

Evangelism – Sunday School

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II. Our own personal conversion story.

Has everyone written out your personal conversion story?

In this section we are going to talk about what a personal conversion story is and how to prepare it.

Please look with me here at Acts 22:1. “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”

Paul uses the word “defense” in this verse when about to explain to the Jews who he is and what he believes, and much of what follows in his defense is his personal testimony, that is, his own experience of conversion or how Christ saved him. This would indicate that sharing one’s conversion story is a legitimate and useful tool to use when seeking to present the gospel to others.

A. What is a personal conversion story?

What is our personal conversion story?



3. Take a few minutes to write down in the space below what you understand to be the definition of a personal conversion story.

What are your answers to this question?

How would I define a personal conversion story?

A personal conversion story aims to show our hearers why we needed to believe in Christ, provides an explanation of what God has done in our lives to save us from our predicament, tells of what we have done to receive God’s salvation in Christ, and describes something of how Christ has changed our lives.

Notice that the elements of a personal conversion story parallel the content of the gospel that we covered in the preceding section. We will see this more clearly below.

B. What elements should our personal conversion story include?

What should you include in your conversion story? I have already hinted at this above in the definition, but would like us to look together at the pattern Paul provides in Acts 22 for some further assistance in determining the answer to this question. Let's read through the entire passage of Acts 22:1-21. **Ask someone to read.**

22 “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”

² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ ⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ ¹¹ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

¹⁷ “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ ²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ”

What do we see in this passage related to Paul's conversion story that we should apply to our conversion story?

- **Speak of some sinful element in your life showing why you needed to trust in Christ** (v.7-8). Paul makes it clear that the one he was persecuting was the “Lord,” Jesus the Messiah, in this way indicating that his persecution was actually sin and not glorifying to God – contrary to what he had previously thought. So, do talk about something in your past that shows why you needed to trust in Christ. **Please note: Paul did not go on and on about his sin.** Such is rarely helpful. He instead points out one large way in which he had been sinning against God, and uses it to prepare the way for what follows.

- **Speak of what God has done in your life to save you** (v.6-11). Paul speaks of his experience on the road to Damascus where the Lord personally spoke to Him. The One speaking is identified as Jesus. It is clear from this testimony that the Lord was pursuing Paul and not Paul pursuing the Lord.
- **Speak of what you did to become a Christian** (v.12-16). Paul speaks of being baptized and calling on Christ's name. To be baptized was understood to include repentance from an old way of life and commitment to a new way of life. Calling on Christ's name means to believe He can save and is willing to save, and pleading with Him to do so.
- **Speak of what you received as a result of trusting in Christ** (v.16). Paul speaks of the washing away of his sins.
- **Speak of how your life has changed as a result of trusting in Christ** (v.10, 17-21). Paul has been changed into a man who now submits to the Lord's will and serves the Lord.

Woven together in this account are the different pieces of the definition given above.

More specifically, what we see in this account are both the objective truths of the gospel and the subjective experience of Paul becoming a Christian. The objective truths of the gospel are explained in how they relate to Paul's life. Paul's subjective experience is connected with his hearers so they can see how the gospel affects a person's life. This, then, should be our goal when we prepare our conversion stories. We should present both ...

- the objective truth of the gospel and
- the subjective experience of how the gospel affects our lives,

...all the while seeking to connect what we are saying to those who are listening so they can understand what we are saying and how it relates to them.

When we fail to include the gospel in our personal conversion story, we have only told people some of our background or of what Christ has done for us. In many cases people will not be offended by this, because it sounds like a subjective experience of something important to us. However, if we begin to talk about the facts of the gospel and how they apply to them, that is when they will often become resistant and hostile towards us and what we are saying.

Though that be true, we should never refrain from speaking of the objective truths of the gospel for they are a necessary part of **a faithfully communicated personal conversion story**.

