

YOUR 100 WORD STORY  
Gateway Seminary Basic Evangelism Class Handout

THE BEFORE-AND-AFTER PATTERN <sup>1</sup>

The promise of the gospel's transforming power is that when you come to Christ, your old self is evicted and a new self-arrives. When you tell your story, the critical contrast to draw for someone is this: What difference has Christ really made in your life? In other words, what were you like before Christ, and now what are you like after you've asked Christ to intervene?

Allow me a terrible analogy to drive this point deeper in your consciousness. Suppose a friend you've not seen in six months bumps into you and starts raving about the diet plan she has been on. About all you need to know is whether or not the diet made a difference in her life, right? In other words, did she have more body fat or more weight before? And now does she have less of those things as a result of the diet? If she were to net it out for you, what hard evidence did the diet yield?

Or suppose someone says, "I've been going to a counselor recently. I'm receiving unbelievable help from this person! It's really making a difference." Your first question probably revolves around knowing how the counselor has helped: "What made you decide to go see a counselor, and how are those situations different for you today?" In other words, what before-and-after change has the counselor catalyzed?

The same is true for our Christian experience. When someone opens a conversational door for you by asking why you are so fired up about your relationship with Christ, state as simply as possible what was going on before you met Christ and what has been going on since you began to follow him. Interestingly, your before-and-after does not have to be dramatic. It just has to be brief, focused, coherent — and true.

In John 9, Jesus is seen traveling along when he's approached by a man described as being blind from birth. Wanting to display God's power by healing him, Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the blind man's eyes. "Go," Jesus told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam." Miraculously, the man went and washed, and he came home seeing.

Imagine how perplexed this man's friends and family members and neighbors were! The man they knew to be blind was blind no more. When they asked him what to make of this Jesus person, do you know what he said? "I was blind. And now I can see."

Or rewind a chapter to John 8. Recall our freshly-washed-with-grace friend who was caught in adultery? Jesus rescued her from the utterly humiliating situation and from the Pharisees' stones. "I refuse to condemn you," Christ said to her. "Instead, I forgive you." And then he encouraged her to walk a new walk.

Despite thousands of life experiences under her belt, what single story do you think that woman told for the rest of her life? I guarantee she didn't parade out some strange story about a furnace flue — "Well, at 2:22 one night ..."

No way! She told everyone she met about that hot, dusty day when a man named Jesus changed everything. "I reached such a low point in my life one time," she might have said, "and I was so filled with shame. I got caught in an incredibly embarrassing situation, and my regret nearly suffocated me. And then I met Jesus Christ, and he gave me a new start. He didn't condemn me. He showed me grace!"

<sup>1</sup> *Willow Creek Resources. Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith.* Zondervan: Grand Rapids, p. 127-132 (Kindle Locations 2390-2392).

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How many times do you think she told that story? Over and over again she probably told her simple, true story of how Jesus made an eternity-altering impression on her world.

Consider Zacchaeus. Luke 19:2 says that Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector living for money. He was a self-proclaimed money monger, but after he had dinner with Jesus Christ, everything changed. On the other side of that meal, Zacchaeus declared that he would pay back every dollar, every cent, that he had stolen and extorted from people, and that he would give half of his net worth to the poor. Do you have a hunch regarding the tale he told in future conversations when someone said, “So, Zacchaeus, what’s up with your God thing?”

I can just hear Zacchaeus now: “I’ll tell you what happened — it was unbelievable! I fell into a pattern where my whole life was wrapped up in money. The grip of greed was so strong that I couldn’t break free. It distorted every relationship I had. But then I met Jesus. And you know what? Jesus set me free from the tyranny of greed. He taught me how to care — really care — about people, particularly the poor. That’s what Jesus did for me — he unhooked me from unhealthy habits and got me pointed in a new direction.”

You know the question I’m going to ask. How many times do you think Zacchaeus told that particular before-and-after story? Yes, hundreds of times. And in my estimation, sharing our stories of Christ’s impact in our lives doesn’t have to be any more complicated than this.

