has given a role or assignment to each one of his children that was set before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 2:10). It has been crafted most perfectly to fit who he designed you to be and what he wants you to do. Whatever shape or form it takes, it is related to the Great Commission. If you are not yet sure of your role, a great start is developing the habit of telling your story. It is a direct and accessible means of participating in the Great Commission, and it will help get the ball rolling as a servant of the Lord.

Apparently, it can take up to seven encounters with the gospel, over a number of years, before a person submits their life to Christ. They may have read a Bible verse, been kindly treated by a Christian, felt a nagging need for forgiveness, experienced a miraculous healing, heard a

compelling sermon on radio or television, or heard a testimony such as your own. By telling your story, you may serve as a person's next step towards salvation – whether you are the first step, the last or one in the middle. You may be the only one necessary to spark a person's decision for Christ. But whatever the case, you are serving the Lord.

2. A Sample Testimony

Allow me to start by sharing my own story in a ten-minute version. It will set the stage for a general discussion of testimonies before we move onto the details of how one can prepare and speak one's own testimony to best effect.

An autobiography of a yogi

Scenario: I/you may have been invited to give a ten-minute testimony at church, or an opportunity has arisen at a dinner party, on a camping trip, at a youth hostel, at a barber shop, or in a booth at a 'New Age' festival – anywhere. The opportunity may be at any location or on *any* appropriate occasion where time allows you to give your story. (Later we will look at examples of 'openers' – moments when you can easily jump into the conversation and tell your story.)

Testimony: Around the age of eighteen, I had no clear idea about what I wanted to do with my life. Most of my friends had a profession in mind, but I was troubled by not having any distinct interests at all, except personal physical fitness. After reading some books on yoga, Buddhism, and meditation in the Eastern spiritual tradition of India, my attention was caught by the promises of spiritual enlightenment, personal transformation, and a life free of suffering. Wow, this is for me! Where do I sign?

This fired my hope to find a clear direction, overcome my limitations and become powerfully effective in all that I might do. Three years later, this zeal led me to buy a motorcycle, jump on a ship, and sail to Sri Lanka, where I rode around the island before heading over to India in search of a guru. Unfortunately, my motorcycle companions, who were not interested in spiritual enlightenment, distracted me from my original purpose and two of us abandoned our motorcycles in India and made our way to London via Afghanistan on buses, trains, and by hitchhiking. Soon afterwards, remembering my original purpose, I flew back to India to a beautiful ashram – that is, a Hindu monastery – where I met my Indian guru, Swami Muktananda, who taught there. He was a powerful and dynamic man, and I became his first Australian devotee. He was renowned for being able to awaken an evolutionary spiritual force that lies dormant in every human being, called the *Kundalini*. Many yoga practitioners refer to this force as the 'serpent power'.

Well, my visit to this ashram did not disappoint me. While sitting on a real tiger's skin one day, trying to meditate, I was suddenly startled by the guru standing over me, stroking me across the forehead and both cheeks. He turned and left. Cool! I had been initiated by his touch, and it only took a few seconds.

Within a week I started to have remarkable experiences, which began with my seated body gyrating in circular motion automatically. Sometimes, I would rise to my feet in classic Eastern dance-like positions, strange utterances would fall from my lips, powerful yoga-like breathing rhythms would occur, and I would see visions and bright blue lights. On two occasions, I experienced journeys out of the body. There were *many* more experiences that I do not have time to tell you about here. It was wholly spontaneous. No suggestion, hypnosis, or hysteria was involved. This 'awakening' is spoken of in the Hindu tradition as the dynamic intelligence force that would theoretically wipe away all karma until union with supreme divine reality – Brahman – took place. Sounded great to me!

These experiences tantalized me so much that for sixteen years until the guru's death in 1982, I practiced thousands of hours of meditation, studied Indian spiritual doctrine, performed devotional service, and chanted for long hours amidst his people and under his authority. Throughout this period, I juggled my time between making a living as a business manager and participating in ashram life. *Strangely, no part of this relationship and practice gave me the peace or spiritual progress I had hoped for.* However, I continued practising this form of meditation for twelve more years after the guru's death, along with running Western personal development programs.

During this time I hoped for the changes that I believed were possible, and this hope and interest took me into the pragmatic world of corporate consulting. I was one of a team of six, developing and delivering a corporate cultural change program for Telecom Australia, Australia's second-largest company. It was the biggest program of its type undertaken in the Southern Hemisphere.

Now with rich experiences from the 'Old Age' movement out of India, the pragmatic world of corporate consulting, and the 'New Age' movement's personal development programs, I was ready to take the next step. I developed my own course in reality training, designed to break through the gates of heaven. It contained ten different modules, including possibility thinking, communication skills and The Decision Principal Training®. I taught this course internationally in France, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Singapore.

I continued my daily practice of meditation for years, thousands of hours of it. I still believed substantive change, though illusive, was possible. To increase my chances of a breakthrough, I took a solo ten-day retreat where I saw and spoke to no one. On the third day, an amazing thing happened. While in a completely ordinary state of mind – that is, no meditation – and about to settle myself onto a couch, suddenly the image of Jesus Christ formed inside my chest cavity. Wow. One second later, I felt an openness and love coming from Jesus to me, of cosmic proportions, along with an invitation and welcome, as if to say, 'Give me your life and breath and I will take care of you.' Well, I was staggered, delighted, amazed; this experience was so personal, so real. But how could I respond to this encounter? I had no idea. Becoming what I imagined was a 'standard' Christian held no interest for me. After all, I was a cool meditator. So I continued doing exactly what I had been doing before.

One year later, another significant event took place. Over a three-day period while in Berkeley, California, I was overcome by the conviction that all those years of disciplined spiritual practice and spiritual experiences had added up to a huge fat *zero*! I actually had remained a very ordinary and untransformed man.

Now, remembering the vision and invitation from Christ, I started listening to hours of radio broadcasts of top expository (explanatory) biblical preaching. At this stage I had had no contact with Christians.

These radio teachings familiarised me with the first principles of Christianity and led to a determination to decide for Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I did so at a Billy Graham crusade on a day in 1997. From that moment of decision (and I give God all the credit for drawing me to do so), I was never the same again. The experience had no dramatic flourishes, but something very new began in me that day. A peace or rest came over me *apart* from feelings; it came with new meaning and purpose, as well as a change in my character and temperament that had evaded me through all those years of Eastern practice. Remarkably, it came as a free gift of grace apart from my efforts and practice. It became clear that I had found my sufficiency in Christ. I was now Christ plus nothing. The Bible came alive to me, and I began to believe all that it said. I was

home in Christ, walking a new walk, praying, enjoying the fellowship of other believers, and enjoying a deep sense of forgiveness through faith in his atoning death on the cross, though a fuller understanding of that came later. In some sense, I had been a dead man walking, but now I was alive and flushed with authentic meaning and purpose for the first time in my life.

Life went on: yes, the easy and the difficult, but with this new life, new times, new direction, new meaning, I became exceedingly grateful to Jesus Christ for all of it. That is my story, and I praise God for its every detail.