C. What are some key “practical” characteristics of an effective personal conversion story?

Sadly, many Christians have never carefully thought through how to simply share their conversion story. As a result, when they are in an appropriate situation for sharing how Christ saved them, they often are very confusing and the hearer goes away not understanding the gospel or how the Christian was saved, leaving the hearer unclear about what he needs to do to be saved. Remember: **Clarity is essential** to a compelling personal conversion story.

At the same time, many Christians often seem to get carried away while telling their conversion story. I have on numerous occasions heard a Christian spend a great deal of time talking about their personal background or about some part of their life after becoming a Christian, usually causing the hearer to lose interest. Remember: **Brevity is important** to a higher degree of effectiveness when sharing our personal conversion story.

What is worse, the focus of the testimony is often mostly on the believer himself and not on

Christ. Of course, it is good to speak of our sinful background to accentuate the glory of Christ in saving us, or to speak of our new life in Christ to exhibit the glory of His grace in changing us, however, more often than not I hear people just **loving to talk about themselves**. Their purpose is not to exalt Christ but to enjoy the opportunity to gab on about their own lives. The sad result is that the person will leave talking about how impressive or nutty we are, but will not really understand who Jesus is or why they need to trust in Him, what Jesus did to save sinners or what they need to do to be saved. This phenomenon shows a tendency in our hearts to be self-centered rather than God-centered. Remember: **Being Christ-focused is critical** to a powerful personal conversion story.

So in sum I would argue that some key “practical” characteristics of an effective personal conversion story include: (1) clarity, (2) brevity, and (3) being Christ-focused.

D. My personal conversion story.

Handout – Please do not show this to anyone else. It will ruin it for them if they can take this class in the future, for they will already know what is coming.

As you listen to my personal conversion story, please keep in mind what we have just looked at above. In particular, ask yourself the following.

- Is it clear, brief, and Christ-centered?
- Does it have the objective truth of the gospel woven in? Do the subjective experiences mentioned connect with my hearers?

I want you to follow along on the handout, jotting down your thoughts on the handout, and then afterward taking a couple of moments to write down your thoughts, your feedback in the box below.

In God’s providence, I grew up in a good, moral environment. While I never attended church when young, I was taught to revere the name of God. My parents would punish me if I took God’s name in vain. I remember one time when I used God’s name in vain when arguing with my brother and my mom made me eat soap to show me I needed my mouth cleansed. Obviously, I was vile even from birth. I loved sin so much even my mouth was an open grave. As I got older, I became very covetous, often going to the audio stores with my friends and just looking at the expensive stereo equipment for hours. I struggled with the lust of the eyes and had no place for the love of God in my heart. I was a slave to sin, all the while thinking myself free. In spite of this, because my heart was deceitful beyond all things and desperately sick, I was able to put on a show and pretend to be a “good and upright person,” fooling a lot of people, including myself.

In college I began to have questions about why I existed. The effects of my atheistic education were beginning to clash with my conscience, which God put in all of us and which testifies of His existence and our sinfulness before Him. “If I exist only for this life,” I thought, “then life is a very meaningless experience.” I would talk with my parents and friends, saying, “When I graduate, I will get a job. After that, I will get married. Next I will have kids, and then they will get married and I will become a grandfather. Then I will retire and play lots of tennis. And last of all I will die. And what was the purpose of it all? If the best I can say is that I was able to pass on a few moments of happiness to my children, will their molecules roll over in the grave and tell me thank you?” And on and on it went. I thought that after death there was nothing more to our existence, and did not realize that there is a state after death where our souls go either to heaven or to hell, and then when Christ returns our bodies will be raised to face the judgment. My friends

all thought I had gone crazy, and would make all kinds of jokes about me. Sometimes they would hurt my feelings, but most of the time I just ignored them.

