

STORIES: SHARING TRUTH IN WORD-PICTURES

*That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done
is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:9*

The presumption that the authority of the Bible is best demonstrated in its propositions and its conclusive summaries reduces the vitality of Christian theology. This sort of shallow analysis is the stuff of dogma and assertion. Its conclusions are easily memorized but rarely demonstrable in life. I fear that this sort of “Bible study” illustrates the conclusion that theological studies may sometimes lead people to mistrust the Bible. It does little to assuage the contention that biblical Christianity lacks authority and has little to say to the current dilemmas of society.

A curriculum loaded with dogmas and assertions crowds out a more carefully grounded emphasis on spiritual quest, thus leading to an appetite for technical translation more than for lively action that is informed by the Gospel. (“Gospel” here and following denotes the whole of the Bible, in which God is seen unfolding the whole redemptive story in a succession of episodes through which Jesus Christ is anticipated, revealed, and exalted through his work on the cross.) Jesus is understood as more than “an answer” or even “a fulfillment.” Instead, he is the central character and the thematic display and fulfillment of God’s completion of his creation. Through his own words and actions he tells God’s story—who God is and what God’s intentions are. In his teaching Jesus reveals his mission, the Gospel, in a combination of actions, historical reflections, and story-telling through which the completeness of God’s mercy and grace is revealed. Thus, in literary terms, even the content and structure of the four written Gospels illustrate and elaborate the truth.

The emergent emphasis on *story* is timely and provocative. Perhaps it arises as an evidence of contemporary humanity’s weariness of quantitative analysis, technical tasks, and mechanistic logic. Today the new quest is for fluidity rather than rigidity, dialogue rather than dogma, and favoring the *question* over the stylized and easily memorized *answer*. All of this requires a more inventive and creative use of the mind. As always, since the tribal African stories, the Celtic and Norse legends, the Greek dramas, and the development of modern history, the *story* is central, whether its style is ritualistic or spontaneous. In general, the social purpose of *story* is to open things up, to lead the mind into constructive explorations.

Church-goers today are familiar with the *sermon* that commonly dwells on the virtues and benevolence of Christ, which indeed is an important part of the Gospel story, but often the unity and wholeness of the Gospels are lost and only the more pictorial events are remembered, never fully representing the *story* of the Gospel as the truly big picture. The wholeness of God’s involvement with his creation as illustrated throughout the Bible and emphasized in the Gospels falls into the shadows, secondary to the lively actions that are seen in the various episodes of biblical text. The argument can be made that if he lived among us today, he would shake his head in disappointment over many of the things that are said from the pulpit, most particularly the reductionist lists of propositions that are proclaimed as “Christian principles.” It is difficult to imagine Jesus nodding his pleasure with the one-way monologues typical of today’s educational endeavors, from pre-school through doctoral studies. Today’s sermons so often are merely didactic lectures that attempt to illustrate and impart the ideas and propositions underlying Christianity but offer church-goers very little of the unity and vitality of God’s story.

Appropriate pedagogy for today

Educators are becoming increasingly critical of the *memorize-and-test* approach to teaching so typical of schooling. A similar shift in missionary tactics challenges the traditional notion that evangelism can best be accomplished by a reading-based emphasis on badly translated foreign commentaries. The leading missional churches and many missionary movements are moving the church worldwide in a contrasting direction. Three emphases are emerging. With no attempt to represent relative importance or historical sequence, these emphases are best represented by the following three constructs:

1. orality
2. dialogue
3. ecclesiology

I. Orality. Like Judaism and to a lesser extent Islam, Christianity has historically been identified as a “book-based religion.” Make no mistake about it, that fact is important and worthy. It keeps us together, on track, and responsible to God in ways that would otherwise reduce us to nothing more than a quarreling pack of social misfits. Indeed, as “people of the Book” we recognize our dependence on the Holy Spirit of God. For Christians, the authority lies in God’s revelation. And basic to comprehending that revelation is the *Book*.