A comment on our times

Though my background and testimony as a non-Christian spiritual seeker may seem unusual to many readers, it is one that is becoming more common. Why? Because Eastern mysticism, mainly under the systems taught by contemporary gurus from the East and West, the Tibetan Dalai Lama, and miscellaneous teachings under the 'New Age' or human potential label are becoming increasingly more popular. The Dalai Lama is touring the world promoting Buddhism. Hundreds of thousands of young people are pouring into India and other parts of South Asia to drink from the well of Eastern mysticism in its numerous forms. People are seeking no less than ever, but they are walking straight past the church to the bookstore shelves groaning under the weight of thousands of New Age titles – currently the fastest-growing book genre. And we Christians are largely asleep to the rapidly growing alternative spiritual landscape.

Who is the most popular televangelist in the world today? Oprah Winfrey, with a television audience of 7.9 million daily viewers (2009) and a general audience of 22 million, in 192 cities of USA alone, not counting the rest of the world. She is a woman fairly dubbed 'The Goddess of the New Age Movement.'

As the modern world emerges globally and as we head for One World, this category of conscious seekers needs to be addressed. They exist right under our nose. They are a people group, or an affinity group, whose seeking hearts and worldview is rapidly influencing the common thinking of all of the First World and the modern cities of the Third world. This horse has bolted and we need to be in lively pursuit.

3. Creating Your Own Testimony

Imagine the following picture:

A child sits on the floor to do a jigsaw puzzle. All its pieces are jumbled up in the upturned lid. The objective for the child is to identify each of the pieces, taking them out of the lid one by one and carefully assembling them to create a clear and coherent picture that everyone can see and understand.

Your personal story is just like this jigsaw puzzle – that is, it is made up of elements or pieces. All you have to do is identify the relevant pieces, assemble them properly to create a clear picture, then speak it.

Our aim

As one formerly involved in non-Christian religion, I am not thrilled about the way some Christians promote the gospel, often by the roadside. Many do so in a wise and kindly manner. However, others do so in an adversarial way, unnecessarily losing friends for Christ before giving their audience a chance to quietly consider Christ's offer of love and grace. And this is less because of the intrinsic offense of the gospel and more because of a lack of wisdom in the way of speaking. In our evangelism, we are to follow Jesus' exhortation 'to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16) – and yet without compromising the gospel. A rightly told personal story can serve our purpose here.

Our aim is not to denigrate but to outshine. We cannot compromise the gospel message; however, the manner in which we speak or write makes a difference to the openness with which it is received.

Begin by asking other Christians to tell their story

Get into the habit of asking other Christians the question, 'How did you come to be a follower of Jesus?' Not only will you find the answers interesting and inspiring to your own faith, but they will also encourage you to tell your own story.

I have heard some amazing stories. As we sat together at a Don Carson Christian conference waiting for a speaker to appear, a young Korean fellow told me his short story. He had been a university student in Seoul. He had met a few Christians on campus who had approached him about the gospel, but he had shown little interest. One day, he participated in a riotous student demonstration in Seoul that came up against rows of fully equipped riot police. As a front-row rioter, the police singled him out for capture, so he began running for his life. After rounding a corner at high speed, he ducked into a recess in the side of a building. While hiding in that recess, hoping to goodness the police would not find him, he found a piece of paper on the ground with *his* name written down, along with the names of some others. It turned out that it was a list of students that the university Christians had been praying for, the ones he had met earlier. He was so moved by their desire to pray for him and his welfare, that for a fraction of a second he forgot about the police and tears filled his eyes. Soon after, he turned to Christ.

On another occasion, I met a young pastor who had been sent from the American Bible Belt to plant a church in Mill Valley, California. Many elements of the human potential movement sprung up first in this region, and Mill Valley in particular is the epicenter of American

Buddhism, yoga, and every New Age thing that you can imagine. I have read that this city has the lowest per capita church attendance in North America.

We later had lunch together, and over a Mexican meal, I asked him, ‘How did you come to follow Jesus?’ What rolled out was an amazing story, but the story was all over the place like a dog’s breakfast. I asked if he had ever used this story to witness for Christ, and he replied that he had not. He came from a very conservative church that discouraged the giving of testimonies because they believed it glorified the individual rather than God. I told him that his testimony was a beauty, and if he put it together in an *orderly* fashion, it could be used very powerfully, particularly in Mill Valley. He agreed, and promised to give this project some careful attention. I added that he should never be dissuaded from using his testimony for fear of glorifying himself, since we are told in scripture that it is only by the drawing of the Father that one comes to be with Jesus Christ (John 6:44). Without this drawing of the Father, one would never have a testimony to tell in the first place. Therefore, all the credit and glory goes to him. The ultimate point of every story is to glorify Jesus Christ, the Father and the Holy Spirit alone.

Now that we have looked at some examples of other people’s testimonies, we will move on to creating our own.

Your own story

Basic structure

Your testimony is really a ‘before’, ‘then’ and ‘after’ story. It needs to consist of the following:

- what things were like in your life *before* Jesus
- how you *then* heard of Jesus, realized your need for him and received him
- how, *after* you received Jesus, he brought meaning and fullness into your life.

OR,

- where I was
- where I am now
- what made the difference.

Importantly, your conclusion needs to answer the listener’s question: ‘So what’s the point of all this?’

Fleshing out your story

Once you have the basic structure, flesh out your testimony by following the same principles that apply to good storytelling.

Be pictorial

Your listeners need to feel *with* you as your story unfolds. In other words, they need to feel right in the middle of the picture. To achieve this, you have to speak in mental images. *We do this all the time, without realizing it.* When you remember the past you do it, just as you do when you imagine the future. *So, think of your story through the lens of rolling cameras.* Whereabouts were you? What was going on exactly? Your listeners will be able to *see* the story as you tell it.

Have you put your listeners in the picture? Any communication of this type that does not create mental images in the listeners’ mind is a poor communication. Being specific helps to create mental images, so avoid speaking in generalities. In this way, you will be able to bring listeners into your story through their image-ination.

For example:

- ‘As I stood by the half-open door, I overheard a woman say ...’ is better than ‘I overheard someone say.’ The former version creates a mental picture, the latter version does not.
- ‘I handed them the message’ is better than ‘I gave them the message’. The word ‘handed’ creates a picture, the word ‘gave’ does not.
- ‘I travelled to Europe’ creates no image, whereas ‘I drove overland to Europe’ conjures up a specific picture of how I was travelling.

If you examine my own testimony, particularly in its longer form, you will find that it contains a number of images which take you, the reader, along with me as I go. It is that simple. It is my real, true story as it happened, and it does not leave the hearer wondering what is going on. They have been put in the picture!

Be relevant

All sections of your story need to be relevant to the overall point of the testimony, so avoid stray comments. For example, your background, the ‘before’ part, puts your listener in the picture about who you are or where you were at. Just a few short sentences should be enough. Samples include:

- ‘I was an honors student whose life was being wrecked by alcohol ...’
- ‘I was fit and healthy senior executive for Caterpillar Tractors, and one day a weird thing happened ...’
- ‘Oh boy was I bored! I figured I’d packed four-and-a-half million Snickers bars into cartons over the last twenty-five years, when this guy came up to me and said ...’