During my junior year of college, God **in His all wise providence** brought about an amazing situation where I met a friend I had not seen for about a year. **We just bumped into each other in the student lounge, which is unusual since the university has over 35,000 students and we studied in different schools within the university.** This friend and I talked for a while eating the best pizza in all of Michigan, and then, before she left, she invited me to a Bible study. It was there that **God opened the eyes of my mind** and I first began to really understand something about God – that He is holy both in His moral nature and in all He does, and something about myself – that I am sinful in His sight, **fully depraved in every faculty of my being, and in all matters dispositioned towards evil.** One of my main struggles was understanding who Jesus Christ is. I understood that He died on the cross in the place of sinners so that **His elect** could be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God, but I was unclear if He was just a man or if He was God come in the flesh. After further study in the Bible I came to understand that the One who came to save me was not just the Savior **foreshadowed in all the types and revealed in all the prophecies, promises and sacrifices of the Old Testament**, but was Immanuel, God with us.

Therefore, I went out into the woods on a beautiful August day, **and while the birds were chirping and the bugs humming,** I finally turned from my prideful confidence in myself to gain my acceptance before God and trusted in Christ's death as my only hope of atonement for my sins and peace with God. At that point I became a new creation in Christ, the old was gone and the new had come, **and I now had a new mind which could understand the gospel and the Bible, a new heart that loved God and the things of God, and a new will that was willing to do all God's holy will.** Moreover, I knew for certain that my sins were washed away and that I was now justified in God's courtroom, **all because Christ my substitute had borne my penalty on the cross and His righteousness had been counted as mine.** Peace and joy flooded my heart, as well as gratitude to God for His great love to me, and so I just sat down there in the woods and sang some songs to God, **the one I especially remember being "Amazing Grace."**



4. As you listen to my personal conversion story, answer the following questions.

- Is it clear, brief, and Christ-centered?

- Does it have the objective truth of the gospel woven in? Do the subjective experiences mentioned connect with my hearers?



What are your answers to these questions?

Thank you for all your feedback. Now...

Before I analyze my conversion story, I must admit that I intentionally added some things into my story that I would not normally add when sharing this story with a non-Christian. I did this because I wanted to ensure that there were some things we could find that should not be there, as I think finding these things together will help you better analyze your own conversion stories.

Most of what I will point out deals with matters of clarity or with relating to my audience.

Ok, in the first paragraph I begin by saying, “in God’s providence.” This is a true statement and means a lot to a Christian, but it is unnecessarily theological when sharing my conversion story with a non-Christian and is something most of them will not understand.

Next, look at the sentence, “I grew up in a good, moral environment. While I never attended church when young, I was taught to revere the name of God.” This is something of my **background** that I hope will **connect with my hearers**.

Next, I say, “My parents would punish me if I took God’s name in vain.... As I got older, I became very covetous, often going to the audio stores with my friends and just looking at the expensive stereo equipment for hours. I struggled with the lust of the eyes and had no place for the love of God in my heart.” These all connect with **some sinful element in my life before I trusted in Christ**. However, I also say, “I remember one time when I used God’s name in vain when arguing with my brother and my mom made me eat soap to show me I needed my mouth cleansed.” This is not necessarily a bad detail to include, but it probably is a detail that is not helpful and could be left out.

Also, I say, “I was vile even from birth. I loved sin so much even my mouth was an open grave.” And near the end of the paragraph I say, “my heart was deceitful beyond all things and desperately sick.” These again are too theological. Either I need to say these things more simply or just leave them out if the rest of what I say is already sufficiently clear.

In the second paragraph, I say, “In college I began to have questions about why I existed. The effects of my atheistic education were beginning to clash with my conscience.... If I exist only for this life,” I thought, “then life is a very meaningless experience.” I would talk with my parents and friends, saying, “When I graduate, I will get a job. After that, I will get married. Next I will have kids, and then they will get married and I will become a grandfather. Then I will retire and play lots of tennis. And last of all I will die. And what was the purpose of it all? If the best I can say is that I was able to pass on a few moments of happiness to my children, will their molecules

roll over in the grave and tell me thank you?” This is more **personal background** information, particularly concerning my struggles with an existential question, a question many people can relate to.