But that premise does not mean that reading is a prerequisite for conversion, nor indeed is reading an essential part of Christian experience. Important and valuable for Christian development, yes; but many come to Christ through oral and experiential encounters rather than literary comprehension of God’s truth. This is not easy to accept, especially for those who are educated in reading-based methodologies and whose personal and social experiences persistently reflect the value of reading as a basic skill.

Many Christians stubbornly hold to their presupposition that reading is integral with faith. For some it takes a dramatic encounter with a differing reality to jolt them into reconsideration. This encounter can take many forms: for some, a more careful reflection on the Biblical text itself opens up the awareness that God dealt with his people through many interactive encounters with the patriarchs *long before writing on the stone tablets* (the earliest clue in Genesis that anyone among God’s people could read). For others it takes a sobering encounter with the overwhelming evidence—face to face—with the fact that many of God’s people, even in our own country, *do not read*. They just don’t. Anyone who hasn’t made these discoveries is living in denial!

A leader in the *orality* transformation is Dr. Avery Willis, a Southern Baptist with a substantial reputation as the president of Indonesia’s Semarang Theological Seminary and whose insights have brought him into several key leadership roles in denominational and inter-denominational coalitions since his return to the United States. Avery’s intercultural experiences have shaken his confidence that book-learning can be entrusted with the task of rearranging the perceptions and paradigms of thought that are planted deeply by culture and past experiences. He concluded that the changes and socio-emotional reorientations that underlie religious conversion were hardly being touched by the typical missionary’s presumption that *reading* the basic information about Christ and his gospel is basic to becoming a convert to Christ. He has been a key player in the unfolding drama of bringing a saving encounter with Jesus Christ to the millions whose illiteracy has kept them out of reach of the ordinary modes of evangelistic communication.

2. Dialogue. Nothing describes better what “dialogue” means than *asking questions*. Jesus used parables (stories with purpose) in most of his dealings with people—small groups, large groups, in various situations, ranging from formal to casual encounters. It is quite evident that he was a very proficient story-teller. (Story-telling is a skill that every follower of Jesus Christ can and should

develop.) Many times Jesus gave a parable (a well-told story) instead of more directly stating a flat answer to a question that had been asked. “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” Note that this question from the learner was at the *beginning* of the teaching session. This evidence that the learner arrived with his question ready suggests that the learner had an intention to learn. Jesus continued the dialogue by asking a focusing question, “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus then added a bit of data, “There is only one who is good.” The comment must surely have focused the attention on God. So then the stage was set and Jesus moved forward. “If you want to enjoy life, obey the (God’s) commandments.” Then another question from the man, “Which commandments?” Clearly he wants to have a simple and ordinary “fix” for his moral condition. So Jesus continued the dialogue until just the right moment, and then he dropped this one on the wealthy fellow, “Go sell all your possessions and give to the poor. . . Then come and follow me.” No. Too steep for now. But note that the man was left to make his own informed decision. Jesus does not push. Who knows how many days it may have been before this man came back to continue this dialogue with Jesus?

To further draw from this illustration in Matthew 19: Jesus’ disciples had been listening all the while, and so they were ready to add to the dialogue. Jesus brought them into the discussion with a very brief parable. “It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God . . . harder than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” The disciples knew the pattern and they, too, responded with a question: “Who then can be saved?”

This pattern of dialogue can be identified time after time in the Gospels. None of the other main figures in the New Testament were as adept in this mode as Jesus. Study of the Gospels is enhanced by noting that Jesus so very often used questions to get things started, encouraged questions among his disciples, and summarized with memorable parables rather than with flat answers. All of these elements together constituted the basis for the what people were observing in Jesus, “He taught as one having authority.” (Each of the three synoptic gospels cites this comment.) Authority was communicated in his style and his pedagogy, not just in the quality of his lecture notes nor in the elegance of his oratory. In his parables, terse and minimally elaborated, we discover Jesus as a superb teller of stories, stories about historical events, spur-of-the-moment metaphoric illustrations, pointed applications of profound truth, themes and variations on the great songbooks of the Old Testament. Surely it is not out of order to listen closely in quiet moments to hear the singing of the disciples in the evening firelight, always focused on the centrality of Jesus and his vital part in God’s unfolding story of involvement with humankind.