And then away you go launching into the rest of your story.

All of the story’s parts need to be relevant in that they tie the *who, what, where, when, why and how* (but not necessarily in that order) into a coherent picture, filling in the *necessary* pieces but not leaving your listeners confused or bored by irrelevant details that do not fit in your ‘jigsaw puzzle’. Struggling to remember an exact date, for example, is an irrelevancy, since the precise day is of no interest to your listeners.

Be concise

Keep your story *tight*. Refrain from rambling or waffling, or you will lose your audience. Spend time searching for the most word- or time-efficient way of describing an event without removing its ‘color’.

Keep the story moving, but do not rush. Yes, pause at times on purpose, but *keep it pictorial*. *Keep it relevant. Keep it tight.*

And, talk to your audience as friends. That makes a difference.

The importance of thorough preparation

The first time I gave my own testimony, I was asked to give it in a church. I was a little nervous, as I had to fill thirty minutes. Not wanting to fumble around, and perhaps feel foolish, I set out to prepare carefully. First, I went through the whole story, writing down the significant events as they happened. I then went over these events a few more times until I felt that I had described them accurately and effectively. Next, I practiced delivering my testimony so that I would not

forget the important parts, as I did not want to use notes. And that was it. This preparation formed the basic skeleton of everything I shared over the following years. And what a wonderful exercise it turned out to be. It clarified for me the wonders of God's providence and grace as each element of my life's unfolding was destined to end in Him. So, there is more than just one benefit to carefully reflecting on God's work in your life.

Seek the Holy Spirit's leading in all your preparation, and start by writing a short and long version of your story. First, write down the essentials as an outline for a two-minute testimony. Make it no more than about two-hundred-and-fifty words. This will be your small 'nut shell' testimony, and preparing it is a good exercise in being concise. Next, expand this outline, fleshing out each point to a ten-minute version. This version is important for those occasions when you have the opportunity to testify in a fuller and more meaningful way.

A helpful way to motivate yourself to *conscientiously* prepare your story is to set up a time to deliver it at church, in your cell group, or to a bunch of friends. These settings will provide the appropriate motivation to do things properly, as it is likely that you will want to avoid feeling clumsy by fumbling around for words or trying to remember what comes next.

As you practice to individuals or groups, it will become easier and easier to lengthen or shorten your story at will and according to circumstances. Using outline notes is fine at first, in case you lose track of where you are, or if you are concerned that you will forget an important point. However, I suggest you *never* read your testimony to your audience, as it does not come across as authentic. Learn it off by heart, if necessary. Repeat it until you have committed it to memory. Practice telling your story to a friend. By doing so, you will be able to present your story with confidence.

Importantly, as you are witnessing for God by sharing your testimony, you will see evidence of the Holy Spirit's touch. This has certainly been my own experience, and it seems that his touch is all the more present if we have taken seriously the responsibility of careful preparation. Of course there are sometimes exceptions. *But many times I've heard people sneer at the importance of careful preparation, declaring 'I'll leave it to the Holy Spirit', and then watch them fall into a big hole.*

4. Getting help in preparing your story

When preparing your story, it can be very useful to enlist the help of another person who is willing to share their testimony with you. This will help you overcome one of the common hurdles in *preparing* your testimony – procrastination. It is more fun, and it motivates you to actually sit down and give your story the time and attention it needs.

This chapter contains some important tips for making the most of this opportunity. From long experience, I find that the end result is better if you follow these tips, and it is the same process I follow when helping others to prepare their testimony. All you need is a pen and paper.

Should you be doing your preparation alone, these points will still help you do a better job.

1. Sit down opposite the storyteller, and remind them that their story will need to have a beginning, middle and conclusion: *how things were in your life before Jesus – how you then heard of Jesus and realized your need for him – how you received him – ending your story with a conclusion that tells of the meaning and fullness that Jesus has brought into your life.*
2. If they come with notes or a testimony that they have previously prepared, encourage them to ignore these and begin again *in a very natural or informal way.*
3. Start by simply asking the question, ‘Okay, tell me what happened?’ As they speak, jot down notes to remind you of *each* incident they relate. This will help you to recall the skeleton of their story and remember important points.
4. Note down the best bits and the good bits of the story – the highlights.
5. Sometimes you may have to say, ‘Wait, wait, don’t gloss over that. Elaborate on that point a little more – it’s great.’ After they have done so, make a note to remind them later.
6. You may need to interrupt and ask, ‘Is that part really relevant?’ If it turns out to be relevant, good, if not, suggest they scrap it.
7. Sometimes they may casually throw in a line that is brilliant. Catch it and say, ‘Hey, that’s great, say it just like that – it’s so descriptive!’ Jot it down verbatim, so that when you give them feedback, they will be able to keep a note of it to use again.
8. If they slip into some vague generalities, ask ‘Can you be more specific here? You said you had an accident ... I can’t form a picture of that. You mean you were actually thrown through the windshield of the car? Ok, that’s good, I can *see* it now. Say it like that.’
9. At times you might have to ask, ‘What’s the point you are making here? I’m not clear.’ Get them to clarify. You may also have to say, ‘That part seems a little long – can you tighten it up?’
10. *The conclusion to their testimony is very important.* Many times I have heard outstanding testimonies that end with an inadequate conclusion – for example, ‘I finally acknowledged Jesus as Lord and Savior’ or ‘I was transformed.’ ‘So?’ thinks the hearer. ‘In what way?’ is left

unanswered. *Therefore, ending with a clear conclusion to the story is very important. Leaving a listener with a big 'so what' must be avoided at all costs.*

The listener needs to hear how Jesus *specifically* changed the storyteller's life. What are they grateful for, both *here* and in eternity? We are looking for an actual or tangible influence, not an abstract one. They may have experienced a change of belief, worldview or attitude toward other people; a healed relationship; a spiritual experience; new meaning or purpose; a sense of forgiveness, peace, hope or physical healing; an unexpected blessing; or a new understanding of love or God. What was it? If necessary, ask questions that will help the storyteller identify the important elements of their conclusion.

Then, check each element. Did any preaching sneak in? (See Chapter 5 for more on this.) Was each element mentioned concisely? Help them to see where they may have been vague, leaving the hearer in the dark. *Inadequate or incomplete conclusions are a common trap to watch out for.*

11. Remember that it is *their* story, so avoid putting *your* words in *their* mouth, unless there is a good reason to do so. Your task is to draw the best of *their* story out of *them*.

12. Once this process has finished, read your notes back to the storyteller. Include the main points of the story as it rolled off their tongues, along with all your reminder notes of highlights or things to be remembered. Make sure they write all of this down in their *own* hand.

13. Encourage them to go away, prepare their testimony carefully, and repeat it many times to themselves.

14. Several days later, invite them to come back and run through the first draft of their fully prepared story. It is then a matter of fine-tuning the story – something you will probably need to do together.