However, I added, “which God put in all of us and which testifies of His existence and our sinfulness before Him.” This explanation of what is a conscience is too theological and hence unnecessary.

Towards the end of the paragraph I say, “did not realize that there is a state after death where our souls go either to heaven or to hell, and then when Christ returns our bodies will be raised to face the judgment.” This too appears to be too much theological information that is not helping the purpose of sharing my conversion story.

In the third paragraph, I begin to share about **how I first heard the gospel**. “During my junior year of college, God in His all wise providence brought about an amazing situation where I met a friend I had not seen for about a year.” This is fine, although the statement about God’s “all wise providence,” is probably unnecessary and distracting.

Then I say, “We just bumped into each other in the student lounge, which is unusual since the university has over 35,000 students and we studied in different schools within the university. This friend and I talked for a while eating the best pizza in all of Michigan.” Such details are just too much when sharing my conversion story.

I say, “God opened the eyes of my mind.” This is true but again probably too theological and unhelpful.

“Fully depraved in every faculty of my being, and in all matters dispositioned towards evil.” This again is a very theological statement, sounding like a sentence from a catechism, and is probably not helpful.

Mention of “His elect,” pointing to particular atonement, is probably better left out as it will not help them understand the basics of the gospel.

And then, “foreshadowed in all the types and revealed in all the prophecies, promises and sacrifices of the Old Testament,” is also too theological and would be better to just leave out.

In the final paragraph I talk about “the birds were chirping and the bugs humming.” This descriptive detail is not helpful to the purpose of sharing my conversion story and can probably be left out.

“I finally turned from my prideful confidence in myself to gain my acceptance before God and trusted in Christ’s death as my only hope of atonement for my sins and peace with God. At that point I became a new creation in Christ, the old was gone and the new had come.... Moreover, I knew for certain that my sins were washed away and that I was now justified in God’s courtroom.” These sentences tell my listeners something of **what I did to become a Christian** and well as **what I received as a result of trusting in Christ**.

“And I now had a new mind which could understand the gospel and the Bible, a new heart that loved God and the things of God, and a new will that was willing to do all God’s holy will.” This sentence has too much theological jargon about regeneration rather than keeping it simple.

Finally, “the one I especially remember being “Amazing Grace.” This too is a detail not helpful to the purpose of sharing my conversion story.

So, that is a quick analysis of my conversion story. The story contains all the elements we looked at above but also has several phrases and sentences that are unnecessary.

I have made some modifications to my personal conversion story. Please listen to it again and tell me what you think. Are there any improvements? If so, where? Are there still some areas that need revision? If so, where?

Handout

I grew up in a moralistic environment. I had never attended church when young, except for a wedding and a funeral, but I was taught to revere the name of God, whoever He was, and to be a “good and upright person,” whatever the standard was for determining that. Because of my training, I rarely did anything to cross my parents’ wishes, and was a favorite with my teachers and friends.

As a result I was very proud. I thought myself better than others and looked down on most people. Even when I started to drink in high school, and get myself into trouble, I still thought myself morally superior to almost everyone else.

In college I began to have questions about why I existed. The effects of my atheistic education were beginning to clash with my conscience. “If I exist only for this life,” I thought, “then life is a very meaningless experience.” I would talk with my parents and friends, saying, “After I graduate, I will get a job. After that, I will get married. Next I will have kids, and then they will get married and I will become a grandfather. Then I will retire and play lots of golf. And last of all I will die. And what was the purpose of it all? If the best I can say is that I was able to pass on a few moments of happiness to my children, will they roll over in the grave and tell me thank you?” And on and on it went. My friends all thought I had gone crazy, but I was sincerely seeking for meaning to life.