3. Ecclesiology. And behind all of this we see the church, God’s chosen community of the redeemed. As the church moves closer to fulfilling its assigned role as the engine of development for Christian leadership, the historic cleavage between “clergy” and “laity” becomes less important. Hierarchical and architectural models of the church and its governance gently but surely fall away and the churches of Christendom, one by one, look into their own fellowships for the pastors of the future. Titus watched over the emergence and maturing of the churches that Paul had started on the lonely island of Crete, churches that had no “outside” sources of pastoral leadership save Paul and Titus, the evangelizer and the teacher. But we read over Paul’s shoulder as he writes to tell Titus that now is the time, the work of the Holy Spirit is fulfilled, as Paul had prayed for Crete. The letter seems to suggest, “Now, Titus, the time has come. Re-circle the island, identify and ordain elders in every town.” Clearly Paul’s faith was so strong that he had no doubt that the Holy Spirit, at work in each church, would have prepared persons for leadership in each one. God’s provision was for every church to mature according to the standards that Paul had documented in this short letter and elsewhere.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to ask, but where did the early church get its “candidates for office,” its students to send to seminary, or its Book of Order to regulate its meetings? As a relatively small island, Crete had a small and isolated population. In terms of evangelism, Crete looked like an uphill battle. But take a closer look! Paul led many to Christ all around Crete and after a relatively short period of sharing the truth of scripture with them, he moved on, leaving just one colleague behind to “set in order” (finish up) the remaining work. Thus it fell to Titus to oversee all the church-growth work among the many planted churches scattered around the coastline of Crete. Ah, the *essential ecclesiology*: the **church** is the joined together **body** of Christ, the **fellowship** of the redeemed, God’s **elect strangers** in the world.

As God gives me days to live and vision to follow in his path, I expect to experience the rest of the story. Already we can hear it in the new stories. A shift is underway; the church is shaking free from its dependence on the faulty models of formal institutional modes of education, adopted by historic Christianity, willy-nilly, from flawed secular precedents. The path is now being cleared. A Christ-centered and Christ-emulating mode is emerging as local churches themselves are becoming directly involved and accountable for the selection and continuing education of their own people, as God raises them up for the shepherding of his people. This emergence of a Spirit-driven centering in the church of the development of leaders is a story becoming more frequently heard. It seems remarkably consistent with what happened when the new churches of Crete experienced it in the first century AD.

DETERMINING THE TRUTH OF THE STORY

Clearly, God is at work across the world, and we are living in the midst of the stories that God’s people are telling as they rediscover that indeed God is very much at work, actively engaged with people in all nations. The central motive of these consultations is to share the bits and pieces of growing evidence that God’s story is continuing. As we put together these pieces and share them within our fellowship, there is yet another task: through whatever means and modes that are available to each of us to tell the continuing story widely, warmly, and with the truth to which we are pledged clearly shining through.

Faithfulness to the Gospel

As stories emerge Christians must learn to listen with discernment. Discernment facilitates spiritual growth as we learn to see more clearly and to choose responsibly the Christ-like path. Through each of our encounters with life we gain maturity in perceptions and judgment. It becomes clear that not all that is true is inscribed in things past. Even history reflects perceptual and judgmental errors. Not all that is claimed as foundational by modern humanity is reliable.

All around us there are new things to hear, new things to see, and most importantly, new understandings. We need humility in our judgments in order to mature into the judgments and the truth that underlies the universe that God put in place. Error lies close to truth. Choice is always necessary. Seeking God’s holiness is not a solitary task. The community of faith displays God’s providence most fully as we seek together to please the creator by respecting the creation. From the respectful and reflective consideration of what God has made each person contributes to the exploration of the frontiers of knowledge and understanding. This process is not only a mandate for Christian scholarship and contributions to science, history and theology but more generally a life-task for all those who seek the honor of Jesus Christ.

The test of *truth* must always be considered. Most simply put, is the story faithful to the Gospel? Does it reflect God’s story, revealing the salvific motive and the redemptive plan?

