

ANXIOUSLY ENGAGED

HOW TO GIVE A SACRAMENT MEETING TALK

AN OPEN LETTER TO CONVERTS

By Jana Riess

Dear New Member,
 Congratulations on your recent baptism! There is so much to rejoice in, and you will be glad of your decision to join the Church. The good news is that there will be fruitful discussions and Spirit-led testimony meetings. Not to mention awesome potlucks! (You will grow to love funeral potatoes.) The bad news is that sooner or later, the bishop is going to ask you to speak in sacrament meeting.

Now you may feel intimidated by this assignment, especially if you converted from a religious tradition that has professional preaching. But the good news is that Mormons have extremely low expectations for what constitutes an acceptable sacrament meeting talk, so if you just use the following guidelines, everything will go swimmingly. In fact, unless you or the bishop reveals it, I guarantee that no one will guess that you haven't been a member your whole life!

BEFORE YOU GIVE YOUR TALK:

1. *Behave appropriately when you receive the call.* A member of your bishopric will either corner you in a hallway between meetings or call you on the phone to extend the call to speak—usually for the following Sunday. Whatever you do, *don't sound excited or enthusiastic.* Real Mormons always act as though they would rather have a root canal that day, and I know you want to start behaving like a



JANA RIESS is an LDS convert who sometimes still sneaks into Protestant churches to hear good preaching and great music. She recently moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, and is a member of the Norwood Ward. She is the religion book editor for Publishers Weekly, the co-author of *Mormonism for Dummies*, and the author of a commentary on the *Book of Mormon*, as well as four other books.

SO THIS GUY WALKS INTO A BAR, RIGHT? AND HE SAYS. . .



birthright Latter-day Saint. Sounding too eager might scare your bishop, who may be elderly, under a good deal of pressure, and prone to stroke. Don't be the reason he has one.

2. *Think about the assignment as a talk and not a sermon.* Sermons require serious preparation, forethought, and study. A Mormon talk mainly requires that you show up. So don't be frightened! You'll want to hastily assemble a few things the night before, but other than that, you can basically cruise through the week.

3. *The night before the talk, gather the following items:*

- *A dictionary.* You will need this to orally define whatever topic the bishop has given you. This is necessary even if the topic seems self-evident, such as “family” or “service.”
- *Some printouts from the Internet.* You will need at least two long quotations from general authorities (preferably living ones) and one inspiring urban legend of uncertain provenance. Check out the resources at www.snopes.com.
- *Your scriptures.* What's important to remember, especially if you have converted from a Protestant faith tradition, is that these scriptures are mostly window dressing. You will want to choose two short verses that seem to

shore up what you will say about your topic. Be sure to keep them brief.

Excellent! Now that you are so well prepared, I know that you will give an outstanding Mormon talk.

GIVING THE TALK ITSELF

Here are a few other elements to keep in mind so that your talk will blend in well with all the others that day.

1. *Begin by explaining where you were and what you were doing when you got the call to speak.* This should take up at least two minutes of your time. Since you are a new convert, your assigned time for speaking is unlikely to exceed ten minutes (and if you happen to be female, this may be the longest amount of time you will ever be given to speak), so you have just filled 20 percent of your allotted time—all with no preparation! Fantastic.

2. *Segue into a profuse apology, explaining that you are unworthy of the call to speak.* You can spend another two minutes (longer if you are a woman) apologizing for your many inadequacies as a communicator. Emphasize that your hands are sweating and your knees are wobbly. To break the tension, you might tell a joke that is wholly unrelated to your assigned topic. Conclude this portion of your talk by telling the congregation just how much you've learned since 11:58 last night when you first began thinking about the assigned topic, and how you hope you can do it justice. Then breathe deeply—you are now almost halfway through your talk!

3. *Define your topic using the aforementioned dictionary.* This will probably only take one minute, but you can drag it out by actually bringing the dictionary with you and thumbing to find the right page.

• Note: *Webster's* is the preferred tool among birthright Mormons, but they will cut you some slack if you use a non-canonized dictionary, especially as you are a convert.

• A variant option if you are a woman: In addition to the dictionary, you may want to spend a little extra time beforehand making a poster to display, offering clip art or wholesome *Ensign* cutouts to define your topic visually.

