

FROM TELLING YOUR STORY TO BEING KNOWN

by Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling at The Summit Church

The fact that you are reading this article reveals several important things about you.

1. God has done some great things in your life.
2. You are willing to steward God's grace to you as a way to bless others.
3. You are already living in community with Christians who have been encouraged by your story of God's grace.
4. You are considering sharing your story of God's grace with a larger audience at our church.

The goal of this article is two-fold. First, we want to help you assess whether this is a healthy and wise time for you to share your story with our church. You have already shared your story with several people, so this is not a matter of your courage or willingness. We merely want to make sure that you telling your story at this stage in your journey will add to rather than disrupt what God is doing in your life.

When describing those the church should call upon to instruct the congregation, the Bible says:

“[These individuals] must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil (I Timothy 3:6).”

We believe it is wise to apply “recent convert” in two senses: (a) someone has recently come to faith, or (b) someone who is recently begun to apply their faith in the overcoming of a particular struggle or challenge.

However, in the same letter, Paul also says to Timothy:

“Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity (I Timothy 4:12).”

We recognize that those who are asked to share a life-change story are frequently either young in their faith or early in their process of knowing freedom-victory over a particular struggle. In the conversations this article catalyzes, we want to help protect you from the dangers Paul describes in I Timothy 3:6 while, at an appropriate time, prompting you to encourage our church as Paul commends in I Timothy 4:12.

Second, if the answer to the first question is, “This is a wise time for you to share your story with our church,” we want to spend as much time preparing you for having your story known as we do equipping you to share your story effectively. These are two different types of preparation.

1. **Sharing Effectively** – How do we tell our story so that God is revealed as the main character and those who hear it marvel at his grace, are encouraged in their relationship with him, or are invited to start a relationship with Christ? Those who are preparing you to share your story will help you answer these questions.¹
2. **Being Known** – This is the subject of this article. What social-emotional-spiritual changes should we anticipate as and after we tell our story? What new temptations and challenges will this bring? How do we respond to the inevitable spike of attention and subsequent fall-off in attention sharing a public testimony brings? How do I remember I am the same person on the same journey when my story seems “new and amazing” to those who are just hearing it?

As you prepare to walk through the conversations this article will cultivate, please remember this – sharing your testimony is not a race. There is no prize or special standing with God for those who share quickest. God is your father; not your track coach. God's concern is for your well-being; not your spiritual speed.

This article is not a “test to pass” but a “form of care to receive.” The only right answers are honest answers that allow us, as a church, to care for you well as we seek to enable you to use your story of God's grace to care for others.

¹ For additional guidance on how to tell your story of God's grace well I would recommend pages 155-158 of Paul Tripp's book *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*.

Is the Time Now or Later?

In this section we are not trying to give a “yes or no” answer to whether you share your story with a larger audience; instead, we are trying to give a “now or later” answer. The criteria by which this assessment is made is not “weak or strong,” “smart or dumb,” “captivating or boring,” or “mature or juvenile;” instead, we want to know if it is “wise or unwise,” “healthy or unhealthy” for you, at this stage in your journey, to share your story with a larger audience.

Below is a list of questions we would encourage you to reflect upon and discuss with the pastor or leader who is encouraging you to share your story. Not all questions will be equally relevant to every person’s story. It is okay to omit the ones that are not a good fit for your situation.

However, please be willing to share the uncomfortable things these questions may reveal; these things will likely be the most relevant information for determining whether this is a wise time for you to share, and also—most importantly—allow us, as a church, to care for you effectively instead merely “using your story.”

- Do you have any reservations about sharing your story? If so, what are they?
 - Don’t rely on our questions to reveal a concern you have. Share it even if we don’t ask the “right question.”
- When have you shared an aspect of your life of similar significance? What was that like?
 - If you haven’t, how have you responded to other major “first time” experiences in life?
- What emotional-spiritual-social challenges have you faced in the initial times of telling your story?
- What is your typical emotional-spiritual-social response to receiving a significant amount of attention?
- Do you tend to view attention as a drug to crave, threat to avoid, or opportunity to steward?
- What follow up questions about your story do you most want to avoid?
 - Do you have a prepared way to steer conversation away from areas you desire to keep private?
- Are there any traumatic events associated with your story that you have not disclosed?
- If you were going to “relapse” after telling your story, what do you anticipate this would look like?
- Are there stories of other people tied to your story in a way that gives you caution about publically telling your story?
 - If so, who are these individuals and should you seek their permission before sharing your story?
- How have you historically responded to significant changes, promotions, and setbacks?
- How much do you replay the things you say (i.e., self-disclosure, reflective comment, or joke) in a social setting?

