

Giving an Effective Message

(Adapted from an article submitted by Dr Chap Clark)

Young Life has always been noted for its effective communication to young people. From the early pioneers to today's staff and volunteers, there remains a commitment to effective messages targeting youth. But productive communication, especially to a highly diversified and disinterested youth culture, is becoming increasingly more difficult. In order to reach the kids of today and beyond with the truth of the Gospel in a way that they can understand and are drawn to, it is vital- that Young Life messages be as clear and relevant as possible.

This article recommends a relatively simple, add water and stir method of preparing and delivering an effective message. This approach has been handed down in one form or another for decades. There is nothing new, but the plea in this approach is for simplicity and a return to the roots of what makes a good talk. The time-honoured speaking traditions in Young Life still provide one of the best possible methods for reaching disinterested kids with the wonder of Jesus Christ.

Method

Order of preparation:

- Controlling Thought
- Conclusion
- Body (Scripture)
- Introduction
- Application
- Transitions

This order is useful every time you approach a brief message to any audience where you have one point to convey. A banquet talk, for example, may require the exact same preparation method in order to stay on target and not lose focus.

Components of the Message:

These are the essential six components of an effective message. See the examples at the end of the proclamation section.

1. Controlling Thought: This is your target statement. When the message is finished and someone is asked, "What did she say?" he should be able to repeat this phrase almost verbatim. Throughout the talk, no matter how lost or nervous you get, as long as you keep this one phrase in mind, you cannot help but communicate clearly.
2. Conclusion: After writing down the thesis statement, the next task is to formulate a conclusive paragraph or summary. The reason I prepare this second is because it provides a framework within which the controlling thought can be couched and delivered. When the thesis is clear, the conclusion will be clear.

3. Body: In almost every talk of this kind, the body represents the Scripture which illustrates the thesis. In most preaching classes, students are taught that the controlling thought flows out of the Scripture. But for a specifically evangelical or informational message, where the controlling thoughts have already been formulated and agreed upon (in Young Life, the Statement of Mission Purpose and Doctrinal Statement), the Bible becomes the tool to illustrate the truth being communicated.
4. Introduction: The point of an introduction is to draw the attention of the crowd to the speaker and interest them in what you have to say. Sometimes this is a personal story, current news or school occurrence or an anecdote. It usually has some sort of natural tie to the Scripture (or sometimes the controlling thought). The danger for most speakers is a tendency to spend too much time with an illustration, thus taking away from the point of the talk and diluting the impact and focus on the controlling thought.
5. Application: This is one of the most neglected components of Young Life messages. We will communicate life saving truth to students and then leave them without an avenue to implement the information. An effective talk must always have a clear and simple application that can be both understood and carried out. For example, after a talk on the identity of Christ, ask kids to answer the question for themselves, "Who do you say that I am" or challenge them to complete this statement on their own: "I believe Jesus is _____ because _____."
6. Transitions: Perhaps the biggest mistake that is made by speakers is the lack of attention given to transition statements. Between every point there must be a sentence or phrase that bridges the gaps between thoughts. It can be smooth (And if you think I was hurting, let's look at a woman who once lost everything she had," and turn to Mark 5:21) or rather abrupt (Enough about school, let's get into some *real* exciting stuff . Last week we saw how Jesus..."). The point is to make sure that each transition makes sense and maintains continuity and flow from point to point, making sure that the thesis statement is the objective.

Trouble Shooting: Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Overuse of Illustration**: The point of a talk is to lift up Jesus Christ and not ourselves. We must keep in mind that every illustration is simply a tool to get into the Scripture, which in turn highlights the thesis. If an illustration goes beyond this purpose, it will often overshadow the thesis, which would cause a reaction like: "Great message! I'm not sure what was said, but it was sure funny!"

- **Muddy Conclusion:** Usually caused by lack of adequate preparation, where the most common mistake is to take either our favourite Scripture or illustration and force it into a talk.
- **Lack of Direction or Flow:** Again, often caused by preparing the components out of order, or not thinking through transitions. The key to a smooth flowing message is keeping a clear focus on the thesis and supporting it.
- **Poor Use of Scripture:** Scripture deserves careful attention in our messages. We must make sure that our interpretation is true to the original intent of the passage, and that we are not stretching the text to make it say what it does not intend. Every passage should be thoroughly studied and prayed through before speaking to kids in the name of the Lord.
- **Poor Delivery:** An effective Young Life message can be invalidated by poor delivery. It helps for the speaker to be aware of deficiencies and work on the delivery prior to speaking regularly. Such things as gum chewing, holding the Bible like a shield, speaking in a whisper or monotone and avoiding eye contact will diminish the effectiveness of a message. On the other hand, if the leader is known (and presumably liked) by kids, has a clear and simple message with a specific thesis and application and is willing to share with kids as friends, an unpolished delivery will still make a huge impact on the lives of the students.
- **A wise, old sage** once remarked to me, "Your message is only as good as the breath mints in your pocket." Not a bad piece of advice as someone approaches you after a talk.