4. *Read your two long general authority quotations in rapid succession without giving any context or otherwise personalizing the topic in any way.* This section is the crux of your talk and should take a good three to four minutes. If you are particularly skillful, you can weave the conference excerpts in with your inspiring urban legend. If not, just read the



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story after the quotes. You will take more time if the story is so inspiring that you get choked up yourself and are unable to speak for twenty to thirty seconds. In any case, great news: You are almost finished!

5. Use your two scripture verses as the icing on the cake. You want to hammer home your point by appealing to the ultimate authority, the standard works. Just read the verses and be done with them. If you have not yet used up your allotted ten minutes, you can always slow this section down by waiting while the whole congregation finds the verses in their own scriptures.

6. Close your talk in the name of Jesus Christ, even if you have not referred to him once the entire time.

Sincerely,
A Fellow Convert

OKAY, friends. Can you tell I was in a grumpy mood when I wrote that letter? I am now laying aside the sarcasm and just want to speak plainly—make that *plaintively*—about Mormon preaching. And I insist on calling it preaching, because preaching the Word of God as revealed in the scriptures is what we Mormons always should aspire to do, despite the casualness with which our subculture seems to regard sacrament meeting “talks.” We have a holy calling: Christ has commissioned us to do no less than “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), and we could do a lot worse than emulate the apostle Paul, who would rather have “woe” befall him than fall short in that responsi-

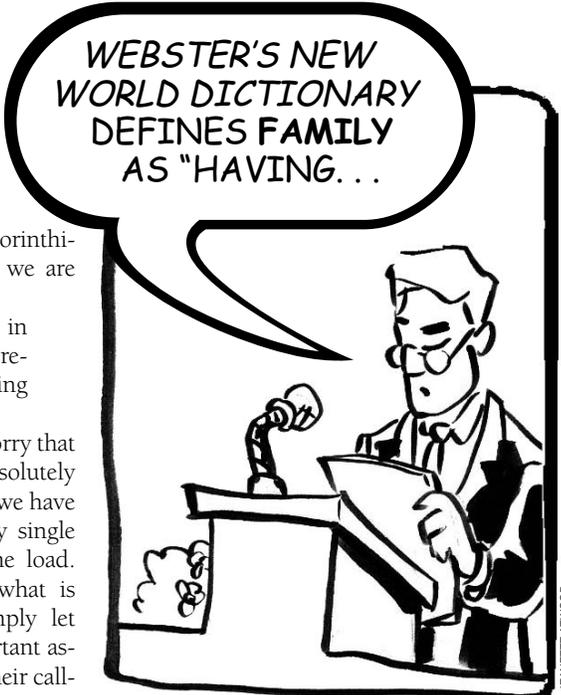
bility to preach Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 9:16; 1:23). In 2 Timothy 4:2, we are urged to

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

Preaching is serious stuff, and I worry that we are missing the mark. What is absolutely wonderful about Mormonism is that we have an entirely lay ministry where every single person is responsible for sharing the load. This includes our preaching. But what is often disappointing is that we simply let people sink or swim in this all-important aspect of ministry. We train people in their callings; we set them apart; we mentor them. But we simply trust that they will learn preaching from example—a strategy that would work only if we had mostly good examples. So I’m going to dream out loud a little and outline some of the changes I’d love to see in grass-roots Mormon preaching.

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Openings. Let’s start with the way most talks begin. As my letter pointed out, too many Mormon speakers, particularly women, seem to fall all over themselves to apologize for their very existence, dragging out the tale of how they received the call to speak and why they aren’t up to the task. They usually close this extended *mea culpa* with some kind of plucky statement about how they’ll give it their best shot despite their many inadequacies. I think those who do this feel that when



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they dissemble in this way, they are demonstrating modesty and showing that they respect the honor of speaking in sacrament meeting. My concern, however, is that doing so actually has precisely the opposite effect: it

puts *more* attention on themselves, not less. The talk begins by being *all about them* rather than, at best, the Savior or, at the very least, the assigned topic. They focus the spotlight on the self when they intend to deflect it.