From the Word God's people derive vitality and vigor. The righteous quest for truth does not condone destructiveness but leads to growth and edification. If we believe ourselves to be ultimate judges, originators, or even infallible interpreters, we run the risk of doing damage. Determining the integrity of a story begins with careful attention to its source. Judging whether a story, in part or whole, is to be accepted can be guided by this criterion: is it God's story or is it simply a human display of wishful thinking?

Effects in the lives of others

Though it is not a fool-proof test, one of the better indicators of truth is in the way it affects people (*human subjects*, as we say in social science). In general, the Greeks had it right; Hippocrates wrote these words in his essay *Epidemics*, "*The physician must be able to tell the antecedents, know the present, and foretell the future—must mediate these things, and have two special objects in view with regard to disease, namely, to do good or to do no harm.*" It is likely from this passage that the so-called Hippocratic oath was derived: "First, do no harm." Any story that leads to embarrassment, isolation, or injury to the welfare, self-esteem, or reputation of others is probably going to fail other tests of faithfulness to the Gospel. Does the story demean, belittle, or degrade persons? Or does it enlighten, encourage, and further the development of the people it identifies? Does the story incite or feed suspicions and rumors and thereby fail to contribute to the cause of faith? This question is more problematic than it sounds, because shedding light on flaw and failure seems justifiable if the evil and fundamental error is to be restrained.

Every story involves information about one or more persons. When any such information becomes more widely accessible the effects on these persons must be considered. The reputation, emotional stability, and general welfare of all implicated persons, whether or not the story is assumed to be benign, must be considered and likely should be protected. When the story includes information about the behaviors, attitudes, and intentions of others it must surely be submitted to the basic tests of evidence. Or to put it in Hippocratic language, *first do not contribute to that which is untrue.*

Christo-centric focus and emphasis

Since we believe that God reigns in his creation, almost anything actual, real, and based on evident facts can be represented responsibly as a "Christian" story if it contributes to a more responsible and more thorough understanding. Putting it more simply, a story can be used to the glory of God if it is honest and if it serves a worthy purpose. Thus all sorts of events occur and there is likelihood that information about many of them can be used by and for Christians. Perhaps this generalization can encourage Christians to attend to the news, whether in the newspaper, television, or radio. We ignore the world around us at our own peril, and in so doing we denigrate the purposes of the church in the world. If exalting the Lordship of Jesus Christ is held as a basic guideline, almost any story can be told in a way that will emphasize God's story.

Exaggerating and biasing a story into untruth in order to make it "sound good" or "come out right" is for many Christian story-tellers a tempting misstep. Ironically, most such stories, even if they may seem believable, are more apt to be accepted as valid if the story-teller avoids embellishments beyond the truth. "Just tell it as it is" should be the quiet watchword for every Christian's practice of the high art of story-telling.

The Gospel should be the central motive of the Christian's story-telling. Not every story needs to be a "Bible story." Nor should every story somehow explain and promote a Christian value or perspective, but as in our every consciousness, the Lordship of Christ should be central and the choices we make

should give evidence that we are “bought with a price.” If the Christian’s commitment to the Kingdom of God causes us to avoid the salacious and demeaning forms a story can take, it will show.

A personal note here. It was just this awareness that changed my life at age 13 in the back room of our Boy Scout hall, when a Christian brother, somewhat older and one of my “heroes” quietly asked me, “Ted, what are you laughing at?” The rest of the boys in our patrol were freely exchanging the most extreme “dirty” stories in their several personal repertoires. Shyness is sometimes a virtue. In this situation it had kept me on the sidelines. But my older friend had noted that I was occasionally laughing, almost as vigorously as anyone. “What are you laughing at?” he mumbled in my ear. I have never forgotten it. It remains one of my favorite stories—hardly more than a childhood incident, but ultimately Christ-honoring and life-shaping. If we are self-critical, such a story can be passed along with conviction.

What has God been doing in your life? Tell us about it. We need the encouragement and the maturing that your story can bring.

