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**Growth Groups Studies**

**Term 2 2019**

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**Overview of Term 2**

The term will divide into 2 parts: Build up (5 weeks) and Reach Out (5 weeks).

**5 weeks of Build Up**

**Week 1 - Mark Overview Night (Wednesday 1 May 7:30-8:30pm @Engadine Anglican)**

A great chance to be introduced to the overall Gospel of Mark, and what makes it unique.

**Weeks 2-5 – Preparation for Christianity Explored [in our Growth Groups]**

We’ll watch the Christianity Explored videos and talk through the discussion questions, as well as help each other write a “conversational testimony”.

This aims to:

* Remind us that the gospel is “the best news we’ve ever heard” and learn to share our story conversationally.
* Give us confidence in the Christianity Explored course, so that we feel excited to invite friends in June, and could take a friend through the course in the future.
* Pray together for God to open gospel doors for members across our church.

**5 weeks of Reach Out**

**Weeks 6-9 [3 options]**

Your leader(s) will work out the best option for your group.

**Option 1 Attend the Christianity Explored Course - Big Community Outreach**

**(4 Tuesdays in June with dinner 7-8:30pm @ Engadine Anglican)**

We’d love as many groups as possible to attend the course together, to create a “big community” event, so our friends can explore Christianity in a large crowd. . The nights will be designed as a 4 weeks series, but still work if your guest can only come for 1 night. Please come if you don’t have a guest, to connect with other guests you might know from our local area. On the nights, people will be mostly seated in their Growth Groups., so your guests will be at your table, and your group leader will facilitate the conversations, based on the material you’ve done in May.

**Option 2 Run your own Christianity Explored Course**

Your Growth Group may decide that your current time (eg morning, or Gorillas night) is a better time to run your own course.

**Option 3 Regular Mark Studies / Prayer partnership**

In this booklet, there is a weekly “Mark Series reading & prayer guide” to do at home to prepare us for Sundays. If your Group decides that attending or running Christianity Explored in June is not what is best for the Group, then you can use this guide for your studies, and spend time partnering in God’s mission with us through prayer.

**Week 10 [In our Growth Groups]**

A special week to pray:

* thank God for Christianity Explored and pray for each other.
* work out what is the best “next step” for any guests (eg join your Group or seek out a new beginners Growth Group; family BBQ).

**Overview of Mark**



Mark’s gospel starts off with remarkable speed and energy. The author wastes no time with lengthy stories about Jesus’ birth and childhood or genealogical lists tracing his legitimate messianic ancestry (as in Matthew and Luke). There is no exalted prologue identifying Jesus as the self-revelation of God and placing him within the scheme of salvation history (as in John). Within a few short paragraphs, Jesus is baptized by John, anointed by the Spirit, acclaimed by God as “my beloved Son,” and tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and he embarks on a ministry of preaching the kingdom of God, calling disciples, healing, and exorcism. **This is a gospel narrative on steroids!**

**The Mighty Messiah and Son of God**

The first half of this energetic story is characterized by three main themes: authority, awe, and opposition. Mark begins by identifying Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of God” (1:1), and this messianic authority is on display at every turn. Jesus’ message is the arrival of God’s eschatological reign through his own words and deeds. He calls disciples, who drop everything to follow him; he captivates his hearers with remarkable teaching; he commands demons to come out of people, and they obey. He heals the sick with a compassionate touch; he quiets a storm with a strong rebuke. The response to this is awe and wonder. The people are amazed at his authoritative teaching and his power over demons. They marvel when he heals the sick. The disciples stand in shock as he quiets the storm with a command. They wonder, “Who, then, is this, that the wind and the sea obey him!” (4:41).

