



giving a short talk

the MINISTRY PAPERS

'it's only a short talk'

You've been asked to "do the devotion" on Friday night at Youth Group. Or you're a mentor to the young mums group and you've been asked to "share some of your wisdom with us". Or you're a growth group leader and you've been encouraged that it'd be good to "give a fireside yarn" at the group's weekend away. They come in all shapes and sizes. They're the occasions where you're asked to step up and "give a short talk".

Leaders often find it hard to recruit people for this challenge. Speaking in front of others is up there with snakes and spiders for some. Most of us just don't feel equipped for it. For this reason the invitation to speak often comes with efforts at downplaying the challenge. The encouragement is given that "it's only a *short* talk". Perhaps we're being told: "the pain really won't last that long"! Hopefully what we're *not* being told is: "shorter talks don't really take any preparation... just wing it like I do".

Ask an experienced public speaker and they'll tell you that shorter talks often require *more* preparation. If you have to say it clearly in a few minutes or so, you have to be even clearer what the it is that you're saying. You have to be prepared.

For some of us the temptation is to over-prepare. We lack direction. We charge in and start writing only to find ourselves continually writing and re-writing. This paper is for you, helping you to think through how to prepare a talk. For others of us the temptation is to under-prepare. We leave it far too late. Or we just hope something will "come to me" when we get up to speak. This paper is for you, helping you to think through how to prepare a talk. Short or long, every occasion where God's Word is spoken is a precious opportunity to honour Jesus and connect people to him. It's definitely worth preparing for.

LEADERS:...before taking someone through this paper, review the two key introductory MINISTRY PAPERS: 'the ministry training church' and 'meeting one to one'.

Connect. Grow. Serve. After **connecting** to God through trusting in Christ, a vital way we can **grow** is through a growth group and a vital way we can **serve** is through a ministry team. This MINISTRY PAPER is designed to help your ministry leader train you for giving a short talk as a part of the ministry of that team. For full length sermons refer to the '**preaching that connects**' paper. '**Giving a short talk**' draws on that paper applying many of the same principles to shorter talks.



read **1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**

1. What is the centre of all Paul's preaching?

2. Paul clearly covers a lot of subjects in this letter. What does he mean, then, that he only preaches "Christ and him crucified"?



3. Why is it important that you proclaim "Christ and him crucified", whatever the topic or passage your talk is covering?



read **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**

4. What is *flexible* in Paul's approach to ministry?

5. What is *fixed* in Paul's approach to ministry?



6. What must be *fixed* about your talk, whatever the context?

7. What must be *flexible* about your talk, according to the context?

connecting the talk

We have discussed that every talk from God's Word, short or long, is a precious opportunity to honour Jesus and connect people to him. Before we dive in to the how-to of talk preparation let's focus on the who-to. It's possible to communicate very clearly without having communicated Christ very clearly. There's a number of connections we'll think about here. But by far the most important connection is this: that your talk connects to Jesus.



1. connect to CHRIST... the gospel centre

We have seen from 1 Corinthians that the Apostle Paul was determined to always proclaim Christ crucified—whatever the topic, whatever the situation. That's the first and most crucial connection you need to think about in your talk: does it connect to Jesus? Does it, most especially, connect to Jesus' death on the cross? Whatever the topic I've been given or chosen, whatever the passage I've been given or chosen: does my talk connect to "Christ crucified". Have a look at Luke 24:44-47. Jesus is giving a walk-along Bible Study on the whole Old Testament (Law, Prophets & Psalms, vs44) and says that it's all—all of it—about his death and resurrection, and the need for people to turn back to God for forgiveness through him. Paul did it. Jesus did it. Make sure you do it. Connect to Jesus.

2. connecting the TALK itself ... the big idea

The next aspect of connection you need to think through is how the talk connects to itself—how it flows, how it "hangs together". Listening is hard work. The fact is, no matter how short your talk is, people won't remember much of the detail of what you have said! And if your material isn't well organised, they might not remember *anything* you said! This is where communicators recommend a unifying BIG IDEA for any communication. "Big idea" really just means that you've actually got something to say. And that you say it clearly. This means making tough choices about what to leave out. Sometimes less is more! If you try to say too many things, people hear nothing. Being profound doesn't mean being complicated! A talk may cover a few different points but unless they're connected by a unifying theme they'll be lost. With a short talk, you'll need that focus all the more.