How does it feel to have reflected on and discussed these questions? Your reaction is an indicator of what it will be like to share your story with a larger audience; not because everyone will ask these questions, but because these will be the kind of things that will likely run through your mind and be magnified by the emotional weight of “everyone knowing” your story.

Discussing these extended questions with a pastor and your small group is an important way to prepare for the experience of sharing your story in a large audience setting.

If you decide sharing your story is unwise at this time, then a question you want to ask is, “How can I begin to grow in the areas of my life that caused me to conclude it was not wise to share my story at this time?” Remember, “not now” doesn’t mean “never.” God will be growing you over the course of your entire life. Our goal should always be that we are maturing in such a way that more of our life is ready for God’s use.

If you decide that this is a wise time to share your story, then the next section is intended to prepare you for some of the common challenges, misunderstandings, and temptations that come with being known.

Preparing for Being Known

Satan is always looking for a “more opportune time” (Luke 4:13) to introduce destruction or, at least, the seeds of destruction into our lives. Times when we use our experience of God’s grace to encourage others seems to be a predictably effective time for Satan’s work (Galatians 6:1-4). In this section we want to explore some of the most common dynamics of sharing your story which have given Satan a foothold in the lives of many believers taking a step similar to the one you are about to take.

1. **Personal Pride:** When our story is known it is more tempting to own. We begin to think of “our story” as what we did instead of what God did in or through us. We should remember that the possessive pronoun “our” reveals the location of the story (i.e., “in us”); not the cause (i.e., “by us”). The affirmation and encouragement we receive from others can inadvertently reinforce confusion on this point and create pride.

Ways to respond to others and things of which to remind yourself:

- “I am very grateful for what God has done in my life.”
- Whenever appropriate, ask questions of others and give your attention to what God has done in their life.
- “I enjoy the opportunity to put on display what God has done.”

2. **Newness of Role:** If you have not shared this part of your story, then likely you will have many new conversations or be put in new roles. People may ask you questions or ask you to mentor them in ways for which you feel ill-prepared. In many of these interactions it may feel like the first day on a new job; which can be particularly awkward in conversations with people you already consider friends. This learning curve after sharing a major part of your story can be comparable to what couples experience during the first year of marriage; they already know and love each other, but they are learning a great deal about how to relate in light of the greater awareness of each other.

Ways to respond to others and things of which to remind yourself:

- It is normal for this to be new. If it weren’t new, you would be sharing a review not a testimony.
- You do not have to have the answer to every question or say yes to every request to help others.
- You know your story; you should not be expected to know the answer for every question of a related story.

3. **Church Validating Your Completion:** Being asked to share your testimony by your church can feel like a “certificate of completion.” Although we would rarely say it this way, we can tell we have bought into this lie when we have a heightened emotional reaction to our next struggle (e.g., more intense guilt or a sense of surprise). It is not unlike the seminary student who is devastated the first time he sins after beginning his studies.

In this sense, sharing your story can serve as an artificial milestone of spiritual maturity. Sharing your story on Sunday creates the sensation that we should experience a spiritual growth spurt by Monday; in reality we are merely telling the story of a growth spurt that happened at some point in the past. You are still living your story. The credits won’t roll when you finish speaking. You will still be living “in process” and not as a “finished product.”

Ways to respond to others and things of which to remind yourself:

- “I am still a person in-process, facing each new challenge, including sharing my story, by the grace of God.”
- Your spiritual maturation process does not get a steroid boost when it becomes a public testimony.
- Sharing your story is not the church-equivalent of a graduation ceremony.

4. **Private World Becomes Quickly Public:** Chances are what you share in a testimony has been relatively unknown compared to what it will be after you share your story. Depending on the nature of what you share this can result in feeling exposed or out-of-control. The result can be a version of the “child-celebrity effect;” where an artificial spike in being known results in an expectation and requirement of a level of maturity that has not had time to develop naturally. Maturity here refers not merely to age-appropriate decision making, but an ability to respond to changes in one’s emotions and relationships that come with being widely known.

Ways to respond to others and things of which to remind yourself:

- *You should have people who already know what you’re about to share and be increasing this number as you prepare to share your story in a large venue setting.*
- “My walk with God did not change because a large number of people learned about a segment of my journey.”
- You need a circle of pre-existing, healthy friends who won’t be “impressed” with your story; people who know you well enough that this segment of our story does not define you in their eyes.