Such audacious deeds attract not only acclaim but also opposition. The religious leaders of Israel are scandalized when Jesus claims to forgive sins, hangs out with sinners, and treats the revered Sabbath commands as apparently optional. They begin to plot against him, seeking a way to eliminate this upstart who challenges their influence with the people. Unable to deny his mastery over demons, they accuse him of being in league with the devil, casting out demons by Satan’s power. Jesus responds by dismissing their authority and accusing them of standing in opposition to the work of God. By rejecting his authority they are blaspheming the Spirit of God, who is at work in him. Israel’s “insiders” — the religious elite — have now become outsiders to the true people of God. In an implicit denial of their leadership, Jesus chooses and appoints twelve disciples, modelled after the twelve tribes of Israel and representing the restored people of God. His true family, the household of God in the kingdom age, is made up not of those who share physical descent from Abraham, but of those who do the will of God (3:34).

Everything Jesus says and does in the first half of the gospel confirms the author’s initial claim: Jesus is indeed the mighty Messiah and Son of God (1:1). His popularity grows and grows, and he continues to amaze all who encounter the power of God through him. In a second wave of remarkable miracles, he casts out a “legion” of demons, heals incurable disease, raises a young girl from the dead, walks on water, and twice feeds massive crowds with a few loaves of bread and fishes. Yet he is also secretive and circumspect about his identity. He repeatedly silences demons and commands those he heals not to tell anyone about it. **A sense of mystery and paradox surrounds his identity. The question, “Who is this person?” hangs in the air. It is as though the narrator is saying, “Yes, he is the Messiah, but there is much more to it than this.”**

This theme reaches a climax at the midpoint of the gospel. Jesus takes his disciples away for a retreat to Caesarea Philippi, north of Galilee, where he asks them a question, “Who do people say I am?” (8:27). Their response shows a variety of popular views: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. But when he asks them, “Who do you say I am?” Peter responds for the rest, “You are the Messiah” (8:28 – 29). The gospel narrative has been building to this climax: Jesus’ words and deeds have confirmed the truth about his identity. He is indeed the Messiah and Son of God. Yet here the narrative takes a shocking and dramatic turn.

Instead of affirming the traditional role of the conquering and ruling Messiah, Jesus predicts that he will be rejected by the religious leaders, arrested, and crucified, and that three days later he will rise from the dead. When Peter objects to this defeatist attitude and rebukes Jesus, Jesus rebukes him back, accusing him of acting as Satan’s agent and pursuing a human rather than divine agenda. It is God’s purpose for the Messiah to suffer and die!

**The Suffering Servant of the Lord**

If the first half of the gospel presents Jesus as the mighty Messiah and Son of God (1:1 – 8:30), the second half develops the theme of his suffering role (8:31 – 16:8). Three times Jesus predicts his death. Each time, the disciples miss the point and respond with some act of pride and self-interest. In response, Jesus repeatedly teaches that anyone who wants to be his disciple must take up their cross and follow him. Whoever wants to be first must be last, and the path to glory is through suffering. This theme climaxes after Jesus predicts his death for a third time (10:33 – 34). Two of his disciples, James and John, approach him and ask for the seats of greatest honor beside the king when his kingdom is established in Jerusalem. The other disciples are indignant, and Jesus must gather them together again for a lesson on humility.

He contrasts the world’s model of leadership with his own:

*You know that those recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise dominion over them. But it is not so among you. Rather, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first will be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42 – 45)*

Here we have the essence of Mark’s story. Though Jesus is indeed the mighty Messiah and Son of God, his role is not to conquer the Romans. It is to suffer and die as a ransom payment for sins. This is a far greater achievement than physical conquest. He will provide victory over humanity’s ultimate enemies: Satan, sin, and death. Those who would be his disciples must follow his path, taking up their own cross and following him in a life of self-sacrificial service — living for the kingdom and for others rather than for themselves… (15-19)

**Excerpt from:**

Strauss, M. L. (2014). Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament. *Mark, Grand Rapids Michigan*, pp17-19.

