

# *Writing as a Ministry for God's Glory*

## **Chapter 3** **Writing the Devotional Article**

**by Kathy Collard Miller**

*My mouth will speak words of wisdom, the utterance from my heart will give understanding.—*  
Psalm 49:3

In our last chapter, we talked about how the personal experience article is a wonderful way to begin writing or to continue our writing ministry. The same thing applies to writing the devotional article. It is a quick yet challenging form of writing. Because the devotional article tends to be a short piece, you might expect it would be easier to write. But that isn't always the case. Yet this genre of writing is still often used by beginning writers as a way to effectively communicate their message. It is a powerful way for any writer to share their message. The genre of the devotional can be used for either articles or books.

### **Attractions of Devotional Writing**

I think we all appreciate the devotional style because we can read about an important spiritual truth and have our heart impacted in a short amount of time. And of benefit to us writers is the fact that devotionals are in demand both for magazines and for books.

A former editor of *The Upper Room*, which publishes only devotionals, said, "Good devotional writing helps readers connect the events of their daily lives with the ongoing activity of God. It causes readers to reflect on ordinary events as a means of understanding supernatural truths. It feeds the interior life, causing readers to examine their commitment to God's ways. As humans, we perceive the abstract routes through concrete experiences, and so devotional writing must be concrete. It must be authentic."

Devotional writing is significant because it is quick reading for busy people. There is a tendency these days for people to want to read short pieces of writing because of their heavy schedules. The current popularity of books which compile people's stories are a good example of this. Although books of compilations are not technically devotionals, they do show the desire for short, powerful writing.

Devotionals also touch people at the heart level, and that brings change to lives. They are appropriate for both men and women. Both men and women read devotional magazines and devotional books. And the "take away" is often practical because it refers to common experiences of life and helps the reader see themselves or circumstances in a new way. The best part for the writer is that it is a good way to break into writing.

### **Basic Components**

Here are the basic components of a devotional in its proper order:

1. *Title*

2. *Byline*

3. *Scripture verse*. It is better to pick the Bible verse first and then write the devotional. This may

not always be possible, but it can help to avoid stretching the meaning of the verse to try to make it fit into the pre-determined anecdote we want to write about. But if we are careful with the use of the verse, it's fine to have the anecdote in mind and then find the verse to go with it.

4. *Personal experience or anecdotal material.* This material can be from your own experience or from someone else's. It can be written in first person or third person. But a good anecdote is vital to quickly catch the reader's attention. First person anecdotes are most effective. Any anecdote should be written with the fiction techniques we talked about in the previous chapter: techniques such as dialogue, description, action, and emotion, making sure we "show" instead of "tell."

After giving the anecdote, we need to tie it into a spiritual application. This is where we can say something like, "I learned..." or "God taught me..." or "I've always remembered..."

5. *Prayer.* This prayer is very short. Usually the idea is boiled down to two or three sentences.

Although I've given you the five most common components for devotionals, many magazines, on-line opportunities, compilation books, and other places for devotionals have their own chosen format. Keep that in mind as you look for opportunities.

### **Devotional Details**

1. *Most devotionals are approximately 250-400 words long.*

2. *Devotionals must have an emotional tie-in.* The experience you write about must have been something that touched you or it will not catch the reader's attention.

3. *Most devotionals are based on everyday occurrences,* things like interaction with people, going to an amusement park, referring to something someone said to you, and other common sources. But even though devotionals are based on everyday occurrences, the examples must be general enough to relate to many. Therefore, universal themes are best.

Writing about abstract things may take away from the reader's ability to apply your point to them. For instance, if you write about something unusual, for instance, climbing Mt. Everest, you must have a common application. If you write about something most people haven't experienced, be specific in describing what it meant and how it applies to them.

4. *Devotionals are very concise and to the point.* There is no room available for rambling or unnecessary words. Therefore devotionals must be skillfully written because the writer is forced to edit it down to the shortest form.

### **Characteristics of Good Devotional Writing**

1. *Use Scripture responsibly.* We need to be careful not to use Scripture out of context or by stretching its meaning. Checking with commentators on the meaning of a verse is an important idea.

2. *Devotionals are short but powerful.* The reader must relate immediately to it.