5. **Your Struggle Becomes Your Identity:** Often this concern is primarily raised in therapeutic or recovery settings. In this context we're referring to your struggle becoming your identity in a positive sense; becoming known for overcoming or enduring something difficult. This can be equally dangerous. Whenever something becomes more central to our identity than being a child of God we should consider it a "red flag." Whenever one achievement, experience, or ability becomes "who we are" it will create an imbalance that will have a significant emotional-relational-spiritual fall out.

"Our deepest problem is that we seek to find our identity outside the story of redemption (p. 27)... In fact, the longer we struggle with a problem, the more likely we are to define ourselves by that problem (divorced, addicted, depressed, co-dependent, ADD). We come to believe that our problem is who we are. But while these labels may describe particular ways we struggle as sinners [or sufferers] in a fallen world, they are not our identity! If we allow them to define us, we will live trapped within their boundaries. This is no way for a child of God to live (p. 260)!" Paul Tripp in *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand*

Ways to respond to others and things of which to remind yourself:

- Consider studying the "Finding Your Confidence, Identity, and Security in Christ" seminar with a friend during the weeks after you share your story (www.bradhambrick.com/identity).
- "Regardless of how much people know about me or what they think of my journey, nothing is more meaningful than hearing God say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant' (Matthew 25:21)."
- Reflect on the "Who I Am in Christ" passages at the end of this article in your personal Bible study time.

6. **Video Tells Your Story Better Than You Can:** If sharing your story involves our creative team making a video so your testimony can be shared at all of our campuses, there is another dynamic that comes into play – your story will be told *really* well. It will likely be the first time your life has ever had a sound track that adjusts with the mood of each event. On top of this the flow of thought will be concise, and there will be pictures to draw people into the events being described. This helps the congregation connect with what God has done in your life. But it can also create a sense of pressure that your life has to match the quality of the video. But that is like looking at the air-brushed picture of a glamour model and feeling insecure when you look in the mirror (the models themselves cannot live up to their cover shots). We should never feel compelled to live up to something that has been technologically refined. It is unrealistic.

Ways to respond to others and things of which to remind yourself:

- Enjoy the video without thinking your life needs to be a succession of amazing 90 second God-moments.
- When complimented or affirmed, "It was powerful to see 3 months of God's work in my life [modify length as is accurate] condensed into a 90 second video. Living it was different from watching it, but both were good."
- "My life is not a highlight reel of God's grace; it is a continual relationship with God himself." Anniversary trips can be epic, but at their best, they only serve to reflect and savor the years of relationship in between.

7. **Temporary Inflation of Community:** This can be one of the most tempting doors for cynicism and disappointment to enter. Inevitably many people will talk to you and show great interest in you immediately after your share your testimony. Then, in the days-weeks after, that attention level will return to whatever was "normal." This can sometimes leave people feeling used even when they realize there is no way to maintain the amount of involvement-interest that was sparked immediately after sharing their story. There are two ways that can be helpful to think about this challenge.

First, there is natural let-down dynamic associated with public recognition and rewards. Consider the child who gets a prize for reading twenty books. At that point, reading is great. But then the child gets nothing for the next three books. Now, reading feels like a let-down. This is not necessarily bad (i.e., selfish on the part of the child or manipulative by the parent-teacher), but it is natural. This same dynamic is likely to occur as your walk with God is highly celebrated by a large number of people and then, in the coming days, largely ignored by everyone except you and God. The larger audience of the church can become a distraction from the main audience, which is God.

Second, if part of your struggle involves an appetite for the artificial rush of pleasure that sin can provide, then the artificial rush of attention that accompanies a public testimony can serve as a "trigger for relapse." You begin to think you've found the key to making your Christian walk provide the same peak-pleasures-on-demand your sin used to provide (although most of us would never say this out loud). God does not and will not compete with sin. God will forgive sin, redeem sin, and provide a better life than sin ever could. But when we ask God to compete with the artificial



and destructive pleasure pattern of sin, he sees our impending doom and opts out of the game as a way to invite us back to what is healthy and holy.

Ways to respond to others and things of which to remind yourself:

- Every person who speaks with you about your story is not volunteering to become part of your journey.
- This season of heightened attention, whether it is a rush or intimidating, is only temporary.
- If you have a struggle that could be prone to relapse (whether is it central to what you are sharing or not), then you should be very diligent with your support team during the months after sharing your story.