**Mark Series: Reading & Prayer Guide**

This Guide is designed to prepare you for the Sunday talks. You can do it on your own, use it in your family, or meet up 121 with someone from church.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Week** | **Passage** | **Questions** | **Prayer Focus** |
| 1 | Ch1-4 | * How is the start of Mark different from Matthew, Mark and John? * “This is a gospel on steroids” (Strauss, p17) – do you agree? * What is your 1st impression of Jesus? * “Though Mark frequently refers to Jesus as a teacher, he focuses more on action than on extended teaching.” (Strauss, p46) Is this true in the opening chapters? | Overall church: Staff team; Raising and sending young men and women into full-time ministry; Congregations & Growth groups; Generosity to meet our church budget |
| 2 | 1:1-15 | * Why are there no details of the author or first readers of this gospel? * How is Jesus summarised in v1 ?(cf 15:39; Is 52:7) * How are 3 OT passages combined in v2-3? (Ex 23:20; Mal 3:1; Is 40:3) Why is this quote all attributed to “Isaiah”? * What was John the Baptist’s task? (v4-8; cf Zech 13:4; 2 Kgs 1:8; Mal 3:1, 4:5-6) * Who does God reveal Jesus to be? (v11; Ps 2:7; Gen 22:2; Is 42:1) * How is Jesus like and not-like Israel? (v12-13; Ps 95:8-11) | Mission Partners |
| 3 | 1:16-45 | * How did Jesus begin his public ministry? (v16-19) * How was Jesus’ teaching unique? (v21-28) * How did Jesus heal Simon’s mother-in law? (v29-34) * Why has Jesus come? (v35-39) How does that affect his decisions? * Why does Jesus strongly warn the healed leper not to tell anyone? (v40-45; cf v34) | Seniors Ministry |
| 4 | 2:1-12 | * What word is repeated throughout this story? (v5, v7, v9, v10) * What was the OT punishment for blasphemy? (v6-7; cf Lev 24:10-16) * What does Jesus know about the teachers of the law in v6-8? Do we sometimes forget this? We need v5! * Who has authority to forgive sins? (v7; v10; 10:45) * What was the response to Jesus? (v12)   Note “immediately” (v8) is used 41 times in Mark giving it a fast-moving pace. | Youth Ministry |
| 5 | 2:13-22 | * Who does Jesus call in v13-14? (cf v16—20) * Who ends up following Jesus? (v15) * Why was it seen as so controversial? (v16) * Who is the real host of the dinner? (v17, cf v19)   Note: The OT law established only 1 fast, on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29). But by Jesus’ day, the Pharisees had made fasting every Monday and Thursday (Lk 18:12).   * Why might John’s disciples have been fasting (mourning)? (1:14) * Who does Jesus reveal he is? (v19-20; cf Is 25:6-8, 65:13-14; Rev 19:7-9) * What does the parable mean? (v21-22) | Kids Ministry |
| 6 | 2:23-3:6 | * What word is repeated throughout this section? (v23, v24, v27, v28, 3:2, 3:4)   Scene 1   * What is the Pharisees’ accusation? (v23-24, cf Dt 23:25; Ex 20:8-11; Dt 5:12-15) * What is Jesus’ answer? (v25-28; cf 1 Sam 21:1-6; 3:4; Gen 1:26-2:3)   Scene 2   * What motivates the Pharisees and what is their response? (3:1-6) | Mission Partners |
| 7 | 3:7-35 | * What the different responses to Jesus? * v7-10 * v11 * v13-19 * v20-21 (cf v31-35) * v22 & v30   Note: Simon Peter is always mentioned first in the lists of disciples, as the “spokesperson” (Mt 10:2-4; Lk 6:12-16; Acts 1:13). See Judas (14:10-11,43-45)   * What does Jesus’ parable mean? (v23-29) * What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and why can that person not be forgiven? (v29; cf v30)   Note: This is first time “Truly, I tell you” is used, which is repeated 13 times in Mark (8:12; 9:1,41; 10:15,29; 11:23; 12:43; 13:30; 14:9,18,25,30). In John, it doubled for emphasis “Truly, truly”.   * What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and why can that person not be forgiven? (v29; cf v30) * Who is in Jesus’ family? (v31-35) | Members in need |
| 8 | 4:1-20 | This is the 1st of 4 parables, and the longest.  1. Public teaching   * Where was Jesus teaching from? (v1) How did he teach? (v2) * When the farmer sowed his seed, what were the 3 responses? (v3-8) * What is Jesus’ conclusion? (v9)   2. Private teaching   * Why does Jesus speak in parables? (v10-12; cf Is 5-6 where God uses Israel’s rejection of him to accomplish his purposes)   Note: “teaching in parables to hide the truth results from the rejection by Israel’s leaders in Mark 3. It’s purpose now will be to blind them to the truth so that they will inadvertently fulfil God’s plan of redemption in the death of Jesus. ” (Strauss, p186)   * What are the 3 responses to Jesus’ words? (v13-20) * Which soil am I? | National & International leadership/stability/mission |
| 9 | 4:21-34 | * What do we learn about the nature of the kingdom of God? * Parable 2: Lamp * Parable 3: Growing Seed * Parable 4: Mustard seed | Past members sent from our church into ministry & raising of a new generation of church leaders; MTS program |
| 10 | 4:35-5:1 | * How big was the storm? (v35-37) * What was Jesus doing? (v38; cf Ps 3:5; 4:8; Pr 3:24) * How did Jesus respond? (v39-40; cf Ps 107:23-29; Ps 89:9-11) * How did the disciples respond? (v41) | Thanksgiving for Mark teaching series and pray for growth in godliness for every member |