In the context of dynamic before-and-after stories, what might the apostle Paul have testified? “I was so caught up in self-righteousness,” he may have said. “That was my gig. Judging, condemning, hating, killing people, all because they didn’t commit themselves to God in the way I thought they should.” Paul, as you will recall, was persecuting the people of “the Way,” the self-professed Christ-followers of the day. “

But then I met Jesus Christ in a blaze of light on a road to Damascus,” Paul might have continued, “and it was there that I realized the full extent of my sin. I stumbled across this thing called grace. I went from self-righteous accuser to recipient of grace.”

My own story has captured hours of my attention as I’ve wrestled with what is the main concept to convey to people when they ask why I would be willing to devote my entire life to full-time ministry. As you know, my story involves living with the mistaken notion as a kid that the only way I could gain God’s acceptance and his approval was through striving. Mistakenly, I thought that if I could only earn more, merit more, or perform more, then God would be impressed with me.

When people ask me why I am so fired up about God, I tell them this: “There was a time in my life when I was absolutely certain that the only way to gain God’s favor was to perform, achieve, and strive. But then I met the Son of God in a powerful way and learned that the only way to gain his favor is to accept his gift of grace. Almost immediately, it brought an overwhelming peace to my soul, an end to my useless striving, and a revolutionary change to my entire world.”

On the day when Christ met me, the geological plates of my soul permanently shifted; that’s where my passion comes from to help men and women on the front side of the cross have a dramatically different story on the back side — that’s about all that I want.

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Think this through regarding your own journey: What is the single key concept reflected in your life that is germane to the ear of someone living far from God?

I'm reminded of a friend whom I've tried to coach in this regard. When asked about his story, this is what he says: "My whole life up until the point that I met Jesus Christ was slowly self-destructing. I was caught in this terrible downward spiral of self-destructive behavior. But then I met Christ. He gave me the power to begin to live a healthy and constructive life. And I'm immensely grateful."

As you contemplate your own before-and-after, start conducting your own investigation among Christ-followers. Discover what impact Christ has had on their journeys to get an idea of how to articulate your single greatest "so what" about your walk with Jesus.

Many of you know of Bob Buford, author of books such as *Halftime* and *Finishing Well*. In business contexts I have heard him deliver his story close to a dozen times. Here is what he'll often say: "I was nothing more than a bored rich guy. And then I met Christ. He has moved me from mere success to significance. In my relationship with Christ, I am finally discovering a purpose for my life."

Or think back on Chuck Colson's story. He took the fast track from the White House to a prison cell after the Watergate scandal erupted in the early seventies, remember? One day he was dining in the company of the president; the next day he was kept company only by his guilt. But then he met Christ and to his astonishment found grace.

For some of you, your entire existence has been marked by fear. You have worn fear like a straitjacket that paralyzes you from flourishing in the freedom Christ intends to give you. But then you met this Jesus, the Liberator, and suddenly confidence began to bloom in your heart.

Maybe some of you were contestants in a lifelong popularity contest. The single-minded goal of your life was to impress other people through image management. But then you met Christ. And now your efforts are focused on serving, on hiddenness, or on living in the freedom that shows up when you cease trying to wow an audience.

Perhaps you know someone who could testify to this: "Before I met Christ, I had this plaguing sense of aloneness. I grew up in a broken and dysfunctional family. My days were spent alone, my nights isolated. But then I met Christ! He actually adopted me into his family, and now I know what it means to be wanted, to be cared for, to be loved." It's as simple as this, friends. Who were you before, and who are you now, as a result of Christ's passionate intervention in your journey?

"I was striving ... but now I'm grateful."

"I was self-destructive ... but now I'm healthy."

"Guilty ... but now liberated."

"Fear-stricken ... but now confident."

"Despairing ... but now hopeful!"

