

How To Give A Sermonette

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One of the things we discussed at this year's Church Board meeting was the need to bring more of our younger men into song leading, giving prayers, and doing sermonettes. All of the churches of God are aging. We are getting older. We do not know when Christ will return but we live each day as if it is our last. Having said that, we do need to plan for the future. It has been nice to see Robert and Levi added to the song leading schedule; if any others are interested, please let Richard know. You may have noticed at the Feast that we also had several of the younger men giving prayers—also very nice to see and hear.

I am going to talk now about a little more sensitive topic: sermonettes. Survey after survey lists public speaking as a top fear for most people. It even has a name—glossophobia—and affects 75 percent of the population. For most, this fear of public speaking manifests itself as increased blood pressure, increased perspiration, dry mouth, a stiffening of the upper back muscles, and perhaps even nausea. So now you men are really going to want to speak, right? It will not kill you, I hope.

All of us who speak had to overcome varying levels of fear and anxiety. I suspect that Jesus Himself had to get comfortable with public speaking when He began His ministry at age 30. One day He is a carpenter, or perhaps a contractor, and the next He is speaking to hundreds and then thousands of people. He was and is God, yes, absolutely, but He was also a man. He got hungry and thirsty, He got tired, and I will bet He was nervous when He began to speak. It is just normal.

But I would like you younger men to begin thinking about giving sermonettes, and I see some even here. You could start in your local areas, in front of a small group, and work your way up to going live on the stream. Some of you are already doing that. I know that Josh Montgomery, John Reiss, and probably others are speaking in their local areas.

What I would like to do in the remainder of this short commentary is give some advice on how to give a sermonette. Back in the early 80s, Worldwide [church of God] passed out a paper on this to those of us speaking. I had it for many years; I went to look for it but could not find it. I pretty much had it memorized anyway. In the meantime, I asked around, and David Grabbe was able to find something for me on HWAlibrary.com, dated 1985. It is very similar to the one I used. I want to read some of the highlights from this outline.

Outline: How To Give a Sermonette

Purposes:

- To give you practice.
- Settle congregation at beginning of service.
- Cover minor point, example, assigned point. [But it does not have to be of minor importance]
- Reinforce pastor, sermon.

Are not:

- To show off speaking ability.
- To move, shake, save the church in 12 minutes.
- To cover major subject.
- To go overtime/cut into sermon time.

10 to 15 minutes on a small topic, or one facet of larger topic, or difficult scripture, or example—healing, blessing, encouraging. Or ask pastor for subject suggestions.

KEY:

- Limit subject to what can be covered in 10-15 minutes.

Examples:

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- Difficult scripture i.e. Matt. 28:1, 6 resurrection; Mark 7:18-19 spiritual defilement, pork; I Tim. 4: doctrine of demons, no marriage.
- One facet of larger topic—Prayer, 3 times a day: Being in spirit of prayer, heart in prayers, position, content of prayer. Sabbath—what you can do, study and pray unhurriedly, time to meditate.
- Explain examples—healing, blessing, news event in light of prophecy, for encouragement.
- Do not apologize (time, preparation, etc.)
- Know exactly where you are headed: Limit topic. Think about the response you want.
- Be warm and friendly—not real heavy.
- Enthusiastic.
- Grab attention quickly—short time—do not waste time.
- Specific Purpose Statement (SPS)—stick to it.
- Stick to key issues of subject—no time for wandering.
- Assume nothing—explain background and points clearly.
- Get a phrase, slogan, basic idea that will stick and repeat it.
- Round off, summarize with short, proper conclusion.

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

1. Is subject appropriate?
2. Is it too broad?
3. Is organization good?
4. Is number of scriptures appropriate? (Not too many—not too few?)
5. Is it interesting?

COMMON PROBLEMS: (From last year's evaluation)

- "lacked punch"
- "out of focus"
- "choose more specific topic"
- "needed more stir"
- "introduced too many ideas"
- "practice reading scriptures ahead of time"

The guidelines that I started out with, many years ago, gave three things a sermonette could be about: 1) a difficult scripture; 2) Christian living; 3) a biblical figure. That is it! Our limits are a bit wider here at CGG, but I do think that for new speakers it would be good to stick to those three areas.

Sermonettes are not for correction (unless you are a minister) or for introducing “new truth”—again, unless you are a minister or have been asked to speak on something of that sort. A sermonette is the appetizer for the main course: the sermon.