**A great resource:**

<http://uncover.org.au/mark/>

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**Using the Growth Groups Studies**

Over the next 4 weeks in May, we will be focusing on gospel training, with a particular focus on our upcoming big community outreach Christianity Explored.

**Part 1: Preparation for Christianity Explored**

* Go through the night program (except dinner!), watching the videos and discussing the explore questions.
* Chat about how your table could best work, so that any guests feels as comfortable as possible.
* Pray for all the guests.

**Part 2: Conversational Testimony**

Write both a 5 minute and then 1 minute testimony, and help each other improve them!

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**Night 1 – Who is Jesus?**

**Tuesday 4th June**

*Over the next four sessions, we will explore three question that cut right to the heart of Christianity: Who is Jesus? What did he achieve? How should we respond?*

*Don’t be afraid to ask questions, no matter how simple or difficult they are. And if you have to miss one week, don’t worry. There is a short recap of the previous session at the start of the next one.*

**7:00 Dinner**

**7:30 Welcome & prayer**

**7:33 Explore 1**

What’s the best news you’ve ever heard?

**7:37 Explore 2**

**Video** *Mark’s Gospel is good news about Jesus*

What intrigues or puzzles you about Jesus?

**7:52 Explore 3**

**Read** Mark 4:35-41

What hope of surviving the storm did the disciples have?

What is so remarkable about the way in which Jesus calms the storm?

**8:02 Explore 4**

**Read** Psalm 107:23-31

Comparing to the Mark passage, what similarities and differences do you notice?

**8:07 Explore 5**

**Video** *Identity of Jesus*

What do you think of the evidence that Mark gives us about Jesus?

**8:30 Finish**

**Explore at home**

**Read Mark 1:1-15**

What do these witnesses say about Jesus?

1:2-3 The Old Testament prophets

1:7 John the Baptist

1:11 God

**Read Mark 1:16-2:12**

How does Jesus show his authority?

1:16-20 To the disciples

1:21-22, 27-28 To those at the synagogue

1:23-26 To the impure spirit

1:29-34, 40-45 To the sick

1:35-39 To the disciples

2:1-12 To those in the house

**Read Mark 2:13-3:6**

How do different people respond to Jesus?

2:13 Large crowd

2:14 Levi the tax collector

2:15 Many tax collectors & sinners

2:16-18 Teachers of the law & Pharisees

3:1-6 Pharisees & the Herodians

What are your early impressions of Jesus?

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**Night 2 - Our problem with sin**

**Tuesday 11th June**

**7:00 Dinner**

**7:30 Welcome, prayer & recap of Night 1**

**7:40 Explore 1**

**Read** Mark 2:1-12

Why was there such a crowd? (2:1-2; see clues in 1:27-28, 32-34, 45)

What were the 4 men hoping Jesus would do? (2:3-4)

What does Jesus do instead? (2:5)

Why were the religious leaders so angry at this? (2:6-7)

How were they both right & wrong?

