

# Speaking To Change Lives

By Dan Webster

*"When Jesus had finished saying these things,  
the crowds were amazed at his teaching,  
because he taught as one who had authority,  
and not as their teachers of the law."*

Matthew 7:28-29

*"The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,  
turning a man from the snares of death."*

Proverbs 13:14

*"And he appointed twelve---designating them apostles---  
that they might be with Him, and that  
he might **send them out to preach.**"*

Mark 3:14-15

It's Monday morning and you are sitting at your desk quietly reading your Bible attempting to recover from a busy weekend of ministry. You are enjoying a few moments with the Lord when suddenly your solitude is interrupted by a phone call from Mrs. Finklemier, a Humanities teacher from one of the local high schools. She mentions to you that she is beginning her unit on *Religion* and wonders if you would be interested in coming to her school and addressing her college prep Humanities class on the issue of *Religion and Society*. You tell her that the issue of religion has never really excited you. You state that it's your opinion that "religion" causes more problems than it solves. To you, religion doesn't get the job done because it is man's feeble attempt to reach God.

Being clever and evangelistically opportunistic you offer her an alternative theme for the lecture and suggest that the class might be more interested in a lesson on how Jesus Christ can transform human life and relationships. You mention that Christianity is all about God attempting to seek us rather than us working to find Him. Mrs. Finklemier is delighted with the option and tells you that you can talk about anything under the heading of *Christianity and how it touches real life*. She mentions that the class is 50 minutes long and she'd like about half lecture and half question and answer. It's a great opportunity and you agree to do it.

What will you talk about? How will you approach this opportunity to influence forty of the brightest students in your local high school? You begin to do a little research and find out that one of the students in your ministry is in the class and she recommended you to the teacher. In a brief conversation with her you discover that only five of the students in the class attend a church and all of them have questions about God and life. Your student briefs you on the discussions the class has had concerning the issues of God, morals,

sex, right & wrong, and politics. What will you do? What process will you go through to develop a talk that will make a difference in this class and present Christianity in a good light?

Over the years I've received many such invitations to speak in high school classrooms, assemblies, graduations, conferences and camps. It can be both intimidating and thrilling to stand before forty to over a thousand students that do not know you and realize that God has entrusted you with the responsibility to communicate clearly and compellingly the good news of Jesus Christ.

How can we do this well? How can we improve our communication skills so that we make the biggest impact possible? I'd like to give you a list of guidelines that I have developed over the years and use when preparing messages for non-churched groups. These are things that I think about intentionally. After a while they become second nature, but I go back to this list often and run my message through it as a filter for effectiveness.

These thoughts are in the form of eight questions that specifically focus my attention on the principles of dynamic communication. They ensure that I'll be prepared to make an impact when I open my mouth to speak. Some of the questions are original, others are thoughts that my mentors have graciously taught me through the years. If you will seriously think about and apply these questions in your message preparation you will become an ever more effective communicator to students.

#### Eight questions to consider:

1. Am I being relevant to the needs of my audience?
2. Will my first 2 minutes grab their attention?
3. Am I illustrating connectively with their world?
4. Am I being authentic or religious and fake in my presentation?
5. Am I being brief or long winded?
6. Am I being Biblical or opinion centered?
7. Am I showing students how this applies to their lives in the real world?
8. Am I satisfied that I prepared faithfully?

#### 1. Am I being relevant to the needs of my audience?

Being relevant is saying something that matters to those we are addressing. The last thing we should want to do is bore our audience. When I consider what to speak about I list the needs of my audience. What are their problems, stresses and challenges? Where do they hurt? What interests them? What captures their attention? I must remind myself that kids rarely sit around and talk about theology. But they do talk about life a lot. What about life captures their energy and attention?

The reason why this is so important is that if students do *not* sense that we understand their world they will not listen. Conversely, if they recognize that we do understand their world, where they live, and how they struggle, they just might believe that we have something to say to that world.