It's worth searching your heart and soul to firm up the three-pronged foundation of your story: the key word or concept that describes who you were before you met Christ; the fact that you then came into a relationship with Christ; and the key word or concept that describes who you are after walking with Christ for a time.

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Last year during an evangelism series in our midweek setting, I challenged every person at Willow with a similar assignment. “Between now and next week,” I told them, “your job is to write out your story in a hundred words or less.” Before they could groan about the hundred-word thing, I explained that my story — the one about my errant belief that I could gain God’s acceptance through spiritual striving — contains exactly seventy-nine words. I counted. Takes about forty-five seconds to tell, and I would guess I have told it more than a thousand times.

“An email address is about to pop up on our side screens,” I told the congregation that night, “and here is what I am asking you to do: once you finalize your story — in a hundred words or less — I want you to email it to me. If I can’t personally evaluate every single one that comes in, I’ll enlist the help of a small team to get it done. One way or another, you will receive prompt, candid feedback. If we think your story needs some work, trust me, we will tell you.

“If we have to scroll down for two and a half screens just to get to the point of your story, you’ll hear about it. If there is an air of piety or arrogance in your language, just back away from your computer when you see our response hit your inbox. And if it leads with some Weird God Story, I’d suggest not even turning your computer on for a while.

“But if you accomplish the goal — conveying your story in a brief, focused, and compelling way — we’ll give you an A and cheer you on to go share it.”

The response to that homework assignment was wonderful. Hundreds of Creekers took me up on the offer, proving their desire to get better at sharing God’s impact in their lives. The examples that follow are from normal people living normal lives, just trying to go God’s way as much as possible. They have experienced pain and frustration and isolation and despair like the rest of us, but they acknowledge Christ’s intervention and are able to articulate it in a powerful, succinct way.

As you read through their brief stories, pay attention to the themes that resonate with you the most. At the end of this chapter, you will be asked to get your hundred words or less nailed down too.

“For years, I felt empty. I had a hole that I needed to fill, so I searched for things that could fill that hole: a new house; children, new friends, clothes, a new job.... My emptiness would be filled for a short time, but I never found the ‘it’ that kept the hole filled. One day I heard a message about having a relationship with Jesus. Once I understood, accepted, and grew in my relationship with him, my emptiness was finally filled — for good. Today, I am no longer searching for things to fill my life.”

“I used to look for acceptance. I used drugs and alcohol to make me feel like I was somebody. I thought God had put me here as a cruel joke. But then I met Christ. He got me off of drugs, off of alcohol, and he made me feel worthwhile. I now know what happiness is actually like. The void in my heart is gone. I now know I have many reasons for being here ... one is to share my story to give others hope. My days are no longer miserable; life actually means something to me now.”

“I was angry and depressed all my life, thinking that the world revolved around me and I wasn’t getting my due. I was cynical and isolated. After finding Christ, though, I felt an amazing love and acceptance for the first time. I began to be liked for who I was by the people around me, and my whole life changed. I came to know the joy of relating authentically with people — opening up with honesty and truthfulness about my life.”

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“My life was filled with shame and fear. I was all tied up inside and isolated. Loneliness led me to a place of hopelessness. But then I met Jesus. Now I am free from my self-inflicted prison of fear and shame. I am forgiven and loved! I am peaceful about who I am and who God is making me to be. The void inside is now filled with joy — joy in knowing that I am a precious child of God.”

“I used to struggle under the burdens of a challenging career, marriage, and growing family. I tried to meet these obligations with my own efforts and sufficiency. As a result, I was stressed-out-overworked-frustrated-angry-fearful-insecure-anxious-competitive-and-exhausted ... all the time! The challenges still exist, but Jesus eases my burdens and is sufficient where I am deficient. Now I focus on what matters to God, and he takes care of what matters to me.

I face life calmly and confidently while enjoying God’s wisdom and his undeserved blessings.”