3. connecting to LIVES ... application

You've locked in the need to connect to Christ—being faithful. You've locked in the need to connect the talk itself—being clear. You also need to think about connecting to the lives of the people in front of you. Who are they? What are their lives like? What's "on their minds"? Whether consciously or not, many people have a question running through their minds as they listen to you speak. It's the question, "so what?... what difference does what you're saying make to my life?" This step is crucial. The talk needs to be Christ-centred and clear, but it also must be *applied* to the listener. It needs to answer the "so what?". Of course, we don't want to pander to this question completely. After all, Christ is at the centre of all things, not us. But we do we need to show how Christ being at the centre of all things has real implications for everyone. It has implications for all the questions we ask and issues we feel. The gospel is always relevant and life-changing. It's your job to show it! What we're talking about here is often called 'application'. Unfortunately, this is often thought of as just the last bit of the talk. Sometimes it's a token minute at the end if you're lucky! In fact, the whole talk should be spoken directly into the lives of our listeners. That means we need to not only study the Word but study people too!



4. connecting to LISTENERS...

The last aspect of connection is about connecting people's ears. It's their hearts we want God's Word to reach. But it's heard via the ears! Here's a few principles to consider:

- listening's hard work. It's easy to drift off
- SO WHAT? is the question in people's heads – give them reasons to listen
- talks don't need to be complicated. Focus on a single key idea.
- read the passage. Re-read it. Write it out by hand. Re-read it.
- if you can't summarise your talk in a single sentence, who could?
- don't start writing until you have this big idea
- the idea needs to be broken down into a clear structure
- the more you say, the LESS people will remember
- give yourself plenty of time to think through application
- repetition is very important
- people like to hear about PEOPLE not abstract ideas
- even the most brilliant people prefer SIMPLE communication
- simple communication uses simple words, short sentences and repetition
- repetition is very important
- learn to write how you speak not how you write
- never use a long word when a short word will do the job
- use down to earth language – without being offensive
- never use more words than you need
- aim for an average sentence length of 15-20 words. Or less
- repeat the first sentence of a new point two or three times
- illustrate and use stories ... to explain points and to give a break
- almost always abbreviate: can't, don't, it's, aren't, etc
- start sentences with AND and BUT. Ignore your old English teacher!
- strong conclusions are crucial – don't fizzle out.
- repetition is very important
- treat the previous point seriously – it'll revolutionise your communication.



planning the talk

With these four aspects of 'connection' in mind it's time to write the talk. But don't just dive in. Plan first. Remember the need for a big idea? It's essential that you don't start detailed writing until you're clear what it is that you want to say! Don't start writing until you have wrestled with the passage and arrived at a clearly stated (written out) big idea. This next section is about how to plan out a talk.

listen to yourself

This sounds a bit weird, but listen to yourself. When you're talking at morning tea or supper, listen to yourself. When you're talking at work or at a party, listen to yourself. Get used to how you normally sound, and try to make sure that's how you sound when you speak. With the exception of projecting your voice a bit more, your speaking voice for giving a talk should be your normal voice. Your tone should be the same, rather than preachy or sermoniac. And your language should be the same, rather than formal or contrived. Try to be as 'over the fence' as possible. To do all this, you need to become a student of how you talk ... listen to yourself!

telling stories

Most especially, listen to yourself (and others) as you tell stories. Telling stories is something that we all can do very naturally when chatting but can be difficult to do in a talk. The key is to try to keep it natural. Tell it the way you would when just sitting around the dinner table. For example, something we do quite subconsciously, but is great in story-telling, is dropping into the present tense "so he looks at me and he says...". It gives a greater sense of being there. This is also useful when speaking from narrative parts of Scripture .e.g. "so Peter stands up and says...". Story-telling is a big part of communicating so it's worth becoming a student of. Study the way people tell stories. And always be on the look out for a good one to use as an illustration!

gather illustrations

always be on the look out (newspapers, other media, personal stories, etc) for illustrative material. If there's something happening in the world that your talk connects to, that can help get the point across. The further ahead you plan your talk, the more time you'll have to gather relevant illustrations.

pray

We need to ask God to help us to be faithful and clear in handling his Word. We need also to recognise that it is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit that applies God's Word to people's hearts. Proclaiming the gospel is definitely an activity where we need not only to pray first, but pray at all times.

select a unit of text

For the sake of this exercise we'll assume you already have a unit of text to speak on. But it's often the case with short talks that you're given a 'topic' rather than a passage, or no direction at all. Whether a topic has been given to you or not, it's important to find a verse or passage that will be "home turf" for the talk. This will help you to get a clear big idea and, more importantly, to be faithful to the Bible.

let the Word speak to you

Ideally it's good to look at the passage you are speaking on well ahead of when your actual preparation needs to start. This gives you space to respond to this part of God's Word yourself before you step into calling others to do so.

read & re-read the text

This stage shouldn't be hurried. Spend plenty of time just soaking in what the passage is saying. This will include looking at it's context in the book, and chasing up any links to other parts of the Bible, etc. Try to work out the flow of the passage Write out a summary in your own words.

big idea

At this stage you should be ready to put a big idea together. This is most easily done by identifying a subject and a complement: the subject is the broad 'topic' the passage is about, in a word or two: e.g. *God's love*. The complement is what the passage is saying about the subject. So in the above example, what is the passage saying about God's love? It's saying that God's' love is *unconditional*. Subject + complement = the big idea: "God's love is unconditional".