3. *Write concretely.* It emphasizes specific themes, not vague ones. Therefore it tends to be practical.

4. *The purpose is to touch the mind through teaching or the heart through emotions.* Because of the short word length for devotionals, you will often have only one of those purposes as your goal.

5. *Be concise.* Edit, re-write, and edit again.

6. *Be authentic, not preachy.* Be vulnerable by drawing from your own experiences and often sharing your struggles. We want the reader to think: "That's how I feel," or "that's what I needed today." Don't write in such a way we give the impression we're telling the reader we never struggle with a particular difficulty—or that we've "arrived."

7. *Don't offer pat answers.* The attitude resembling "if only you'll do this, you'll never struggle again." Or, "This always works." The Christian life rarely includes cliches or formulas. Omit "all or nothing" words like always, never, all the time, etc.

8. *Watch for terms or phrases that are common to Christians* but may not be understood by unbelievers or new Christians. Phrases like, "walk in the Spirit," or "know Jesus," or "accept Christ," may be familiar to someone going to church, but if we want to reach out to others, we'll need to use words anyone can understand.

## Devotional Formats

Here are several devotional formats you can choose from. I'm including examples from my old (and now out of print) book, *Your View of God...God's View of You*. But because it's a devotional book I think the examples will be helpful. The two themes of the book are: who God is and who we are in Christ.

*1. Interior monologue: this highlights a person thinking.* Here's a sample of that from my devotion on "God Is Love":

One afternoon after I'd been a Christian for about five years, I drove home from church feeling downhearted. "Why can't I love God enough?" I asked myself over and over again. I was afraid that if I didn't love Him "enough," He would never fully accept me as His child.

I remembered 1 John 4:18, and it seemed to scream at me of my need to have a perfect love toward God: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear."

"See, Kathy," I berated myself, "if your love for God was perfect, you wouldn't have any fear of Him."

*Lord, it's just hopeless. I can never love You enough to take away this fear of what You might do to me if I don't measure up,*

Then as I stopped the car at a red light, the correct meaning of that verse broke open in my mind like the sun bursting forth from behind a black cloud blown away by the wind. *Wait a minute, Lord. That verse isn't talking about my love for You, but Your love for me. Now I understand. Your perfect love can cast out my fear because You only want what's best for me. Oh, thank You!*

That thought revolutionized my thinking. No longer was I required to "love enough." God's unconditional and never ending love-His perfect love-could take away my fears and assure *me* He has only good plans in mind for me.

Then I continue on to address God's love.

*2. Interaction between people: two or more people talking.* Here's the example from my devotion, "God Is Joy":

My sister-in-law, Leslie, said to me, "Kathy, you'll never guess what Chuck said about our Bible study the other night after you left our house."

I cringed inside, wondering what my brother might have said, since he didn't come to the study. "Oh, what?" I hesitantly asked, thinking maybe I shouldn't hear.

"He said, 'Boy, you guys sure laughed a lot.' Isn't that great he noticed?"

I smiled. "Leslie, you should have told him, 'Kathy was nice to us tonight; she let us get off our knees for once.'"

Leslie grinned back at me.

Chuck couldn't believe that we could have so much fun studying the Bible. Similarly, some people find it hard to believe that God is joyful.

I've been in that category before. Because of my serious nature, as a child I envisioned God as a strict taskmaster who was always frowning and saying, "You should have done better." But in the last several years, it's been easier for me to think of God as joyful and actually *smiling!*

Then I continue the devotion with a short discussion of God's joy.

*3. Third person reporting or making observations.* Here's an example from "God Views You with a New Name:"

What's in a name? Ask the clerk at the Los Angeles Superior Court, where, for \$108 plus the cost of a legal advertisement, anyone over the age of 18 can have his name changed.

Georgia Ricotta wanted her name changed. After all, who would want to be identified with a cheese? Her new name? Anna Novelli. "I picked my last name from a TV series," the new Anna says.

Clifford Morong also filled out the form and commented, "I dislike Morong, as it is often misspelled Moron." He came up with the name Cliff Michaels after looking through the telephone white pages.

Iranian-born Esmaeli Sabaghi Khiyabani said his birth name was too long and difficult. He wants to be called Oliver Twist.

"Nice, short names" are what a couple with a long last name wanted. They became Witt and Gibb McDee.