How do we know what is relevant to students? What's relevant is what's *important to them*. How can we know what's important to them? Talk to them, read what they read, listen to their music, see the movies they attend, and watch the TV programs they enjoy. Be friends with them. I guarantee you that your best communication will come out of the relationships you have with students. Knowing kids and what they think about is the place to start. As you live in the real world relating to students allow all the input from the above sources to fill your mind. Out of this experience and diligent thought flow the right topics to address. This discipline will ensure that you are in the ball park when choosing your topic. If I can't convince myself that what I have to say is both important and life changing for my audience, I won't say it. Every time I get up to speak to kids I focus on why this issue must be considered and taught on. This ensures both relevance to my audience and passion inside of me as a communicator.

## 2. Will my first 2 minutes grab their attention?

Every good communicator knows that the first 50 words of their message are the most important words they will speak. In the first minute we must grab the audience's attention. Coming out of the gate strong means we give students a reason to leave their world and enter our world. We come excited about what we have to say, students might be cold and disinterested. We must remember that kids come from a variety of life experiences. Some have had good days, some have experienced terrible days. A good introduction takes them from their world into your world. The opening of our messages must connect with the student's world & be highly interesting to them.

How do we do this? I have found that opening with a statement or question that creates interest or curiosity usually does the trick. My first few statements will almost always precede a story or illustration that introduces the topic.

Here's a few opening lines that I've used in the past:

"Next Sunday Ken Norton Jr. will play in his first Super Bowl but his father refuses to watch the game. Do you know why?...."

"Last Sunday morning John snuck out of his house at 1 a.m. without his parents knowing he'd left. He had no idea that his life would be over by 4 a.m....."

"I've always been amazed at the difference one person can make. One person can totally change a team, a family, a student ministry, a class room....."

"My son said something to me last week that broke my heart. He looked at me and said....."

"How would you feel if the person you trusted the most lied to you?"

"She was 5'5" tall, had blue eyes & blonde hair with the body of an aerobics instructor and she wanted to go out with me...."

"It was the most humiliating thing that ever happened to her and three guys were responsible for it....."

"If I was to ask you what Oral Roberts (the famous evangelist / healer) and Charles Manson (convicted mass murderer) have in common, what might you say?...."

Each of these opening remarks drew students into my topic and allowed me to move right into a story that led into the body of the talk. Come up with creative ways to get into messages.

Whatever I can do to gain the attention of the audience, I'll do. Sometimes props work well. Students love anything visual. I once brought a brown bag filled with high school memorabilia on stage and used it to introduce my talk on *Living With A Full Heart* . I told the students that everything that mattered to me in high school was in the bag. One by one I pulled out the things that I thought would fill my heart in high school. There was the picture of my high school girlfriend, then a picture of my VW bug, and my basketball trophies, etc. The point of the message was that there is a big difference between living with a full life (which relationships, accomplishments & dates can bring) and living with a full heart (which only a relationship with God can bring). Many people's lives are full of accomplishments and relationships, but their hearts are empty. The bag of memories worked as an attention grabber.

A friend of mine often introduces his messages by using short video clips out of classic movies that apply to the topic of the message. Whatever you do, don't blow the first two minutes. And once you have their attention don't lose it.

If you do lose them remember that at every new point you can grab their attention again. If you are giving a message with two major points, work hard to introduce each point just like you did at the opening of your message. I used to think that a good message had only one introduction. Now I realize that every point has an introduction. I must give students a reason to listen to every point. That reason is laid down in the first few lines under each new message point. Look at the transition between points as an opportunity to reintroduce why they should listen to what you have to say. Every point must be compelling to hear, and in reality, every point is it's own message with an introduction to it.

### 3. Am I illustrating connectively with their world?

Modern theologian and communicator R. C. Sproul has three rules to effective communication. They are 1) Illustrate, 2) Illustrate, 3) Illustrate. R. C. is not far from the truth. Illustrating your talk well gives it life. It enables us to move from the factual to the visual, from the conceptual to the practical, from the abstract to the concrete. It's the main way we bring truth into the real world.