Conclusion

Raising this many warnings can seem like a real downer. As we said at the beginning of this article, the fact that you are being asked to share your story means that God has been doing some great things in your life. As your church we want to affirm these things and allow you to encourage our congregation with them.

But in doing so, we want to care for you in this new experience of sharing your story and having your story be known by a large number of people. We believe this is part of loving you well rather than just “using your story.” We want the experience of sharing your story to be a spiritual highlight for you. We want you to be able to look back on this experience as another time when your relationship with God grew significantly.

In order to facilitate that growth we would encourage you to use the check list below as a way to verify that you are taking this step of faith as wisely as possible.

_____ I am consistently engaged with a small group who knows me well and will not be surprised by the things I share.

_____ I have honestly reflected on and discussed the “now or later” questions with a pastor and my small group leader.

- They have affirmed they believe this is a wise time for me to share my story.

_____ I have identified which of the common challenges I believe I am most prone towards.

- _____
- _____
- _____

_____ I have identified which of the actions steps or responses I believe will be most important for me.

- _____
- _____
- _____

_____ I understand sharing my story does not change God’s affection for me or my church’s role in my life.

Mindset: Think of what you’ve received in these pages as an equivalent to pre-marital counseling. No one thinks that pre-marital counseling is going to allow them to avoid every struggle common to young couples. Instead, as in this material, there are two primary objectives. First, screen for red flags that would caution against taking this step; which if the good guidance and wisdom has been applied in the process should be the exception.

Second, reveal what to expect in this new experience so you will not be surprised by these challenges or changes, and to know who to talk to when you face these challenges. This is the biggest benefit, both for pre-marital counseling and this material. Removing the sense of surprise and opening the correct channels of community allows these new opportunities to be the blessing they were designed to be.

WHO I AM IN CHRIST

Adapted from Bob Kellemen, RPM Ministries (www.rpministries.org) and, Excerpted from *Soul Physicians*.

Salt of the Earth Matthew 5:13	Redeemed Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7	Competent to Disciple Others in Christ Romans 15:14	A Minister of Reconciliation 2 Corinthians 5:18
Light of the World Matthew 5:14	Credited with Christ's Righteousness Romans 3:21-26; 4:3-24	Sanctified by the Holy Spirit Romans 15:16	Christ's Ambassador 2 Corinthians 5:20
A Disciple of Christ Luke 14:27; John 8:31	Dead to Sin Romans 6:2	Acceptable to God in Christ Romans 15:16	Christ's Spiritually Pure Virgin 2 Corinthians 11:2
Christ's Witness Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8	Raised to New Life Romans 6:4	Holy in Christ Ephesians 5:26; Colossians 3:12	Rescued From This Present Evil Age Galatians 1:4
Set Free From Sin John 8:32, 36	United with Christ in His Resurrection Romans 6:5	Blameless in Christ 1 Corinthians 1:8	Crucified with Christ Galatians 2:20
I Have Abundant Life John 10:10	My Old Self is Crucified Romans 6:6	God's Fellow Worker 1 Corinthians 3:9	Redeemed from the Curse Galatians 3:13-14
I Have Peace John 14:27; 16:33	No Longer Sin's Slave Romans 6:6-7	God's Field 1 Corinthians 3:9	Chosen to be Holy Ephesians 1:4
Clean in Christ John 15:3	Alive to God Romans 6:11	God's Building 1 Corinthians 3:9	I Have God's Resurrection Power Actively Working in Me. Ephesians 1:17-19
Bearer of Lasting Fruit John 15:4, 5, 8, 16;	Not Under Law, but Under Grace Romans 6:14	God's Sacred Temple 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16	Saved by Grace Ephesians 2:5, 8
Completed in Christ John 15:11	A Slave to Righteousness Romans 6:19	Washed in Christ 1 Corinthians 6:11	Raised Up with Christ Ephesians 2:6
Overcomer of the World John 16:33	No Longer a Sufferer of Condemnation Romans 8:1	Bought and Redeemed with a Price 1 Corinthians 6:20	Seated with Christ in the Heavenly Realms Ephesians 2:6
Not of This World John 17:16	Not Controlled by the Flesh, but Controlled by the Spirit Romans 8:9	A Growing Reflection of the Lord's Glory 2 Corinthians 3:18	Christ's Workmanship Ephesians 2:10
A Christian, "A Little Christ" Acts 11:26	Predestined to be Conformed to the Image of the Son Romans 8:29	Renewed Inwardly Day by Day 2 Corinthians 4:16	Prepared in Advance in Christ Jesus to do Good Works Ephesians 2:10
Freely & Fully Justified Romans 3:24, 26, 28, 30	More than a Conqueror in Christ Romans 8:37	A New Creation 2 Corinthians 5:17	
Sanctified 1 Corinthians 6:11			
A Saint Philippians 1:1; 4:21, 22			