There you have it! It is definitely worth the effort to get it right. If yet more practice is necessary, all the better. And do remember that you are not preparing for a performance, but to give God your *best* for His glory.

There are those people, who, being naturally descriptive in the way they speak, can prepare well on their own. Even then it is helpful for them to run through their testimony with another, checking to see that all the points of good storytelling are there.

5. Pitfalls to Avoid

Watch your delivery

When you deliver your talk, it is important to keep a steady tempo and avoid speaking too fast. Where appropriate, use well-timed deliberate pauses.

Speak up, and speak clearly! Refrain from mumbling or speaking at the volume of a mouse. So that everyone can hear you well, project your voice as though you were not relying on a microphone. I suggest only using a microphone if the venue where you are speaking is too large for your natural voice to be projected clearly. It is interesting to note that before there were microphones, Christian speakers were able to project their voice to an audience of thousands, often in the open air, yet the person in the last row could still hear them clearly.

Make eye contact

If you are speaking to more than one person, cast your eyes around and speak to the whole audience. Avoid focusing on one person as this may be considered rude – especially if there are only two or three people present.

Monitor your audience carefully as you speak

While telling your story, you need to be alert for certain behaviours in your audience. If people in the audience have their arms folded, are yawning, looking away, or zoning out, you may be using terms they do not understand or your talk might be losing its focus. Perhaps the picture you are trying to describe is getting a little fuzzy. You may be talking for too long, too fast, or just rambling.

If you see these responses to your talk, you will need to find a way to regain the audience's attention. In general conversation, some people prattle on endlessly, oblivious to whether their audience is listening or interested. This generally indicates that the speaker is unconscious of what they are doing, and they are ignorant of basic communication principles. While you may be able to get away with this in general conversation, it must be avoided when telling your story.

Refrain from preaching

When telling your story, be careful that you do not preach at your audience.

While preaching plays an important role, it is in an entirely different category of communication. The moment you begin preaching at your audience, during time set aside for a testimony, just watch the audience start to switch off.

What your audience needs to 'hear' from your story will be drawn from their *own* deductions and inferences as they listen. This is a distinguishing feature of the power of storytelling as a teaching method. Preaching makes use of the direct approach, whereas storytelling takes a more oblique route: it comes in at an angle that causes little resistance. This is because stories are unthreatening; they leave the listener in a safe place to evaluate the message for themselves. You are not speaking *at* the audience; rather, you are speaking *about* what happened between *you* and God.

Adding stories to your preaching is fine, but adding preaching to your stories is folly. Of course, a preacher and a storyteller can be the same person doing both on the same day. For example, a preacher can use stories to illustrate their point, then begin to preach and teach

immediately *after* giving their testimony. The two should be separated, however. One should end before the other begins.

From years of experience, however, I have found that the power of a personal testimony rests in its being told as a personal story alone, how it affected *me* – then leaving the audience to make up their own mind about it!

Last of all, if quoting scripture, use it in relation to the way the scripture impacted *you*, not as a means of preaching to your audience.

Avoid speaking ‘Christianese’

When talking about your faith or even quoting scripture, be aware that a lot of our Christian words have fallen out of common use – for example, ‘righteousness’, ‘grace’, ‘propitiation’ and ‘atonement’. ‘What does all that mean?’ someone may ask. Some biblical terms, such as ‘sacrifice’, may have grown to have strange associations in hearers’ minds. We are sometimes deceived by the fact that they speak English. Further, some of our words have become emotionally charged, way beyond the intrinsic offense of the gospel. For example, the word ‘sin’ is an important biblical concept, yet it has been ruined as a term that we can use effectively. Because it has been used in a loveless manner, it is now associated with condemnation rather than the demonstration of Christ’s love and sacrifice on our behalf.

One needs to be awake to these points and navigate accordingly.

Explain the gospel proclamation

‘Jesus died for your sins on the cross.’ What does that mean, someone may fairly ask? Many times, I have heard my fellow Christians flip into a language that sounds like gobbledygook to the hearer. It was done to me before becoming a Christian.

Of course, a deeper understanding of biblical truths comes through the Holy Spirit. However, we need to do *our part* in being as clear as possible and refrain from speaking ‘French’ to the ‘English’. We want to avoid any situation where our listeners do not understand words or concepts and therefore lose interest in our message.

Avoid using church lingo

Assume that your listeners know nothing about church or the way Christians speak among themselves. Hearing the words ‘I answered an altar call’ or ‘I was lost/saved’ means nothing to an un-churched person – ‘Lost? You mean you didn’t know where you were?’ ‘Saved? Saved from *what*?’ As we use so many in-house words and concepts, make sure that you speak in plain, contemporary English so that your audience clearly understands what you mean.

Avoid declaring that Jesus is ‘the only way’ during a first encounter

Declaring Jesus as ‘the only way’ during a *first* encounter, in whatever context, is difficult for a listener to hear, particularly in today’s universalist spiritual climate. If they hear statements like this, many people will take flight and an opportunity has been lost.

Instead, through your story, encourage your listeners to investigate further, before they have to wrestle with some of our Lord’s more difficult truths. In this way, people are gradually exposed to the Christian faith without unnecessarily hindering their progress toward embracing the full gospel and counsel of God. Your opinion may validly differ on this point, but think about it.

Be careful not to lie, prevaricate or exaggerate

This is an extremely important point. I once heard the same person's testimony on several different occasions. When it was longer or shorter with additions or subtractions that was *fine*, but when I noticed some glaring *contradictory* facts on the different occasions, I started to wonder how much of the story was true.

Further, although you may be keen to attest to a new buoyancy of spirit, fullness and meaning in your life, and many other blessings, *avoid giving the unrealistic impression that you are daily flushed with never-ending glee* – unless, of course, that is true.

Be authentic, be real, be true. People respond marvellously to a self-confessing spirit, openness and honesty. Being credible is most important for the honour of Christ.

Be sure to end with an adequate conclusion

Inadequate or incomplete conclusions are a common problem. Sometimes people give a wonderfully described testimony and *end* with 'now I'm saved by the grace of Christ.' Finish. Huh? The listener is left puzzled and wondering what was the point of all that.

It is important to *specifically describe* the way your relationship with Jesus has changed your life, heart, interests and/or mind. In exact words, how has this renewal benefited you in relation to God and your life? See Chapter 4 for more discussion on conclusions.

Prepare answers

It is important to think ahead and prepare answers to some of the common responses that people in the audience give after hearing a testimony. A classic comment is 'I'm really happy for *you*, but for me ...' Do a little homework on this one. How would you respond? This is a question you can mull over with your Christian friends.