A good illustration practically explains the truth that we are attempting to teach. It shows the idea in real life and displays the truth in action. They

also aid in remembering the point we are trying to make. Occasionally I'll meet a student that attended a conference I once spoke at years ago. I'm fascinated by their ability to recount a story I told. They can rarely remember the topic I addressed, but they can often remember a story.

Stories and illustrations can touch the heart, the center of a person's emotional being. Principles that we teach touch the mind, stories we tell touch the heart. I believe that story telling is the most powerful form of communication to the younger generation today. The media communicates just about everything to students in the form of stories. They love to see how lives connect and touch each other. Their lives connect and touch other lives. If we can help them see how their life can touch and connect with the person of God, we are doing something!

This entire area opens the door for us to both use stories to illustrate and to communicate the gospel as the greatest story ever told. Study good story tellers. I study Paul Harvey (famous for his news casts that tell us *the rest of the story*) and Garrison Keilor (the great storyteller of Lake Woebegone). They are wonderful story tellers. I want to tell the story of God to kids with the same impact that Keilor has when he touches me with the lives of people in Lake Woebegone.

We must remember that for us the goal of telling stories is not to simply entertain, touch students emotionally, or hold their attention. We must work to use stories to hammer Biblical truth home. Most of the time I will build a point of a message around a logical flow of thought.

Each point will have...

....an introduction to the point

....a statement of the point

....the Biblical truth behind the point stated

....a brief comment about the truth

....a story to illustrate the truth, and then ends with

....my attempt to hammer the truth home by applying it to real life.

Any time that I can help people "feel" the principle being taught, I will. If I can think connectively with a students world, I will be able to get the audience to a place of experience.

Sometimes it's easier to take a real life experience and build a message around it teaching the Biblical principles that apply to the real life situation. Jesus did this all the time. Read the Gospel of John and notice how often Jesus taught out of real life experiences.

Let me give you an illustration of using the things that happen in a students world as an opportunity to teach. One of the lessons that I found myself constantly teaching our students was the importance of respecting and honoring each other. Kids can be so cruel and hurtful to each other.

I can remember when I heard about a girl in a neighboring city that was manipulated by a water polo player on her campus into doing something she didn't want to do. At the beginning of the school year this great athlete, he was the captain of the water polo team, made a bet with his friends that he

could get this girl into the school pool skinny dipping. His friends laughed and said that they would give him \$50 bucks if he could pull it off.

The water polo team captain loved the challenge and so he pursued the girl through flirting and attention. He asked her out on one date and while driving home he suggested that they stop by the school pool for a midnight dip. She agreed and they both secretly snuck in. The coach had given the kid a key so that he could open the pool for early morning work outs.

She naively followed the guy into the pool area and before long found herself peeling her clothes in front of him and hoping into the pool. There was very little light around the pool. She never saw his two buddies sitting in the dark at the other end of the pool. At least she didn't see them until they turned on the underwater pool light. It's a horrible moment when a person discovers that they've been used.

The two guys walked up to the water polo captain laughing, gave him a high five and the \$50. The girl felt embarrassed, humiliated, and taken advantage of when she saw what was really going on. When she asked the guy why he did it, he simply said that it was no big deal, he just did it as a bet. "No big deal!?" No big deal to him that is. It's always a big deal to the person that's hurt.

When I heard this story I knew that it revealed how life is when we ignore God's principles concerning human relationships. I was able to share the story and how God knows that it's a big deal to the person that's hurt, that's why the Bible tells us in Philippians 2:3-4 to... "do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

God hates the kind of insensitive pride that would motivate us to do something like that. It's horrible to live in a world where people use each other for \$50. God's way of living is much better, His ideas are true and protective. Each of us should be careful when feeling tempted to manipulate or use another person. We should be humble and honoring of each other.