DETERMINING A STORY’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WAY

One of assumptions underlying the emphasis in this Consultation is that each of us has access to pieces and parts of the unfolding story of God’s power and authority in the world. Not only should we know the stories told in the Bible, but we should see the Bible as a *whole story*, revealed by the creator and sustainer. And it goes beyond that. Many of us are motivated to collect, pass along, and gain strength from the stories of brothers and sisters at home and abroad who are parts of the unfolding story of God’s continuing work. We have come together to commit ourselves more actively to the collective work. In recent years the emphasis on orality, the increasing use of dialogue, and the discovery of more powerful ecclesiology are stimulating a new sense of purpose in the church. Through all of this, **story** has become the revealed centerpiece. In the new perspectives, **story** has lost most of its childhood baggage. It no longer connotes the strained alibi of the teller of untruths. (My mother used the gerund, “storying,” just before her threat to mete out punishment).

Thank God, **story** has returned to its roots. **Story** has become a matter of interest and emphasis. Not only are we inspired to be story-tellers as we reflect on the power of Jesus the Teacher, but we are here to reflect on all three of these story-related tasks:

1. Seeking out and collecting
2. Sharing and passing along
3. Assessing and gaining strength

Applicability to contemporary situations

The most valuable purposes served by seeking out, sharing, and assessing the stories of God’s on-going work in the world fall into two categories: 1. *to enlighten* and *to deepen* understanding of on-going events and conditions that relate to the circumstances that indicate, shape, or are related to the cause of Christ and the outworking of the Gospel, and 2. *to extend the scope and clarity* of the interpretations that the people of God are able to make. These interpretations range from societal meanings to spiritual applications. All of this falls in the category of discernment and what the Bible calls “understanding the times.”

To enlighten and thus to increase understanding

The stories we seek out and carefully listen to are most valuable when they help us understand things that previously were only dimly grasped. As a picture can provide a way to see a scene more clearly and perhaps to interpret it more fully, a story can be the vehicle for raising our consciousness of the emotions, the sequences, and the observable details in a social situation. Especially as we reflect on a story on its third or fourth hearing, we may exclaim, “Oh, now I see what’s really going on!” Yes, **see!**

A well-told story can be as vivid and “realistic” as the event-reality it represents. Comparing the Gospel as written by Luke with John’s account reflects the importance of details of two separate types. John’s details are more concerned with religious philosophy and history; Luke fills his pages with details about persons—their ancestors, the individuals who were present at a scene, even the onlookers. Thus depending on the experiences and cultural attunement of the reader, more of Luke’s story than of John’s will be remembered or vice-versa. But in each case, the difference in perspective gives the reader a fuller grasp of the meaning and worth of the gospel

Discovery of deeper meaning

Stories are the literary equivalent of pictures. Stories are word-pictures--pictorial images in the mind of the story-teller that make images available to the hearer. Much that is remembered stays in memory because it has been knitted into an elaborately interconnected set of memories. These bits of recollections are connected by associated clues from the mind of the story-teller. The listener brings these bits together to form the hearer’s own version of the story. In much the same way the observer makes a version of a scene observed, a picture seen, or an image represented in any graphic form. Whether heard or seen, the bits form a story. And meanings are attached by the perceiver from his or her repertoire of previous experiences. Think of it this way, the meaning of the story is not so much on the screen or in the print on the page as it is within the experiential memory-bank of the hearer/viewer. What is most likely to be remembered is the portion of the new information that coincides and thus reinforces previously processed (older) information. The story is a powerful vehicle of communication. It encourages new encounters with the information already stored and thus it encourages the mind to develop additional structure that will transform information into understandings.

Jesus knew this very well. Consider his stories. A woman has lost a coin; she goes to great lengths to find it. A shepherd has many sheep; but when even one is lost he takes it very seriously and hurriedly searches for it. The man who simply buries the resources given in trust to him will lose even more. Note that Jesus the story teller was able to challenge his disciples to their limits (in Luke 8:9 they have to ask for an explanation), but especially in his public interactions he was concerned that his listeners get *the point*. He was not an entertainer; he was an *excellent teacher!*

Stories, in that they describe actions and indicate causes and effects, gain power by projecting the event-image into perceptible forms. This may explain the story-teller’s occasional interjection of the rhetorical question, “Can’t you just see it?”

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