6. Opportunities for conversations

I have found that during the course of daily conversation, there are plenty of openings for me to share my testimony. If I walk away from more than a momentary conversation with a stranger, without having mentioned a single thing about Jesus Christ, somehow I feel ‘off’. It is not as if I have felt under compulsion or obligation to mention Jesus, the gospel, or even a snippet of my testimony. But why would I have *not* done so, considering his significance to all of life, the life of others, and to my own life in particular? Only my fear of disapproval has kept me silent. Of course, there are occasions where it may be an inappropriate time to mention Christ. But what I am referring to here is saying nothing as an *appropriate* opportunity slips away. So what do I try to do when these opportunities arise? I do my best.

Depending on our background, the lead-in or jump-off point for an opportunity to share our testimony depends on us spotting key words, concepts or situations that dovetail with our story. I was a meditation teacher, corporate consultant and spiritual yoga aspirant, and any conversation including these subjects provides an opportunity to make a comment for Christ. And yes, you may be a therapist, a tennis player or a former junkie. The point is this: there will be openings based on a comment someone has made that connects with some part of your own story. That moment creates your opportunity to jump in and share. These ‘openers’ will be found amidst the features of your own life that led up to and followed your own conversion.

Examples of ‘openers’

There are many conversational openers that will provide a ‘lead-in’ to give your story, and it is likely that they will be much better than my examples here. In fact, there are thousands of them, because everyone without exception is stuck in the same fallen condition sharing the same fundamental human dilemmas.

- In the course of a conversation, someone comments, ‘I never did see that blockbuster movie, *The Passion of Christ*.’ ‘I didn’t see it either,’ I reply, ‘but a guy who laid my carpets said his sister saw it and got changed forever – she’d been a real party girl. I never saw the movie, but had a big change myself. In my case ...’
- ‘The scientists reckon that prayer works,’ says a girl. ‘Yeah,’ I reply. ‘I used to pray from time to time, but my praying got a big lift when ...’
- A guy pipes up and says, ‘My business has been driving me crazy these days. After thirty years of it, I’m bored, I’m tired, I’m done!’ ‘I can relate to that,’ I reply. ‘I was in a similar boat, but in my case I remembered a Bible verse from school where Jesus said – “Come to me all those who are weary and heavily laden, and I will give you rest.” Sounded good, but I never thought much of it at the time. However later, when ...’
- ‘Two divorces have killed me; I messed both marriages up, and I feel really bad about what I did to those two men,’ declares a woman. ‘Yes, I’m with you on that,’ her hairdresser replies, ‘I carried guilt for years about how I treated my parents, but now, owing to a real touch of grace, that guilt has been lifted and I feel completely forgiven. May I share with you what happened to me?...’
- A girl says, ‘Wow, the Dalai Lama is becoming popular these days.’ ‘True,’ I reply, ‘thousands are flocking to him for spiritual teachings. You know, I used to read a lot about that and found it very interesting, but one day, this guy approached me after our hockey game and invited me to attend ...’

To identify moments for your next opportunity, cast your mind back over some recent conversations and see if you can recall any spots where you could have appropriately jumped in and shared. Write them down as an aid to memory, then jump in and share at your next opportunity.

7. Giving testimonies of different lengths

Now it is time to prepare your testimony in several different lengths. Since I have stressed that careful preparation makes all the difference to doing your best for God, watch that you practice each version. You will find by experience that the more you share the longer version of your story, the more you will be able to reduce its length. You will become accustomed to making *spontaneous* adjustments as you go, according to your audience, situation, and time available.

To begin with, I will share my own story in three different lengths, each appropriate to a different situation. The first will be my one-minute testimony ‘in a nut shell’, and the other two will be set in an imaginary scenario. These demonstrations show how one’s testimony can be tailored depending on the time available. We will then look at some other short testimonies, each demonstrating how compelling personal stories can be. All of these stories appear in my missions testimony booklet *Encountering the Eternal Guru* – more on that later.

Before we start, it is important to realize we all come from various backgrounds. Therefore, our stories will differ. I was a seeker in India’s Eastern spiritual tradition, a meditation teacher, and a business consultant. You may have been a dog catcher, a rocket scientist, or a bamboo-basket weaver. Whoever you are, whatever you were, your story speaks – and all our stories are tales of how we were salvaged by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

White Yogi (Michael Graham)

A two-minute ‘nut shell’ version

Before

By age seventeen I became frustrated at not having a clear direction in life. This took me to reading books on Buddhism, Hinduism, yoga and meditation, and the concept of the Indian guru. I read of huge claims for personal transformation. *Very cool*, I thought, *yes, real change*. So I bought a motorcycle, jumped on a ship, sailed from Melbourne, Australia, to Sri Lanka, got off, rode around the island, then rode up through India to find the guru. However, I got distracted. My first keen intention dropped off. So instead of meeting the guru, I rushed off hitching, bussing, training my way overland via Afghanistan to London. I stayed there, got stressed, which jolted me to remember the guru. I then flew back to India to meet the Hindu holy man, dressed in silk orange robes. Swami Muktananda was his name, and through him I had many tantalizing spiritual experiences.

So, for twenty-eight years I practiced in the Eastern system, travelling back and forth between Australia, America, and India, between making a living, all the while doing thousands of hours of meditation and a score of personal development programs in the West.

Ok, I was looking for change and a true meaning in life. Though I matured through time and experience, the big promises of meditation and spiritual yoga were definitely not delivering. But I kept pressing on.

Meeting Jesus

Then one day an amazing thing happened while on a spiritual retreat. Jesus Christ came to me in a vision, engulfing and embracing me with a flood of love, as if to invite me to give him my life

and breath and give myself over to his care. Wow! I was thrilled, but I stuck with my daily Eastern practices.

About a year later I realized I'd found no real peace or change through my decades of practice. I'd tried everything, so now I started to seriously consider Christ, reading in the Bible that Jesus, dying on a cross, took everything that separates us from God upon himself. That impressed me. So one day in 1997, in front of a crowd of twenty-two thousand people, I responded to Jesus' earlier invitation. I turned to him in full surrender as my Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

That very day, something new began in me. I was never the same again. An inner rest came, true meaning and purpose was given, and I was overcome by a change of heart and mind that none of my personal past disciplines could give. I had received the free gift of his transforming grace, which started to change my temperament and character for the better. Yes, ordinary life went on, but what a difference now, one for which I am forever grateful. I've walked on with him, having a more interesting and blessed life ever since, now with a right understanding of God.

One-minute version with imaginary scenario

Two people are standing at a bus stop. One person pipes up with, 'Gee, I hope this bus is on time or I'll be late for my yoga class.'

I reply, 'Really? That's interesting. I was into yoga for nearly thirty years'

'Wow, cool, thirty years?'

'Yep, I spent twenty-eight years with different Indian gurus, did thousands of hours of meditation, spent years in India and had some amazing spiritual experiences ... I loved it, but strangely nothing really improved inside of me.'

'Hmm', they reply.

I continue: 'And this is the strange bit; about seventeen years ago, I had an amazing encounter with Jesus Christ, totally real and surprising, and he indicated to me that if I gave myself to him he'd look after me. That fired up my interest, and I listened to a whole lot of Bible teaching on him on the radio, so I decided to find out more and put my trust in him completely. I made that decision one day, and wow, I was never the same again. Something new began in me that day, never the same again – a sort of peace came over me ... Aahh, here comes your bus. What's your name?'

