

Writing a Talk from Scripture

There are many ways to write a talk. This section suggests just one way to write a talk based on the scriptures. There are as many other ways to write talks as there are people writing them, but these suggestions are a good starting point. As I gained confidence in my ability to prepare scriptural talks, I found that I developed my own way of doing so.

The first step is to choose a passage of scripture to discuss. If a passage was assigned, this part of the task is easy. If a passage was not assigned, a topic may have been suggested. In that case, the Topical Guide is a good source for finding a passage of scripture to use as the basis for a talk. Be careful not to choose a passage that is too long, or there may be too much material for the time allotted for the talk. A few verses are usually enough.

After deciding on a scripture, use the tools in this book to study that passage. Remember to focus on questions. What questions does this passage raise? What insights arose from thinking about and studying the passage in light of those questions? These insights are likely to help us decide what to discuss with the congregation. While studying the passage, focus on the verbs. They indicate what the passage is about and can give ideas of what to include in the talk.

While studying, be sure to focus on what is often called the plain sense of the passage. I look up each key word to be sure I understand what it means (I do not assume that I know; sometimes I am surprised). Look at how important words and phrases in the passage have been used in other scriptures. Be sure to know to what each pronoun refers.

If the passage uses metaphors, try various ways of understanding them to see which makes the most sense. Broadly defined, a metaphor is a way of using the language to say that something is or is like another thing, such as “he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7) or “they are walking in darkness at noonday” (D&C 95:6). Ask questions. Why does the writer use that particular metaphor? What does it tell us that we might not see otherwise? How far can we extend the meaning of the metaphor? What limitations should we put on our understanding of the metaphor?

Practice reading the passage aloud several times. Try emphasizing different words and phrases to see how doing so conveys different possible meanings. Decide which reading is most interesting and helpful and focus the talk on conveying the message of that reading. As I read aloud, I think about what the passage means and try to read it so that others will understand that meaning as I read.

Remember what Joseph Smith said about understanding scripture: “I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable?”¹ We should ask ourselves to whom the prophet was speaking or writing and why he was doing so.

Finally, ask what the main point of the passage is. We must be careful not to decide the answer to this question until we have finished our study. If we focus on this question too early, we may just repeat what we have always heard about the passage rather than what we have learned from our own study. As I try to decide the main point of the passage, I ask myself the following questions. Can I explain to someone else what makes me think that this is the main point? I do this by pointing to specific details in the passage (words, sentences, metaphors, etc.) that show this point. Can I explain the importance of the point? Do other scriptures relate to it and reinforce it? Do other

scriptures explain the same idea in another way? What have General Authorities said about this point? What are my ideas about the point?

Before writing the talk, write a paraphrase of the passage of scripture. This can help us be sure that we understand what it says. Include as much of the meaning of the passage as possible, but remember that short paraphrases are usually more effective.

Now we are ready to begin writing. Following is a format that may be helpful for giving a talk on scripture:

1. Read the passage aloud; if it is too long, read a paraphrase of it
2. While reading, comment briefly on the meanings of any words that the audience might not understand
 - a. It is usually best to comment after complete phrases, such as after commas, semicolons, or periods
 - b. Keep comments short so that the audience does not lose sight of the passage as a whole
3. Explain the main point
 - a. Explain any insights, referring occasionally to the details of the passage that sparked those insights
 - b. Use one or two quotations from General Authorities, especially living ones, to make the point
4. Conclude by summarizing the talk
 - a. Reread (or paraphrase) the passage of scripture
 - b. Briefly summarize the talk
 - c. Bear testimony
 - (1) Be sure it is a testimony about the topic of the talk
 - (2) Bear testimony of the gospel, Jesus Christ, the church, etc.

Though this format is brief, it can provide the basis for both short and longer talks. Most who use it after learning to use the methods described in the rest of this book find it difficult to confine their talks to five or ten minutes. The easiest place to expand a talk is in part 3 of the outline, which recommends discussing the insights gained from the passage in question. Thoughtfully expanding on insights and tying them both to the scripture on which the talk focuses and to other scriptures and words of Latter-day Saint prophets can provide a good deal of material for teaching in talks.

It is not difficult to use part 1 of this format as the format for a Sunday School, Relief Society, priesthood, or other lesson on scripture. The main difference is that in a lesson, the teacher allows the members of the class to read portions of the passage, stopping them at appropriate points and asking them to reflect on what they have read. The teacher can provide additional insights from his or her own study and careful preparation and ask the students to respond to those insights.

Note

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 5:261.