Spiritual preparation. Many speakers share how they have prayed that Heavenly Father will calm their nerves and help them get through the talk. This is well and good, but why should it stop there? I’d much

rather hear that they’ve prayed to know how they can minister to their listeners; for Heavenly Father to touch their hearts to know what people in the ward are struggling with; that they may know how to best serve the members. We are commanded to feed the lambs and tend the sheep. What happens when the shepherd worries only about himself?

Scriptures. I’m troubled by the way speakers so often use the scriptures only as a prop, a

weapon of sorts with which to shore up their position. All too often, I think we come to the text already knowing what we want to find, so it's no surprise that we find it. Scholars call this *eisegesis*, the tendency to read our own culture and beliefs into the text. This is in contrast to *exegesis*, drawing from the text the culture and beliefs of the men and women who wrote the scriptures. It would be nice to see more Mormons come to the text with an open mind and use it as their primary source material for most talks. Now I'm not suggesting that everyone needs to be a scholar or consult commentaries, or even that they need to do any outside reading. I am suggesting that we delve more deeply into the scriptures themselves, choosing a passage or two that we can explore beyond mere proof-texting. It's perfectly amazing the details that we notice when we read the same passage aloud carefully even as few as three times.

Getting Personal. In addition to a deeper use of the scriptures, I'd like to see more Latter-day Saint preachers draw upon their own experiences. We need to tell our own stories. The incredible opportunity that arises from having an entirely lay ministry is that each week we can be exposed to the raw and halting faith journeys of the people in our wards. Sacrament meeting provides the chance to grow closer to Christ through partaking the bread and water, and to one another through the personal sharing that can occur when we take turns preaching. Some of the best sacrament meeting talks I've ever heard involved people sharing their personal struggles—a disabled child, an illness, a battle with addiction—and “likening the scriptures unto themselves” by relating their own difficulties to the Atonement of Christ. We need to reveal some of our stories and show how God has worked in our lives.

Studies have shown that people retain even a short-term memory of only about 16 percent of what they hear in a lecture, speech, or sermon. Moreover, most of that 16 percent is comprised of—you guessed it—personal stories. We won't remember what Brother Jones said about the divine importance of food storage, but you can bet your last dollar we'll recall the powerful, real-life tale of how his family lived comfortably off their food storage when a blizzard isolated them for nearly two weeks in rural Wyoming.

Once when I was teaching Gospel Doctrine, I opened class by asking people what had stood out most strongly to them when they had listened to general conference the week before. I thought it would be

helpful for us to recap the conference highlights for those who weren't able to hear it. Every single response involved a personal or scriptural story told by a speaker; they remembered the personal accounts, not the more weighty or explicitly theological parts of the addresses.

The reasons for storytelling (what homileticists call “narrative preaching”) aren't just practical but theological. As Latter-day Saints, we pledge to follow the Savior's example in all things, so let's look a little more closely at how he preached. He never gave a platitude when a parable would do the job. And he never stopped teaching through stories.

If we desire a more contemporary example, we need look no further than President Hinckley's moving talk in the 2006 April General Conference. Amidst all the rumors of his ill health, the whispers that this might be his last-ever conference, millions of Saints wondered what final wisdom President Hinckley would choose to impart. But what he did should serve as a model for all of us: he laid bare his life. He spoke of his mission, his marriage, his lifelong passion for the Church; he told us of lessons learned and service given. And in what I found to be one of the most moving aspects of the talk, he shared a portion of his patriarchal blessing, allowing those who love him to witness firsthand how the Holy Spirit has moved in his life. He gifted us with his story. We should go and do likewise. ☺



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SALAMANDER NIGHT

*Some said that salamanders
could live in fire.*

Standing on the beach
in the roaring dark,
I seek water,
want waves
before sleeping.

Moon-burnished,
I open my hands
like pale sea anemones,
gather the night's secrets
floating nearby.

In the sky—
seven stars and a moon. . .
I stay awake
to remember.
Where I grew up
the sea was louder.
Black rocks stalked
the shore.

I left that for Greece. . .
sands soft, light silky. Waves
embraced the rising moon.

Now, the morning flames
of sunrise consume me
as they crackle
over the sea.

—ELVA LAUTER

THE FLOCK

BY JEANETTE ATWOOD