'Jill.'

'Hi Jill, I'm Michael. Remember what I told you – check it out! Bye – all the best.'

'Thanks.'

Three-minute version with imaginary scenario

I'm sitting in the corner at a party, talking to a fellow, who asks me what I do. I reply by saying, 'Well, I write a bit.'

'What do you write on?' the chap asks.

'Well, spirituality. I write about a twenty-eight year spiritual odyssey in the Eastern spiritual tradition out of India and the New Age human potential trainings, which led to a surprising conclusion.'

'What conclusion?' the guy asks.

'I'll get to that in about one hundred and twenty seconds,' I reply. 'By my late teens, the subjects of yoga, meditation, and Eastern spirituality – Hinduism and Buddhism and so on – had

so captivated me, along with the benefits they promised, that I eventually flew back to India – I had been there before – and found this later-to-be-famous guru. I met this man, a remarkably charismatic swami, and spent nearly six months in his monastery or ashram, doing a strict daily routine of meditation, chanting and study of the Indian scriptures. I received a powerful charismatic-type spiritual awakening through him and the experiences were so amazing that I was hooked on this spiritual track for decades. In between coming back and forth from India, I met other gurus and also did a lot of the leading personal development programs in the West – New Age programs from the human potential movement. I then became a corporate consultant and developed and taught my own personal development program internationally. I was a real seeker looking for what would make a difference.

Then, much to my surprise, one day while on retreat, I had an amazing visionary encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. I was settling myself onto a couch, when suddenly a wave of his love poured over me so huge that it was beyond imagination, and it came along with an invitation to give my life and breath to him. I was staggered, amazed and thrilled. But I kept committed to the familiar paths I had been following. The long and the short of it is, I finally responded to that call and acknowledged him as my Lord and Savior, partly because the thousands of hours of meditation and other practices I'd done had not brought me inner change or peace. So I turned to Christ one day, no turning back, and I was never the same again.

'That day, something new began in me. A sort of peace came. I think I became a nicer person. My son noticed it. That was good enough for me. There was plenty more, but the change came as a gift of grace independent of my practices – that's what the story is about – quite remarkable, really. Do you have any feeling for spirituality?'

And the conversation may go on from there ...

New Life (Acharya D.P. Titus)

One-minute version

Divine grace came to me sixty-five years ago in my youth. I was born in a Christian family and was well employed in life; had my family as well. I observed my religious duties strictly and never missed going to church on Sunday. But I had no personal encounter with Christ. I had my religious duties and lived for myself only. One evening sitting in a church on Sunday, when the preacher illustrated the love of God in suffering on the cross for my sake, my heart was pierced with grief and repentance.

I was completely broken. Early after dinner I slipped out of doors for a while and threw myself into the refuge of the Savior. I had no idea at all what might happen at that point, but suddenly there came to me a complete inward assurance that God had taken me over and granted forgiveness, peace and life. That divine inward assurance has never left me. Ever since then, one thing I have ever cherished, is that I belong to him who died for me and he belongs to me by the free gift of his grace.

(Acharya Titus was an author and a personal friend of mine who died in 2013 at the age of ninety-nine.)

A Surprised Buddhist Monk (Jampel Wangthuk)

Four-minute version

Coming from the Himalayan country of Bhutan, I was committed to a monastery at the age of 12 to be trained as a Buddhist monk. Over the years, this training took me to several Tibetan monasteries in India. Studying as I did, I started to become very curious about spiritual 'salvation'. What was it really, and how can it be obtained? Up until this time, though I had done practices myself and lived with thousands of monks, I had never seen anything close to its attainment. However, one day in my middle teens, a tall being in dazzling white appeared to me in a vision and clearly declared 'I will give you salvation.' I could never forget this encounter but didn't have a clue as to who this being was.

Sometime later, I was shopping for clothing with two other young monks in Kathmandu, Nepal, and the shopkeeper handed me some literature about a spiritual teacher called Jesus. I had not heard of him. Because I was a Buddhist, I didn't want to take it, but my other two friends said I should do so out of respect for an older man. Then, without reading it, we threw it away on our way back to the monastery.

Several weeks later, I happened to walk past that same shop and the shopkeeper politely stopped me and asked if I had read the literature. I said, 'Yes.' I lied. Then he persisted further and asked *exactly* what I had read? At this point I felt forced to confess and said I hadn't read it because my friends actually told me that if I read it something bad would happen to me. Anyway, the shopkeeper said that wasn't true, that he wasn't forcing anything, but handed me the literature again and said to just read it anyway. Okay, I took it and returned to my monastery.

Reading the literature, I became intrigued by some of the big differences between Buddhism and Christianity and especially was amazed by the claim Jesus made in saying, 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.' This meant salvation. However, as I realized later, the Holy Spirit had been convincing me of the truth of what I was reading and it raised huge questions within me that I had never considered before. They burned inside me and wouldn't go away.

Sometime later, as a Buddhist teacher I was sent to Darjeeling to instruct others. One day, I was sitting on a park bench next to a man from Nepal. We talked for quite a while and then he told me he was follower of Christ. He invited me to his house and then gave me a copy of the New Testament. Growing in curiosity, I took the book back to my monastery and secretly spent time reading it daily. *It wasn't long before I knew without a doubt that it was the person of Jesus Christ who had appeared to me in that vision, saying, 'I will give you salvation.'*

Following this, and much to my embarrassment, the abbot of the monastery, looking through the peephole in my monk's cell, caught me reading the New Testament. He came into my room, looked at the book, figured out it was about Jesus, seemed angry, and just said, 'come with me.' He then assembled all the monks in our big hall, and in front of everyone asked, 'Jampel, who are you going to follow: Jesus Christ or the Buddha?' I hesitated, and quietly said 'Jesus Christ.'

At that I was summoned into a smaller room and was severely beaten by several monks, ordered to leave the monastery that day and was jeered by monks as I left.

As I walked away, considering this harsh treatment, I couldn't help wondering about Buddhist teaching on 'compassion.'

Soon after, I burned my robes, assumed 'civilian' clothing and wound up with a group of Christians that displayed a heavy demanding tone like that of my monastery. But thankfully I finally found myself in the company of a group of genuine Christians in whose company I found loving fellowship and good biblical teaching. I was blessed.

In Jesus Christ, I found the true way to salvation that my soul had always longed for. As I studied the words of Christ and the apostles recorded in the Bible, I found the truth. I also found

that Jesus was the true source of a life that would last forever. I am now free from my spiritual struggles of the past. So, to this day I live by the strength that Jesus gives me. I have dedicated my life to proclaiming his good news of salvation to others – the good news that brought me the true spiritual freedom and comes by the free gift of his grace alone. For this miracle of grace, I am eternally grateful.