The clerk who processes all the applications has already decided what her favorite new name request is: some man wanted to be renamed Zenith Ray Blitz. She comments, "I think he was in show business."

Then I continue on talking about God has given us each new identities.

4. *Lesson from nature.* Here's how I used this type in my devotion, "God Is Merciful:"

I've been told that the river leaving Niagara Falls has some interesting safeguards for any who might fall into the river and be swept away. At several places down the river, walk-ways extend across the river with ropes hanging down into the water. Each knotted rope gives any poor soul being tossed down the river an opportunity to grab hold and stop his descent to destruction.

These opportunities to be saved from the rushing river are a fitting example of God's mercy.

I continue on addressing God's mercy.

5. *Phrase or motto.* I didn't use this technique in my book as it's a commonly used one and I tried to avoid anything too trite. But a good example could be something like "Bloom where you're planted," yet you will want to come up with something more original.

6. *Retelling Bible story or using a story that most people know.* This can be tricky since we could assume the story is well-known and it may not be. If it is not well-known, you will need to share the story and do it quickly.

Here's how I used this technique in the devotion, entitled, "God Views You as Precious."

Imagine for a moment that you are on the streets of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' triumphal entry as the Messiah. The crowd is buzzing with excitement. Thousands are choked into the small avenues of the city and the outlying areas. Rumors have been flying through the crowd all morning. "Jesus is on His way to declare His Messiahship."

Finally in the distance, you hear a mounting roar. Jesus is coming. A feeling of electricity spreads through the crowd. As the noise grows closer, someone shouts, "There He is. There's Jesus, riding a donkey's colt."

Standing on your tiptoes, you finally see Him. He's sitting regally upon the donkey, smiling at the praises toward Him as the Messiah. You hear your own voice shouting out, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Praise to the Messiah!" You're waving the palm branch that someone has handed you, but you're so far back in the crowd, you despair of having the privilege of setting it down so that Jesus can be transported over it.

You think, *Oh, if only, I could get closer. I want Him to know I'm praising Him. I want Him to know I believe He's my Messiah.*

He's coming closer now, and the noise is incredible. Everyone is trying to get His attention. "Hosanna! Hosanna!"

*How can He hear my voice with everyone else calling out? If only I could get closer. If I could just have Him look at me and know I'm here. Then I'd be sure He knows I truly want to believe.*

*Wait. Maybe I don't want Him to see me. I'm so sinful. I'm just a nobody. How can I even think that He'd notice me with so many important people surrounding Him?*

By now Jesus' donkey is in front of the crowd before you, and He's scanning the crowd with a calm, confident smile. You can tell He's absorbing the praise, and it seems absolutely appropriate. Your arms are swinging back and forth, the palm branch making a half circle above your head, as you hope He'll look over and give you a passing glance.

What's this? Jesus has stopped His donkey. Yes, it's true. He's getting off, and it looks like He's walking toward you. *Me? Can't be. There's so many people around. He must be looking for someone else. He can't even know I'm here. I've never met Him before. But look, He is coming in my direction, right toward me, and everyone is making a path for Him, even as they keep right on praising Him. Incredible!*

With a broad smile on His face, He walks up to you and reaches out His hands to lay them gently on your shoulders. A deep peace settles in your soul. If you'd known something like this was going to happen, you would have anticipated being terrified, but there is no fear in you. Your soul is melted into love and surrender as Jesus' eyes look deeply into yours.

*He seems to know everything about me, but I feel His unconditional love and acceptance. He knows me! He knows everything about me, yet He still loves me!*

Then His golden voice speaks, and even though the crowd is tumultuous in their praise, His words are clear in your ears. "My child, I love you. I forgive you for all your wrongdoings, and I want to give you the power to live obediently in Me. I'm going to die soon, but just remember that I'm dying for you so that you can be reconciled to God. If you were the only person alive, I would still be dying just for you. You are precious in My sight."

You stand in awe and soak up each word. His attention seems completely normal and expected. You don't understand everything He's said, but there's an inner knowledge that everything will be revealed eventually.