I'm sure you see how real life is a great teacher. This experience illustrates so well the opposite of love and respect. And you can be sure that I used it when it was appropriate. Work hard at illustrating. Don't let the real incidents of life on the high school campus blow by. They can be some of the best illustrating material you will ever have.

People often ask me where I get my illustrations. Here's a list of locations that my illustrations come from...newspaper articles, magazines, personal experiences, books, other people's messages, commercials, movies, newsletters, record lyrics, Bible stories, just to name a few. I encourage you to keep an illustration notebook. I have folders full of illustrations that I draw from.

#### 4. Am I being authentic or religious and fake in my presentation?

I learned years ago that my best presentations happen when I don't try to be someone that I'm not. It's tempting to try and mimic Tony Campolo or Bill Hybels. It will take a while to develop your own style but being you is always your best strategy. Students don't like it when we try to be someone

that we aren't. They want us to be us. When we are personal and genuine, it is powerful.

Occasionally I teach a class in *Evangelistic Communication to Youth* at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. In one of my classes a young man totally change his natural speaking voice when he delivered his first message. When he got behind the podium he transformed himself into some bass speaking "preacher." It was hysterical.

I asked him why he felt compelled to become someone different than who he was when delivering a message. He said that that was how the ministers spoke in his denomination when they entered to pulpit. I told him to knock it off. My counsel to him was to trust that who God had made him to be naturally was good enough. I encouraged him to simply be himself when he gave his next message. Next time up he trusted my instruction and did a great job. It was 100% better and more effective.

Stop and think for a moment. What type of communication turns you off? For me it's mindless, unprepared, opinionated, insincere, long-winded, arrogant, over emotional, reactionary or crude. So guess what? I avoid all that.

Now consider what type of communication is disarming and inviting? For me it's honest, vulnerable, gentle, well prepared, truthful, and respectful of my ability to make my own decision. This type of communication happens when the speaker talks to me like I have a brain and respects my ability to make up my mind on the issue he or she is presenting.

It's a great challenge to be real, to be authentic as a communicator. How can we practice this more in our messages? Besides attempting to be genuinely ourselves, we can do it three ways. *First*, share your struggles and weaknesses whenever you can. Good communication is dropping your guard and sharing deeply felt emotions.

We make a mistake when we assume that students want us to be perfect living examples of the truth we teach. They just want honesty from us. For whatever reason I've always been confessional in my speaking. I get a lot of positive feedback for doing this, not primarily from Christian listeners, but from non-Christian listeners. They have told me that my willingness to be real creates a safe environment within which they feel open to hear the truth. People want to hear how we struggle with the truth. They want to see someone live the truth before them honestly.

Secondly, share the truth of your spiritual journey. Where are you growing? Please remember that the minister is, to a large degree, the message. I always wrestle with the truth of a message as it relates to me and my world before I deliver it. This is risky business if you talk about temptation, suffering, truth telling, your thought life, living with joy, family life, hope, or faith. We must think about how the truth we're teaching fleshes itself out in our lives. If we are courageous enough to deal with that question and share the answer, students will be drawn to us.

Thirdly, share what you are learning. There is a sense of the authentic when we teach out of our own growth. Let me ask you, how have you changed recently? We can never be an agent of change in student's lives if God isn't changing us. We must continue to grow. Spiritual impact can only

happen through spiritual people! Having integrity as a teacher is inviting people to live as we live. In our messages we invite students to come close to us and see how truth looks when lived out. Do students sense growth in you? Does your life have spiritual direction that can be offered to another? If we share our journey and what we are learning as we struggle with the truth, students will see first hand what their lives will look like as they submit themselves to the truth of the Bible.

#### 5. Am I being brief or long winded?

One of my speaking mentors, Bill Hybels, used to say to me more than I want to admit, "Dan that was a good 35 minute message. It could have been a great 28 minute message." I hated it when he said that. But his point was well taken. He pointed out to me that one should not *diesel* when speaking. *Dieseling* is a term Bill uses for staying on a point longer than you should. In other words, don't say it, then say it again, and then say it again.....just say it and move on!