Rescued from Death (Yassine Yahyaoui)

Four- to five-minute version

This story begins as my being the son of very strong Sunni Muslim family in the Arab Muslim country of Morocco. My parents decided early on that I should attend the ‘Madrassa’, which is the Islamic school where young boys are sent from the age of 12 to learn about Islam and memorize the Koran. My life was to submit to the rules of Islam, believe that salvation is only through Allah, ‘the God of Islam’, and believe that all other religions are wrong. I prayed five times a day, fasted during the month of Ramadan and tried to live a holy life.

After graduating from high school, I went abroad to Europe, where I attended a business school. One day, I came across a booklet in the library that talked about Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount and his life according to the Gospel of Matthew. This little booklet was so different from the Koran; it felt beautiful and divine. I started to feel attracted to Jesus Christ, but at that time, I was afraid because I had started to doubt the claims of Islam. In Islam, we are taught that God is never merciful in the case of apostates (Muslims who stop believing in Allah and in Mohammed as his prophet).

I returned to Morocco and firmly decided I would no longer read the Bible or anything dealing with Jesus or Christianity, but the seeds of the biblical word of God had already been sown in my heart. Every time I read the Koran I could not focus as I used to, but instead my mind was constantly turning towards the Bible. I strongly believe that the Holy Spirit of God was drawing and guiding me during that time. 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 says: ‘... whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’

I’m thankful for the internet, because when I finally decided to get a Bible, I found out that the Bible was banned in Morocco, but the internet was not controlled. So I started reading the Bible online and after a couple of months of struggle the Holy Spirit caught me and convinced me that Jesus is my Lord and Savior. I prayed the classical prayer to turn towards Jesus and repent of my sins. I did so all alone in my room late one night.

For the first time, I experienced true freedom and peace because I was free from the fear of going to hell that I had in my previous beliefs. Now I am sure that I will have eternal life with God. For the biblical Word of God told me: ‘... there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Romans 8:1).

I have now been a follower of Jesus Christ, since 2008. However, the road has not been easy. For some time I lived my new faith in secret. I continued to pray five times a day with my family, I attended the mosque. I believed I had to pretend to be a devout Muslim, not only for my family, relatives, and friends to which I would bring a huge shame, but also in order to avoid persecution, prison, and even death. During that time, I met other secret believers through the internet. I started to attend an underground church once a week; we always met in people’s homes. It was really a blessing from God; we were so happy in spite of all the struggles we faced.

In the spring of 2011, I was attacked by Muslim extremists who follow the Islamic teaching that apostates should be punished by death. They kidnapped me early in the morning, when I was going to my work. They tortured and stabbed me several times and left me for dead on the street. I was found and taken to the hospital and had two surgeries and lay in a coma for two days. After a month in the hospital, my doctors could not believe or understand how I was still alive; I had been stabbed in my stomach, my kidney, my liver, my pancreas, my legs and two main arteries. I did not want to go outside, fearing to be attacked again, but it is during that time that my love for Jesus grew stronger and stronger. One day, I contacted friends I had in New York. I let them know what had happened and they urged me to come to the United States.

In September 2011, I was baptized at the Muslim Background Believers' Conference in Washington DC before many of my brothers and sisters in Christ who at one time had also been Muslims and found peace. The Bible says, '... in me [Jesus] you may have peace' (John 16:33). I'm so thankful for the new life that I have been given by the free gift of God's grace. By now God has blessed me with the opportunity to further my education in America and continue sharing Jesus with Muslims. Even though I still face some struggles including missing my family, I am so thankful for my new brothers and sisters in Christ. I am convinced I can face any struggle or hardship in life because I now have the Spirit of Jesus living in me, who gives me strength and comfort.

Out from Despair (Annie Redmond)

Four-minute version

Growing up, I never really knew who I was or what my identity was. In high school I became friends with many different types of people, but nothing really stuck. Then, in my adult years, I continued with trying out different identities. I became a flight student, a waitress, a traveller, a finance professional, among many more, but none of these jobs or roles defined me. I was searching for something, but I didn't know what it was.

During my adult years I also began using alcohol and drugs to cover up the pain in my life, so that I could cheerfully continue to try to find myself. I had become very frustrated with my life. On one hand, I was a successful professional in the finance industry, living in San Francisco, but on the other hand I couldn't stop drinking and using drugs. It was very common to party a lot among my friends, so logically I concluded that my life was great, but deep down I knew that something was very wrong. How I felt on the inside and my inner desires did not match what my life looked like on the outside.

One January a year later, I finally broke down and realized I couldn't live my life like this anymore. I began cutting myself and was finally able to ask for the help I knew I needed. I quit my job, moved in with my dad and began therapy, where I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I felt like there was a battle being waged inside of me – light versus dark, good versus evil – and I knew which side I wanted to be on.

I had always been interested in Eastern religion and spiritual practices, so I also began healing sessions with a Qi Gong practitioner, who was well versed in many Eastern traditions. Qi Gong is a form of energy healing. I also began taking Tai Chi lessons. Although Tai Chi is a martial art, it is also calming and I used it as a form of mediation. I began to feel better; the war being waged inside of me had subsided, but I still didn't have an identity or know what the purpose of my life was.

After a few months, my depression and anxiety got worse, to the point where I became suicidal and had to go on medication. I decided to leave California and move to Boulder in the state of Colorado, where my sister lived. A few weeks after moving to there, I heard a voice say, 'God is the only one who can help you; he is the only one who can save you.' I knew I had to obey, but how? I had moved into a student-housing unit run by a Christian ministry, and the president, who was also pastor of the church, invited me to their Sunday service.

At the service, I could instantly feel God's presence; I knew this was where I was supposed to be. However, after hearing the sermon, I was a bit thrown off. The teaching was so different from any of the Eastern traditions I was familiar with. The following week, I again felt God's presence at church, and after church, one of the girls sat with me for two hours and explained the gospel to me. She said that God takes care of us, and when we have genuine faith in Jesus, we become God's children. A lot of my anxiety had been around not taking care of myself and not having one identity that reflected me, so to hear that there was a God who would be my father and take care of me was amazing.

That night I prayed and asked God about Jesus and he showed me Jesus, not literally, but in my soul I knew Jesus was presently alive and real. That night I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior and gave my life to him.

God is always there to guide me. Jesus says, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28). God is so true to his word! Whenever I turn to Jesus, any worry or heaviness in my heart is gone. I no longer suffer from anxiety or depression. In fact, the only time I have any burden is when I am looking to the world, or to myself, for comfort and guidance, instead of looking to God.

For most of my life, I didn't know who I was, but I now have one identity as a servant of Christ and child of God. Faith in Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection, was the fulfilment of everything I ever wanted or needed.

8. Print it? Facebook it? YouTube it?

When in South Asia one day, I came across a young orange-clad Indian ‘Hindu’ swami or holy man named Sadhu Nityananda. He was talking with a bunch of Christians. This fired my curiosity. An hour later I was introduced to him and asked if he would tell me his story. It turns out that he had become a born-again, Bible-believing, exclusively Christ-following Christian nine years earlier, but had adopted the garb of a Hindu monk or swami to open more doors for the gospel. His story was remarkable. I asked him if he ever used his testimony to good effect.