How does Jesus indicate that he does have the power to forgive sins? (2:8-12)

**8:00 Explore 2**

**Video** *Sin*

**Read** Mark 9:43-48

Why do you think Jesus uses such extreme illustrations to talk about the need to avoid hell?

Jesus believed in hell, should we? Why or why not?

Imagine all your thoughts, words and actions were displayed for all to see. How would you feel?

If Jesus really does have the power to completely forgive sins, is that the best news you’ve have heard?

**8:30 Finish**

**Explore at home**

**Read Mark 6:1-8:29**

So far Mark has built up an impressive picture of Jesus’ power and authority.

How do the passages below add to the picture of who Jesus is?

6:32-44

6:47-48

7:31-37

8:1-10

8:22-26

In 6:34, Jesus looked at the crowd as “sheep without a shepherd”. Do you think it’s the same today? Why or why not?

How do different people respond to Jesus?

6:1-6 In Jesus’ local synagogue

6:14-15, 53-56, 7:37 People in general

6:51-52 The disciples

8:11 The religious leaders

Why do you think people responded so differently in each of these cases?

Which group do you most identify with? Why?

How can we deal with our problem with sin? (7:20-23)

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**Night 3 - How does Jesus deal with our sin?**

**Tuesday 18th June**

**7:00 Dinner**

**7:30 Welcome, prayer & recap of Nights 1 & 2**

**7:40 Explore 1**

**Read** Mark 8:27-33

In general, who do people say Jesus is today? What do they base these views on?

Why do you think Peter’s conclusion in 8:29 is so important?

How central does Jesus think his death is to his mission? (8:31-33)

Why do you think Peter rebuked Jesus? (8:31-33)

**7:55 Explore 2**

**Video** *The Cross*

**Read** Mark 10:45

Sin means “rebellion against God”. How does Jesus deal with our sin?

Explain how Jesus’ death on the cross is considered the way to deal with our sin.

Different people reacted to the cross differently:

* The religious leaders were convinced they didn’t need Jesus (14:53-65)
* The Roman leader was weak and gave into the crowds (15:15)
* The soldiers were too busy capitalising off Jesus’ death (15:16-32)
* The Roman centurion concluded Jesus was “the Son of God” (15:39)

Which reaction is most like your reaction? Why? Have you changed recently?

Was Jesus really who he claimed to be (lord) or was he just a liar or a lunatic? Give reasons.

**8:30 Finish**

**Explore at home**

**Read Mark 8:30-16:8**

How aware was Jesus that he would die? (8:31, 9:12, 31, 10:32-34, 12:10, 14:27-31, 41-42)

Why must we receive the kingdom of God like a child? (10:13-16)

At the moment Jesus died (outside the city), something happened in the Temple. (15:38) The temple curtain was like a massive “No entry” sign. It showed people were cut off from God because of their sin. Why do you think is the significance of the curtain being torn open right then?

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**Night 4 – Responding to God’s grace**

**Tuesday 25th June**

**7:00 Dinner**

**7:30 Welcome, prayer & recap of Nights 1-3**

**7:40 Explore 1**

If God asked, “Why should I give you eternal life?”, what would you say?

**Read** Mark 10:17-21

How good is good enough for God? (12:18)

How much can we contribute to inheriting eternal life?

**7:57 Explore 2**

**Video** *Grace*

What does grace mean and how is it linked to gift?

**Read** Mark 14:27-31, 66-72, 16:7

Grace is when God treats us in the opposite way to what we deserve.

How did Peter treat Jesus just before he died?

How do you think Peter felt about his name being mentioned in 16:7?

How is the grace Jesus shows to Peter a picture of the grace he now offers to us?

“You are more sinful than you ever realised, but more loved that you ever dreamed”? Do you agree? Why or why not?

**8:30 Finish**

**Personal Reflection**

What are my questions now?

How do I score the following statements? (0 = unconvinced; 10 = very sure)

* Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.
* Jesu came to rescue me from my sin.

**Prayer of Commitment**

Dear God,

I know that I am not worthy to be accepted by you.

I don’t deserve your gift of eternal life.

I am guilty of rebelling against you and ignoring you.

I need forgiveness.