During my junior year of college, a friend invited me to a Bible study. It was there that I first began to really understand something about God – that He is holy, and something about myself – that my pride and other sins made me unacceptable in His sight. One of my main struggles was understanding who Jesus Christ is. I understood that He died on the cross in the place of sinners so that we could be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God, but I was unclear if He was just a man or if He was God come in the flesh. After further study in the Bible I came to understand that the One who came to save me was not just my Savior but was also my God.

Therefore, while out in the woods one day wrestling over this issue, I finally turned from my prideful confidence that I could by my own goodness gain acceptance before God and trusted in Christ’s death as my only hope of peace with God. At that point I became a new creation in Christ, the old was gone and I had a new purpose and new direction for life. I also had a new heart that turned from selfishly living for myself to now loving God and wanting to serve Him by loving others. Moreover, I knew for certain that my sins were washed away because I believed that God could not lie, and that if He said in the Bible that He would forgive my sins through Jesus’ death, He would do so. Peace and joy flooded my heart, as well as gratitude to God for His great love to me.

small adjustments. And there will be interruptions or questions that arise that may steer your conversation in a different direction. And again, there may be times when the person you are talking with obviously does not want to continue listening. Hence, you need to understand beforehand that while having your personal conversion story prepared is immensely helpful for evangelistic opportunities, there will be many occasions when you do not actually get to go all the way through it. But do not despair. In the previous part we noted that you will not often get to go through an entire gospel presentation point-by-point, and yet what you do share is seed-planting and can be used of the Lord to draw a person to Christ. In the same way, sharing only a part of your personal conversion story may feel incomplete to you but the Lord can use what was shared to plant seeds and draw people to Himself.

Third, allow me to reconnect us to a point made previously. As a part of experimental theology, evangelism has much that is subjective, and the sharing of our personal conversion stories is one such example. Of course, the content should all be true. We must not lie just for effect or because we think it will draw people to Christ. God does not need our lies to save sinners! But, some of the guidelines I have given are not objective truth, but are the application of general principles of wisdom. As such, we have freedom to make adjustments in each situation. Thus, there may be situations where you break the 5 minute limit I set, and that is certainly NOT a sin. I have given these guidelines simply to assist us in developing good habits in conjunction with general revelation (for example, most people do not want to sit and listen to a long rehearsal of our history), so that when we seek to evangelize in the future we will be able to apply wisdom for greater effectiveness. So, do not feel guilty breaking these guidelines, but do try generally to apply them in most situations as they will help you be better ministers to those you are seeking to reach out to.

Are there any questions at this point?

If time: Ask someone to share their PCS and then have everyone give some feedback.

To wrap up our time today, let us again break into our teams. First, discuss the question in the box below. Second, rehearse the Gospel Outline together. Third, talk about anything you need to talk about related to your team plan. Fourth, pray together about matters related to your team plan and evangelism opportunities.

This week, if you have not already done so, finish your PCS. Send a copy to me and to your teammate(s). Please look through each other's PCS and give some feedback. Email that feedback back to your teammate.

Also, during the week take some time to practice your PCS so that you become more familiar with it and freer in sharing it with others.

One last thing: Keep working on the memorization of the gospel outline covered last week, including the verses that correspond to each point.



4. Take some time to answer the following.

- First, write down something new you have learned about sharing your personal conversion story from this lecture.

- Second, what is something you did wrong in writing your personal conversion story the first time that you need to change (might be the same answer as #1).



Homework:

- Rewrite your personal conversion story. Practice telling your story and edit it until it takes no longer than 5 minutes to retell. Then record yourself telling your personal conversion story on your cell phone camera and upload the recording with your manuscript onto Canvas before you begin the next video.
- Please note that I will be noting the timing of your story on the video, so you will have to make sure your story **does not exceed 5 minutes**. If you exceed 5 minutes, I will not listen to it but will require you to revise it and hand it in again.
- You must critique 2 classmates' personal conversion story. The purpose is not to be mean but to help each other refine our presentation so that we can more clearly and powerfully, under the blessing of the Spirit, share our personal conversion stories with others.