You whisper, "Thank You," but Jesus is instantly back on the colt, continuing His way through the crowd. A cocoon of love surrounds you as you calmly wave good-bye. You will never be the same. *I am loved. He knows who I am, and I'm precious to Him. That's all I need.*

I've read for you the entire devotion except for the title and Bible verse at the beginning. Let me also include the closing prayer as an example of that part of the devotion: "All-knowing God, I praise You for your ability to make me feel special and distinct from so many other people. I am important and precious to You. Thank You for knowing and yet accepting me. Amen."

7. *Children's quotes or anecdotes.* This is a source that is often overused so be careful to not use it too frequently. I didn't choose to use this technique in my book, but I'm sure you can think of examples.

8. *Writing techniques like quotes, poetry, or rhetorical questions.* Here's how I used this technique in "God Views You as Blameless."

Are you like me? Do you blame yourself for everything? Over the years, I've developed an expertise about holding myself responsible for anything and everything. Did we plan a picnic and it rained? I must have done something to cause the weather to turn ugly. Did my child have a temper tantrum on the floor of the grocery store? Obviously, I must have pinched her. Did Larry arrive home from work grumpy? I must have displeased him in some way. My children not do their homework? I must be a terrible mother.

Going through life constantly blaming myself was a heavy burden to carry around. It reminds me of something I heard that happens in a foreign country named Abyssinia. When a man is convicted of an offense, he must be chained to a willing friend until he can pay the fine. Until then, the two connected men roam around, sharing one another's misfortunes, and if necessary, begging for the money to pay the fine so that they can regain their liberty.

What a vivid illustration of blame! It's like a constant burden that's chained to us, making joyful walking and living difficult. It flavors a person's view of life and creates resentment and insecurity.

I then go on to encourage the reader to stop blaming themselves.

9. *Direct teaching about Scripture.* This possibility is not used too frequently because it can come across as preachy. Sometimes it is also hard to be concrete if the Scripture contains an abstract thought.

Here's a sample from my devotion, "God Is Patient."

Sometimes I think if God weren't so patient, things would get done faster. But then I remember what Dr. A. H. Strong said: "When God wants to make an oak, He takes a hundred years; but when He wants to make a squash, He takes six months." So I must admit that maybe He knows what He's doing.

I can certainly see the results of His patience as I flip through the Bible. Here are some examples of God's patient dealings with men:

God took six days to create our world, when He could have called it into existence in one second.

God provided Noah 120 years to build the ark and give people an opportunity to turn to Him.

God caused Isaac to be born to Abraham 25 years after He promised it would happen.

God took almost two decades for Joseph to see his dreams of greatness come true.

Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness being groomed to be a great leader.

God patiently disciplined the Israelites for 40 years in the wilderness.

Joshua spent many years as Moses' number one man before he was called to be head of the Israelites.

David wandered in the wilderness for over a decade before his rightful place as king was fulfilled. The Old Testament prophets never saw most of their prophecies fulfilled in their lifetimes. God waited 400 years between the last Old Testament prophets and the coming of Jesus. Jesus didn't start His ministry until the age of 30.

It took 14 years after the apostle Paul was converted before God used him extensively in missionary work.

And, of course, I continue by talking about God's patience.

As you look over the types of devotional formats we have available to us, which could you use immediately? You may have even found a nugget of an idea for a devotional as we've gone over them. Write down that idea right now, because otherwise it may be forgotten.

### **Marketing devotionals**

For both magazine writing and book writing, refer to the marketing resource, *The Christian Writers Market Guide*. We will talk in more detail in a later chapter about that resource.

As you refer to *The Christian Writers Market Guide*, you will discover many magazines which feature devotionals exclusively also give assignments. They will want you to write two or three devotionals using their format, send them as samples on speculation, and they will consider you for future assignments. "On speculation" means they are not obligated to buy what you have submitted.

Because magazines which use devotionals use a lot of them, it's a constant market for writers. Also, some devotional guides are for every day of the year, therefore they need 365 devotionals a year. That's a good source for our work.

Another positive about devotionals is that magazines are open to having first time writers submit their work. Because these devotional pieces are short, the pay is little, but it can be a consistent source. And even if the money is not great, it is a way to name publications where your work has appeared.

Now that you learned about writing devotionals, what would you like to write about in the devotionals format? You may find you will see the most daily, common occurrences in a new light as you see how they can become the source of devotionals.

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