Thank you for sending your son Jesus to die for me that I may be forgiven.

Thank you that he rose from the dead to give me new life.

Please forgive me and change me, that I may live with Jesus as my ruler.

Amen.

**Writing a Conversational Testimony**

When gospel opportunities arise in everyday conversations, often we don’t know where to start or waffle and say too much. So it’s a great discipline to spend time writing out your testimony and learning it – not so that we can parrot it word for word, but so the words come more quickly and naturally in conversations.

**Preparation at home**

Write out your testimony of how you became a Christian (5 min version)

**Preparation at home**

Write out your testimony of how you became a Christian (1 min version)

**The Beauty of ‘Boring’ Testimonies**

Many Christians struggle with their own testimonies. Our stories are boring, uninteresting, and mundane—or so it often seems to us. Who would listen to us even if we did share?

What often qualifies as “interesting” is the sort of thing someone would write (and read) a book about: ex-felons, ex-addicts, ex-something-or-others. We are all sinners saved by grace, and yet, as unclean and broken as we may be, many of us haven’t gone a day in our lives not knowing about God. Often we describe our testimonies in terms of reshaping or renewing our current faith: we are reminded of the sin we have, or convicted of the sin we didn’t see, and now we can return to the gospel we’ve known all our lives. It isn’t so much a 180° change as a couple of degrees at a time.

### **Always Amazing**

We’re suckers for big and loud stories—look at the film industry for evidence—and so we tend to write off anything that doesn’t fit that pattern. We don’t volunteer to tell people we grew up in the church and asked Jesus into our hearts as soon as we learned to speak. Who would find that story anything but boring?

The solution isn’t to seek a more powerful testimony—let’s not sin that grace may abound—but to expand our understanding of what constitutes a beautiful testimony. We can describe those who grew up in the church as spared from the horrors of the criminal life, but this story feels empty. The negation isn’t nearly so powerful as the positive expression: we are saved from the damnation we earned by the great grace of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Of course we desire to be remembered, to be seen as moving examples of the grace God can provide. The examples trumpeted stand out in the wide course of history, especially those saved through harrowing circumstances: Paul’s persecution of Christians, Augustine’s many sexual sins, right on up to the teenage-atheist-turned-30-something-Christian C. S. Lewis. We see that great Christians of the past have often come from broken places.

### **No Ordinary Christians**

This emphasis on dramatic testimonies can be harmful, though, despite the intention to inspire us. While these testimonies can encourage us to look and see the greatness of God, we tend to only see God’s grace manifest in those who have been saved from what appears to be much. If we took for our role models “ordinary” Christians—local pastors and elders, our parents and professors, our peers—perhaps we’d be more capable of seeing God’s explicit and awesome grace in our “ordinary” lives.

I don’t recommend removing the historical “greats” from our studies, nor should we discount the explosive testimonies we so often hear. Rather, we ought to broaden our understanding of what makes for a compelling story of grace.

Every Christian has a redemption story. Whether you are saved from cocaine addiction or a prideful heart, from deep in a prison cell or the comfort of your suburban home, your story is filled with grace. If we can’t see the beauty of a redemption story, the problem isn’t with the story: the problem is with us.

After all, every story of redemption is one so powerful that Christ died to fulfill it.

**Writer: J.F. Arnold**

https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-beauty-of-boring-testimonies/

**Giving a Testimony**

Evangelicals have been using testimonies as part of their evangelism for years. There is a formal procedure at evangelistic rallies 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 wafty 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; 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 in giving the testimony. 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 Kelloggs advertisement: "People like you like Kelloggs Corn flakes". Testimonies are not given in order to preach. It is very important not the 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 actress. 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 Kelloggs Corn flakes".

Sometimes it is wise to conduct the testimony by an interview. This keeps the chair 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. But chiefly it leaves the chair in control of the meeting.

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.

**One plan …**

BEFORE I was a Christian I thought ...

BUT things started to change ... (what I learn about Jesus)

NOW the changes have been ... (ie how God has changed you).