a big question

It can be useful to put the big idea into question form: e.g. "*can anyone be beyond God's love?*". This might be useful to state early (and often) in the talk.

application

Don't wait till the end of the writing process to work out where it's going! Jot down some key application ideas first. That way they won't just be tacked on.

structure

With your big idea in front of you, and your work on the flow of the passage, work out a structure for the talk that will establish the big idea. e.g. point 1: God is loving; point 2: God's love is unconditional. Even short talks need structure

key verse

If there is one verse that most captures the big idea it's worth identifying it – and perhaps going to it first in your talk before then working through the passage. Depending on how short your talk is it might in fact only be on one verse. If that's the case, however, make sure you understand (and give) the context.

key language

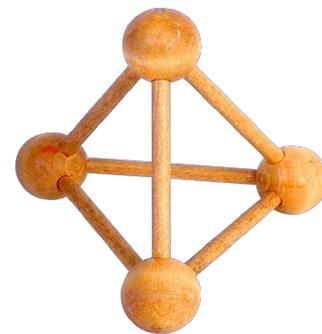
Write down some 'picture' words that will help carry the big idea (i.e. before you think about bigger illustrations, think about illustrative language & word pictures)

gospel check

How does the big idea relate to the centre of the Bible message: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Don't move on until you are clear about this.

a model talk

The danger of presenting a 'model talk' shape is that a model can easily become a mantra. With that qualification stated, however, it is good to have a basic model as a starting point for talk-writing. This is especially the case when you are starting out. Learn the model first, and then you'll be able to adapt it and develop it intentionally to your own style.



introduction

people make up their minds in the first minute or two whether they are going to listen to you! So the introduction needs to be interesting. This might take the form of a story, whether personal or from current events. But being interesting is only half the job. It also needs to *introduce the big idea* and the key language associated with it. Getting people's attention is great. Getting them thinking in the right ball park is even better.

key question

before moving to the text, it is useful to state the big idea in question form and somehow connect with the listener. If the introduction is where you introduce the big idea to the listener, the key question *introduces the listener* to the big idea. It needs to be personal and direct. It's about helping people anticipate that God's Word is going to speak to them today. This may also be a good point to go to the key verse.

1st point

Within each of your subpoints a few steps are normally involved:

STATE the point – say in clear terms what this point is

SHOW where in the text this point has come from (verse reference, etc)

EXPLAIN the point – expand on the point in plain language

ILLUSTRATE the point – some sort of story, etc to help your explanation

APPLY the point – this may only be brief at this stage but should happen

TRANSITION to next point – “we have seen that... next we see that” (these are critical as ‘get back on board’ points for people who may be struggling)

2nd, 3rd, etc points

...steps as above. If the talk is only 5-10 minutes it may be a single point talk.

biblical theology

depending on where you are in the Bible, you may need an intervening step before drawing conclusions and making application. In Old Testament passages, for example, you need to be careful. You need to bring the ideas/themes *through* the death and resurrection of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit before applying to us. Otherwise you'll misapply it. Ask yourself: “what difference does Jesus make?”

conclusions & application

- what does the passage tell us about God?

- what does it tell us about us?

- what change in thinking/acting might be needed... David Cook suggests 3 categories of application:

NECESSARY – how the text applies to all people at all times...

e.g. “God's Word is the absolute authority in what is true”

POSSIBLE – some helpful suggestions on how to practically apply the truth...

“why not start each day with reading God's Word for 15 minutes?”

IMPOSSIBLE – what you cannot do or think if you are responding to this passage ... “you cannot walk away from this passage thinking tradition matters as much as the Bible...”.

the critique

there is nothing radical in the idea that feedback is important. But here's something more radical: get feedback from others *before* you give the talk rather than after!

Getting feedback after a talk has the obvious problem that it's, well, too late! The fact is, people will tend to be a bit too 'soft' with you fearing that you'll feel that you did a bad job. Or you might be a bit defensive, fearing that you *have* done a bad job.

Contrast that to the prospect of a 'critique' - a feedback session *before* you give the talk. Sure it's still a bit confronting. But it's an opportunity to hear feedback with your defences down. Enjoy the chance to get some help improving the talk before you give it.

A few days ahead, get a couple of other leaders from your ministry together, including at least one person more experienced in giving talks.

- pray together
- distribute feedback sheets
- speak your final draft to them
- use the feedback sheet to talk through changes you might make
- while it's good to discuss a range of issues, try to come away with just one or two key improvements
- pray together again, responding to God's Word (critiques are great but we never want to become 'experts' over God's Word but always sit under it.

Apart from *this* talk being improved, you'll learn and develop greatly for *next* time. You will learn a great deal through having to make changes as you respond to thoughtful feedback.