Do you realize that last Sunday over 55 million people heard over one billion words in sermons and when all was said and done, a lot more was said than done. The Lord's Prayer has only 56 words in it....the Gettysburg Address is made up of only 267 words....the Beatitudes are a whopping 122 words....and the entire Declaration of Independence has total of only 1322 words.

What am I saying here? Some very profound statements have been made in relatively brief statements. Students tell me, "just give me the goods and let me deal with it." How long you can speak without putting students to sleep depends upon the interest level of the topic and your skill as a communicator. Be aware of both. Don't go longer than you need to. Students will appreciate it.

#### 6. Am I being Biblical or opinion centered?

I have a seeking friend that had an interesting response to a sermon he heard recently. This man is a senior vice president of a multi-billion dollar a year company. He's not a high school student but his insight is priceless. He commented that the pastor told those listening....."I was in the shower the other day and I thought....." My friends reaction to that was, "Listen, I don't want to hear *shower thoughts*. Why are his *shower thoughts* any better than my *shower thoughts*?"

Good point, uh?! When we begin our messages we will almost always launch at the point of a students need. We begin with what they are interested in. This is not sin, it's how Jesus taught. But we must be clear about where our truth comes from and we must remind everybody what our truth source is. The heart of our messages are not *shower thoughts*.....it's the truth of the Bible! Our truth comes from the Bible and any way that the Bible can be seen and read is important. "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

When preparing messages thoroughly research what the Bible has to say about your topic. Build every point upon a Biblical principle. If you can project verses on a screen so that everyone can read it, so much the better. If you give outlines to kids, put the Scripture on them.

Let us never forget that the Bible and the gospel have power. "For all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16) I love psychology and sociology. I enjoy reading the insights of secular thinkers. But I always go over my message and ask myself whether or not I'm giving students psycho-babble or the truth of the Scriptures. We must be careful in this New Age era that we don't fudge on the Bible. Our challenge is to find new and interesting ways to say old truths. Don't ever forget that the gospel in its simplicity had the power to transform your life and mine. It's got enough power to transform your students lives too.

#### 7. Am I showing students how this applies to their lives in the real world?

The goal of our communication is life change. When we stand up to speak we should want God to impact student's lives. This means that we must clearly apply the truth that we teach. At the end of every point we must show how it lives out in the real world. I do this by carefully answering the question, "What difference will this make tomorrow on campus, in their relationships, in their private lives, or in their family life?" If I don't have a good answer to that question I back up and do some more thinking. We must work hard to help students see how truth can be lived out.

I have also found it helpful to apply the message based upon what type of message it is. There are many different types of messages. There are **evangelistic messages** that have as their purpose to lead students to saving grace in Christ. There are **encouraging messages** that attempt to lift students and motivate them to appropriate God's power in daily life. There are **corrective messages** that reprove and refine. There are **shop-talks** that address a specific issue that your ministry is facing. And there are **instructional messages** that simply teach what God has to say about an issue.

Make your applications based upon the type of message you are giving. I don't give an evangelistic call when I'm doing a shop-talk type of message. When I am giving an evangelistic message I directly focus on challenging students to trust Christ personally. That is the proper application for that specific message. Make the application fit the purpose of your talk.

#### 8. Am I satisfied that I prepared faithfully?

We live in a world of short cutting. Very few people are willing to do what it takes to become effective as a communicator. I ask myself if I did my best in the preparation process and will this message be usable in God's hands? Let me plead with you to take this issue seriously. Many of you are in frustrating circumstances. You wish you could change your budget, church politics, or other circumstances. But all of us can do one thing this week that can make a difference in our ministries and that's to work hard at the task of preparing and delivering relevant Biblical messages. And if we do that we are making a difference.

Remember that you are a prophet for today. Truth needs a voice and a life to live through. Allow God to change you and then take yourself along with His truth before students and speak with confidence. As you prepare pay attention to the eight questions and you'll be a difference maker in students lives.

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