The function of the sermonette is to settle the audience down, give something that will enhance the brethren's spiritual life with a tidbit of teaching, and get them ready for the sermon. We have all seen a congregation when the sermonette speaker steps to the podium. There is a rustling noise—and you can hear it—that goes through the room as we get out our Bibles and our notebooks and try to settle the kids down a bit, moving around in the chairs trying to get comfortable. This is why one of the first things these guidelines give is “settle congregation at the beginning of services.” Personally, I try not to start off with “please open your Bibles to...” for the very reason that the audience has not yet settled down. The crowd is still restless. I try to say a sentence or two, and then move into the meat of the sermonette and the verses at that point.

The length of a sermonette in CGG is 15-17 minutes, with a limit of three scriptures preferably. You can refer to other scriptures and you can read passages that count as a scripture. I have been a repeat offender as to length. It has been pointed out to me many times that my sermonettes are closer to the 20 minute mark than the 15 minute goal. For that I beg your forgiveness. I will strive to do better. But since CGG does not have an extended announcement period, we have more time for a sermonette than we did in the Worldwide days. And that is also where the Commentary comes in. It is somewhat in lieu of announcements. The commentary is not meant to be just another sermonette. It is meant to be topical in nature, whereas a sermonette might mention current events to lead you to your point, but it is to be more tied to scripture.

From the years that I have been speaking, I have a few points here of things I have learned. They are in random order. Long before I spoke in church I was speaking to employee meetings, business groups, and things of that sort. Here are just a few things that I think are useful:

1) Humor is a useful tool in tamping down your nerves. If you can get the audience with you by inserting some humor, it will make things go more smoothly. The humor should not be forced but natural. It should not be offensive or off color, but appropriate for the message. And if you do find you have said something funny (and you do not always know that is going to happen), do not talk over the audience reaction. Just wait a beat.

2) If you will be reading difficult to pronounce names or places—and the Bible is full of them—practice them! In your notes, write out the phonetic spelling and highlight it. Take your time; do not go too fast.

3) Pacing: Too slow and you will put us to sleep. Too fast and we cannot keep up. Find the right pace for you by practicing. And while I am talking about the pacing, when you ask us to turn to a scripture, give us time to get there. I am not against writing out the verses in your notes. I do that myself, and I do that to help me count the words and estimate my time. But use your Bible to turn to the verses so that you know how long it is taking the audience to get there, and also the audience knows that you are speaking right from the Bible.

4) If you are married, let your wife look over your notes and make suggestions. She is absolutely doing to be your best help. And if you are just starting out, I would suggest you even give the sermonette to her and let her critique it.

5) Pay close attention to the audience. What I would say to a youth group is different than what I would say to an employee meeting, which is different from what I would say to the brethren in a sermonette. On the whole, when you are speaking to the brethren as a group, use humility and stay within what you are comfortable with. I would never presume to speak on assembling the space shuttle, but I would quote from someone that has.

6) Edit, edit, and edit some more. Believe me, it hurts to cut out whole sections of what you have written. Oh, it hurts. But after writing something and going back through it, I can always find redundancies that just are not needed. Assume your audience is at least as smart as you are, and maybe more so. They do not need to be hammered with anything except maybe your SPS. As I said earlier, it is good to repeat a phrase that emphasizes your point several times through your message. But be careful of wordiness. For instance, “It was on a Monday, the second day of the week, the day after Sunday.” You just do not need all that. Refine your point down; do not make it too broad. Keep in mind that this is an appetizer. This is chips and dip, but not too much either! I suggest a “dry run.” too. Use a computer program to type out your message, and then time it. However long it takes in practice in private, it is going to be longer in real life, so keep that in mind. Find your comfort zone. How many words (or how many pages) is right for you to come in under 17 minutes? Or 20 minutes, if you use the clock that Ted uses.

7) Know your subject. Do not expect to speak extemporaneously for 17 minutes. You are going to need your notes. But try not to read them to the audience. Speak to the audience. Use vocal variety; do not speak in a monotone. Make eye contact with the group. If you are merely reading a paper and not looking up, it is doubtful your audience is going to be fully involved with your message.

Those are just some things that I thought might be useful, and that is really all the time I had to go through this. I realize that this barely scratches the surface. I am just hoping it might spark some interest in some of you to come forward and give this a shot. I am going to pass these notes on to David so they can be put up on the website so you can look them over at your leisure. I look forward to hearing sermonettes from some of you very soon!