‘No, not really,’ he replied, ‘I don’t tell it much.’

I was surprised. I said, ‘Let’s get this down on paper.’

We spent about six hours typing it up – I type very slowly – and voila! Along with my own testimony and one other, we put it into print as an attractively presented booklet. Since then, this booklet (and subsequent revisions) has been personally handed to over twelve thousand individuals in the United States, South Asia, and Australia over six years. The current booklet (following nine print runs and now containing ten testimonies), is available in English and either wholly or partly in Hindi, Tibetan, French, Hebrew, Swedish, and German. It has also been translated into Korean, Tamil, and Marathi, although these versions are not in print. The latest English version adds The Gospel of John, the ‘Father’s Love Letter’, and a concise summary of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Each story is compelling, and together they make a compendium of accounts chosen to reach a broad spectrum of people for the gospel.

The last section of this book contains this ten-story booklet. It includes the longer versions of *all* the shortened testimonies that I have used here as examples of sharing testimonies of different lengths (except for Acharya D.P. Titus). Also included are the longer versions of Sadhu Nityananda’s story, as well as the stories of a convert from Judaism, a Chicago architect, an Indian pastor, a former secretary of an organization in India that actively persecutes Christians, a Muslim convert, a South African soldier, and my own extended story. This prolific *seed-planting* work, based on the smart use of testimony, has led to hundreds of significant gospel conversations, people finding new life in Christ and people being baptized.

Jesus came in God’s perfect timing. He was born at a time in Roman history called Pax Romana, the ‘Roman Peace’, a period of comparative stability throughout the empire, when, for the first time in history, there were forty-eight thousand miles of Roman roads spreading east through Asia Minor and west into Europe. The gospel rapidly spread along these roads. Today, two thousand years later, the internet’s websites, YouTube, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook are the ‘Roman roads’ of our modern times. Is this God’s timing in providing these ‘roads’ for the next worldwide resurgence of the gospel?

Why not *multiply* your story through different media – print, eBook, YouTube, Facebook, a blog? You are one person only. How many people can you personally talk to? Relatively few. How much further, then, can a testimony go for God’s glory, if it is printed or recorded for wider distribution? In this way your testimony and those of others can be in a thousand places at once, planting seeds for the gospel.

Some of my testimonies are also available on the internet, and my own can be viewed on YouTube by searching for ‘fromgurutogod’ (<https://www.youtube.com/user/fromgurutogod>). Another interview of mine, by the 700 Club, can be found by searching for ‘Undone by God’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF6D5MrO0Jw>).

If you have not considered how the sharing of your testimony (or another's) could be an effective tool in being a seed planter in the Great Commission, take a look at the following 17 good reasons for its use. This list draws heavily on my own ministry to backpackers and young travellers around the world, and it focuses on the advantage of using a printed testimony. However, you can adapt it to your own audience to give yourself plenty of reasons to be active for Jesus using this tool – whether printed or spoken. You will notice that many of these points overlap with observations I have made elsewhere in this book.

Reasons to use your testimony to reach people for Jesus

This list is adapted from materials provided by Life Source Ministries, under the title 'Why use the booklet *Encountering The Eternal Guru: Ten True Stories?* as a means to reach people for Jesus?'

- The gift of the booklet acts as an icebreaker to start conversation. Many times I've used the booklet to open up a conversation. Almost always this gift is graciously received, and it is rarely refused. For example, I may waltz up to someone *in a light spirit* (this is important) and ask them, 'Do you speak good English?' If they reply, 'Yes' I will hand them the booklet and say, 'Please accept this with my compliments. It contains ten *fascinating* stories.' I may even add, 'Worst case, you'll be entertained, best case, you may find something of value.' They look down, momentarily check out the title, which in this case is *Encountering the Eternal Guru*, then say 'thanks' and walk on, usually flipping through the booklet as they move. Or they'll strike up a conversation. There it all begins. A seed has been planted. A Christian has participated in the Great Commission.
- It gets people's attention. Without their attention you have nothing.
- It is attractively bound and printed. It is not a throw-away tract.
- Its title attracts, generating curiosity among seekers (the target audience).
- It opens up the possibility of a relationship by giving the recipient an opportunity to make contact for more information.
- Most people are fascinated to hear or read about a transformed life, from whatever angle.
- The stories are written in a manner that seeks to outshine rather than denigrate.
- *No one argues with a story.* Stories sail right passed a person's defences and plant a seed for the gospel.
- The booklet is a definite seed plant. No seed, no fruit.
- It will probably pass through several hands.
- Testimonies that have been spoken and/or written well *prepare, open, and motivate people to read the gospels.*
- By graciously offering the booklet as a gift, it becomes an easy way for a Christian 'hand-sitter' to participate in the Great Commission.
- In terms of evangelism, it's a time-efficient form of participation.
- The booklet is big enough to include a separate piece of paper – for example, an invitation to attend an introductory course on the Christian faith.
- Receiving and reading these stories may be one of the 'seven gospel exposures' required for someone to come to the Lord. Are you willing to be number 1, 4 or 7?

- Distributed quickly and widely (in a courteous manner) to small groups – for example, bands of travellers in youth hostels, on pilgrim trails, or at New Age festivals in India, Europe, or South America – creates a communal ‘buzz’ of interest and queries.
- Even if a person never comes to the Lord, a cultural contribution has been made. The recipient may realize that evangelical Christians are not as odd as they once thought as the writers of the stories did not seem strange or silly.

Add your own reasons to this list, and for God’s glory alone!

9. Conclusion

By now you will have read or ‘heard’ several personal testimonies. However, yours will be *uniquely* different. Comparisons are unnecessary.

In writing this book, my aim was to show you what an *impact* you can make with your personal testimony – that is, how the power, place and importance of your personal story can glorify God by spreading the Good News. In summary,

- personal testimony works
- personal testimony makes a difference
- sharing a personal testimony is possible for any motivated born-again Christian who seeks to participate in the Great Commission
- a personal testimony can be shared in many forms
- a personal testimony is an easily accessible means of evangelism for everyone who has a heart to share the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, may I encourage you to participate in the Great Commission by sharing your testimony. Firstly, and most importantly, do so verbally and whenever you get the chance. In this easy way, you can be God’s instrument in spreading the Good News and contributing to people coming to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’

(Isaiah 52:7)

Ending with words from the Shorter Catechism of The Westminster Confession:

Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Therefore, do enjoy him and send forth his word.

Every blessing for success,

Michael Graham.

Notes

To contact Michael Graham or to enquire about supplies of his booklet, *Encountering the Eternal Guru*, please email him at yournworks@gmail.com. This booklet is available in paperback and as an eBook.

Bulk purchases of this booklet are also available:

- minimum order: 200 copies
- booklets are printed in India, and sold at cost price
- international shipping charges apply.

For bulk purchases, the cost price per book (including Fedex shipping to the UK, US, or Australia) is *approximately* \$US 0.97 per copy (figures last updated July 2015; prices subject to change).

Orders: yournworks@gmail.com.