**A Dwelling in Which
God Lives by His Spirit**
Ephesians 2:22

**Strengthened with
Power by God's Spirit**
Ephesians 3:16

**Rooted and
Established in Love**
Ephesians 3:17

**I Have Power to Grasp
God's Great Love for Me.**
Ephesians 3:18

**Filled to the Measure
of All the Fullness of
God in Christ**
Ephesians 3:19

**New in the Attitude of
My Mind in Christ**
Ephesians 4:23

Light in the Lord
Ephesians 5:8

**The Fruit of My Life is
Goodness,
Righteousness and
Truth**
Ephesians 5:9

Cleansed
Ephesians 5:26

**Together with the Bride,
I am Presentable,
Radiant, Without Stain
or Wrinkle or Any Other
Blemish, But Holy and
Blameless**
Ephesians 5:27

**Blameless and Pure;
a Child of God
Without Fault**
Philippians 2:15

**Conformed to His
Image through
Christ's Resurrection
Power**
Philippians 3:10

**My Citizenship is in
Heaven**
Philippians 3:20

**I Can Do All Things
through Christ Who
Strengthens Me**
Philippians 4:13

**God Meets All My
Needs through His
Riches in Christ Jesus**
Philippians 4:19

**Qualified to Share in the
Inheritance of the Saints**
Colossians 1:12

**Rescued from the
Dominion of Darkness**
Colossians 1:13

**Holy in God's Sight –
Without Blemish, and
Free From Accusation**
Colossians 1:22

**Sin is Defeated and
Disarmed in My Life**
Colossians 2:14-15

**I Died with Christ to
the World**
Colossians 2:20

**My Life is Now Hidden
with Christ in God**
Colossians 3:3

**Blameless and Holy
Before God's Presence**
1 Thessalonians 3:13

**Sanctified by God
Through and Through**
1 Thessalonians 5:23

**Kept Blameless by
God in My Whole
Spirit, Soul and Body**
1 Thessalonians 5:23

**God Placed Within Me
His Spirit of Power,
Love and Wisdom**
2 Timothy 1:7

A Good Soldier
2 Timothy 2:3-4

**A Victorious Athlete
in Jesus Christ**
2 Timothy 2:5

**A Disciplined, Hard-
Working Farmer**
2 Timothy 2:6

**Purified from Sin in
and by Christ**
Hebrews 1:3

Saved Completely
Hebrews 7:25

**God's Law is in My Mind
and Written on My Heart**
Hebrews 8:10; 10:16

**My Conscience is
Cleansed**
Hebrews 9:14

Set Free from Sin
Hebrews 9:15

**My Sins are Done
Away With and Taken
Away in and by Christ**
Hebrews 9:26-27

**Cleansed Once for All
- Guiltless**
Hebrews 10:2

**Made Perfect Forever
in and by Christ**
Hebrews 10:14

**Redeemed from My
Old Empty Way**
1 Peter 1:18-19

**Purified by Faith
in Christ**
1 Peter 1:22

**Born Again of
Imperishable Seed**
1 Peter 1:23

**A Living Stone,
Being Built into a
Spiritual House**
1 Peter 2:5

**Along with All the Saints,
I am a Holy Priesthood**
1 Peter 2:5

**Along with All the Saints,
I am a Chosen People**
1 Peter 2:9

**Along with All the
Saints, I am a People
Belonging to God**
1 Peter 2:9-10

**Called Out of
Darkness into Christ's
Wonderful Light**
1 Peter 2:9

**Through God's Divine
Power, I Have Everything
I Need for Life and
Godliness**
2 Peter 1:3

**I Have Escaped the
Corruption in the
World Caused by Evil
Desires**
2 Peter 1:4

**An Overcomer of the
World, the Flesh and the
Devil Because Greater is
He Who is in Me, Than
He who is in the World**
1 John 4:4

**I Stand Before God's
Glorious Presence
without Fault and with
Great Joy**
Jude 24

**Freed from my Sins by
Christ's Blood**
Revelation 1:5

**Part of the Pure Bride
of Christ – Clean,
White and Righteous**
Revelation 19:7-8, 14