**Writer: UNSW Campus Ministry** (written 1980s but still time-less insights)

**Your Testimony isn’t about You**

We live in an age of narcissism. It is the era of self-actualization, the relentless race to perfect the self. Time magazine reported in 2013 that “Narcissistic personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their twenties as for the generation that’s now 65 or older. . . . 58% more college students scored higher on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982.” As the West has become more narcissistic, so have the people in our churches. We see it on social media. We hear it over coffee. We see it when young people break away from living and breathing social groups to snap a selfie.

We also see it in our evangelism. A decade or two ago our evangelism still pointed outward. We spoke of the existence of God, objective truth, and the historical reliability of the resurrection. Now, swaths of churches have moved on to leading with personal testimonies.

This contextualization isn’t necessarily wrong. In a postmodern era, stories are often more powerful than objective truth claims. Testimonies can be a valuable way to share the good news about Jesus. But in a society where even Christians are steeped in rampant individualism and self-idolatry, our testimonies can easily sound like another story of self-congratulation.

Though some personal testimonies are on the mark, many boil down to this: “Look! God is great because me me me.” These are not road-to-Damascus stories, but spiritually tinted selfies.

**Selfie Testimonies**

A caricature might be helpful here. This example below is — sadly — only slightly exaggerated.

My life used to be in shambles. I was a wreck. I used to do X, Y, and Z. You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff I did. I found my meaning in the opposite sex.

But Jesus died on the cross to change my life. Now, I thank God that I’m not like those old friends. I live a good life. I wake up with purpose every day. I volunteer. I sponsor a child in Africa.

Oh, and did I mention? I have a smokin’ hot Christian spouse.

The good news is you can have this life, too.

This isn’t the gospel. It’s the kind of Self-help Narcissism 101 you’ll find in any Barnes & Noble. Just add a twist of God.

**Narcissism, Meet Postmodernism**

So, how did this happen?

As the West began to respond more to story rather than reason, the church adapted, which was good. But the stories we told began to center less and less around Jesus. In order to avoid debate, our witness focused less on the existence and glory of God — which can be argued with — and more on our changed lives — which cannot. The problem is the systematic shift in focus away from God and toward ourselves and our “changed lives.” God is great because . . . me — so these stories go. No. God is great because God.

**One Gospel Please, Decaf**

This new gospel of changed lives is a small gospel. It’s decaf. It’s human-centered, like a planet without a sun. We hear it encouraged like this: “Sharing your faith is easy! Just tell your story. You don’t need to know much about the Bible. God’s in the business of changing lives. Jesus came to change lives.”

This is dangerous because it’s only partially true, and it makes us the center of the gospel. None of the statements above is necessarily wrong, but repeated ad nauseam, cut off from the glory of God and the fuller gospel, it replaces God’s gospel with a man-centered, I’ve-arrived, changed-life kind of news. The sad reality is that we’re not the only ones evangelizing based on our changed lives …

**Changed Lives Are a Dime a Dozen**

Many religions, philosophies, and even health crazes will change you. If you want evidence of this, just head to your nearest CrossFit gym, yoga studio, or health food store. Those lives have been transformed by whatever flavor of self-actualization they idolize most. If changed lives is all we got, it ain’t much.

But that isn’t all we have. We have the glory of the living God. And that glory should create a great chasm between a secular testimony of a changed life and a Christian testifying about Jesus Christ.

The secular testimony is focused on the self — how it arrived despite the obstacles on the road. The Christian testimony is focused on the Person, that Great Obstacle in our wandering path — that Brilliant Light who kicks us off our horse and blinds us, and calls us to repent and be baptized, and commissions us on his great work, and even tells us we will suffer for his sake. This is a Christian testimony.

**Writer: Jordan Monson**

https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/your-testimony-isnt-about-you

**Reach-Out Prayer List**

Pray that God will open new gospel doors over May (Col 4:3). Pray for God’s mercy on everyone in your particular street.

Who could we invite to Christianity Explored in June?

* family members
* someone who’s never been to church ever

(eg neighbours/friends from sport/parents from youth/Kids Plus etc)

* someone we haven’t seen for a while at church
* someone new to church
* someone God connects me with over the next month

**Group Prayer List**