You can distill your faith journey in similar fashion. Keep it brief, stay focused, make it easy to understand, and convey it with a humble and honest heart. That’s all there is to it.

Quig Fletcher and Pat McDaniel are two men who have been part of the Willow family since the early days. They both said I could pick on them for the purposes of this book, so I offer their stories now as great examples of formulating a good before-and-after.

Quig has chaired the board of directors meetings at Willow Creek for more than twenty-five years. But before he became such a faithful part of our church, we crossed paths at the Bueller YMCA in Palatine, Illinois. He and I played racquetball almost weekly, a habit that led to a deep friendship.

In those days, Quig wasn’t a very religious person by his own admission. He thought that since he couldn’t seem to stop sinning, there was no hope of heaven for him. The first time I crossed that locker room to talk to him, I had enough collateral in the relationship that he was actually open to talking about spiritual things. When the time came for me to tell my story, I remember feeling a little insecure because there was nothing flashy to it. I wasn’t a reformed serial killer. God hadn’t had to rehabilitate me from some thousand-buck-a-day cocaine habit. My story just wasn’t dramatic by most standards.

So I walked Quig through my plain-vanilla journey to faith, and soon afterward he began attending church — then a small gathering of young kids who met in a movie theater. Many, many years went by, but one day at the age of forty-six, he met Christ and his life was radically changed. Because of the work of the Spirit in his life, Quig no longer saw himself as career sinner but instead as freshly anointed saint — from hopeless to heaven-bound.

“Looking back,” Quig recently told me, “I probably would have accepted Jesus Christ much sooner if someone had explained the gospel to me. I had the heart for it but never really had the opportunity.”

Quig has been a serving, volunteering part of Willow ever since. His legacy will be finding the land that Willow Creek Community Church sits on today. People ask how we ended up on the corner of Algonquin and Barrington roads in South Barrington, Illinois, and my answer is the same every time: it’s because a talented property developer

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named Quig Fletcher met Christ at age forty-six, committed himself to serving in the church, and one day hunted it down for us.

Another Willow “lifer,” Pat McDaniel, became a friend as a result of a walk across a golf green — ironic since I detest golf. A couple of my buddies coerced me into playing with them one day, and Pat was part of a group of guys I’d never met. I walked across the green and introduced myself, and out of that seemingly insignificant exchange grew an abiding friendship.

One day, I shared my faith story with Pat — again with no flash, no flair, nothing fantastic. But he was intrigued enough to begin coming to church with his wife at the movie theater. After having landed in an emotional spot where he could no longer solve the problems he faced alone, Pat turned to Jesus Christ — the ultimate Problem Solver. His problems didn’t go away overnight, but God gave Pat the power to overcome what he was facing. And since that time, he has faithfully served among us as a member of the offering counting team, as part of our board of directors, and as one of the strongest advocates for the poor in Willow’s entire congregation. These things will make up a mere fraction of Pat’s fruitful legacy.

❖ Was there anything spectacular about walking a few steps across a locker room or across a golf green to share my simple story? Of course not. But God doesn’t always need the spectacular to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes all he wants is a guy like me to tell his own unspectacular story. In doing so, the Holy Spirit can then ignite a spark that will one day lead to a miracle in a person’s life. The proof is in the stories of these two men, who serve as faithful pillars in a church that has been used to touch the world.

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Your simple, straightforward before-and-after explanation of Christ’s work in your life can have profound impact. It is worth working on. It is worth getting right. It is worth falling on your knees every day to say, “God, if there is an opportunity for me to walk across a room, if there is anybody you would have me talk with about my story, it would serve as the greatest joy in my day.”

❖ I promise you this: you will be absolutely amazed by the power of your own story once you have been diligent to hone and shape and refine it. When you communicate your personal faith story with sincerity, you will see supernatural sparks fly as God uses it for his glory and your listener’s good. Ready for your turn? Rules are the same: pull out a sheet of paper and get it done in a hundred words or less.

**Write Your 100 Word Story Here**