

Biblical Narrative as an Agent for Worldview Change

There are a number of concepts that are essential for accurate understanding of the Gospel. It is unrealistic to think that they can be understood and internalized through relatively superficial exposure. The Biblical narrative may have been God's answer all along!

by Don Pederson

The essence of missionary work is communication. God has given us a message and commanded us to take it to every “tongue and tribe and people and nation.” However, even under the best of conditions we experience communication difficulties and failures. When we consider the task of communicating the Gospel across language and cultural boundaries, we confront a less than optimum communication situation. Missionaries face the formidable task of attempting to communicate an alien message in a language that they speak imperfectly to a people whose worldview differs in significant ways from their own and from the biblical worldview as presented in Scripture.

The foreignness of the message is an obstacle for anyone who shares the Gospel, whether to an educated urban Westerner or a rural tribal person. In fact, it goes counter to our natural bent. No one naturally believes that they are helpless to save themselves. The response of the Israelites to God's demands are typical of all mankind: “Everything the LORD has said we will do” (Ex. 24:3). All religious systems, other than biblical Christianity, are based on a system of performance: do the right things and you will attain salvation. The idea that salvation is unattainable through human effort but rather is dependent on God is abhorrent to the self-centered human heart.

Communication is based on shared language, culture, and experience. Individuals who speak the same language, but do not have the same culture or experiences, can communicate to a degree, but will experience a signifi-

cant amount of miscommunication. When communication takes place between people who have the same language and culture there is a higher degree of communication. Because they share the same culture, the likelihood that their assumptions and presuppositions intersect, increases.

Inadequacy of Traditional Methods

It has been quite common in the history of missionary endeavor to begin teaching with the life of Christ, present the Gospel message and solicit a response as quickly as possible. This method is attractive because it allows the missionary to get to the “point” as quickly as possible. This approach has born fruit but has often resulted in nominalism and syncretism, which are two sides of the same coin. A major reason for using the traditional methodology is its familiarity. That is how evangelism has been done in the home countries of Europe and North America and to some degree it seems it has been successful. However, the audience in the home countries and the audience in a tribal world are very different. Historically, the missionary sending countries were Christian in their outlook and worldview. Because of this, the preacher or evangelist could assume that he and the audience shared a great many presuppositions regarding the nature and character of God, sin, salvation, Satan, and Jesus Christ. In ministering among tribal people, and indeed people who come from any other religious or cultural tradition, operating with this assumption is a recipe for syncretism. Even those ministering in

countries with a European history and tradition are finding that they can no longer assume common definitions of theological terms in our post-modern societies.

In Lewis Carroll's (1960) *Through the Looking Glass* the following exchange occurs between Humpty Dumpty and Alice:

I don't know what you mean by “glory,” Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant, there's a nice knock-down argument for you!” “But ‘glory’ doesn't mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected. “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that's all.

In evangelizing cross-culturally, it is quite possible to unconsciously operate with Humpty Dumpty's view of words. Because we know the definitions of the biblical terms, we project those definitions on to the words we have chosen to express them in the tribal language and assume the tribal people will understand what we are talking about. In effect, we, like Humpty Dumpty, think we can make the words mean what we want them to mean.

In reality there are a number of concepts that are essential for accurate understanding of the Gospel and it is unrealistic to think that they can be understood and internalized through relatively superficial exposure. This is recognized as true even in the current American context as reflected in the following comment by William Willimon (1997).

There is no way I can crank the Gospel down to the level where any American can walk in off the street and know what it is all about within 15 minutes. One can't do that even with baseball! You have to learn the vocabulary, the rules, and the culture in order to understand it. Being in church is at least as different as being in a baseball stadium (p.31).

How can we effectively transmit a biblical understanding of the key concepts needed to understand the Gospel? For instance, take the main concept: God. How can we clearly communicate who God is in his nature and attributes? As products of Western educational institutions, most of us would immediately develop a list of attributes and teach them to the target audience. After teaching them that God is holy, just, merciful, gracious, omnipotent, etc., we would assume that they now understand who God is and what He is like.

Unfortunately, most tribal people have never learned from systematized curriculum; they learn from stories. Additionally, the problem of definitions comes up. How can we be sure that the tribal words we use for such concepts as holiness, righteousness, grace, etc., are communicating correctly? We have only moved the original problem one step further away.

Using the Bible Story

Over the past 20 years the use of the Old Testament story to provide the necessary background and conceptual understanding needed to understand the Gospel in the New Testament has been gaining acceptance in the mission community. Much of the early work was done by Trevor McIlwain (1987-1992) and other New Tribes Mission missionaries in the Philippines (Jay Jackson, Dell and Sue Schultze, Tom Steffen, Brian and Dianne Thomas). The use of stories as preparation for the Gospel derived from the following observations:

—Much of the Bible is historical narrative. God must have had a reason for choosing this literary motif.

—God revealed Himself in the historical context of His interaction with mankind through His acts, not just

His spoken words.

—Tribal people learn best from stories and the spoken word.

—Starting at the beginning of a story makes more sense than starting in the middle.

As more and more church planters began to use foundational Old Testament narrative to provide the conceptual framework for understanding the Gospel, there were positive reports of people coming to faith in Christ. Additionally, missionaries reported the sense of security they experienced in allowing the scriptural narrative to invest the terms they were using with meaning. Rather than discovering and listing the tribal terms that would identify the attributes of God, the tribal people were learning of His character as revealed in His dealings with Adam and Eve, the patriarchs and others. As Christians who have studied the Bible and systematic theology, it is difficult for us to appreciate the difference between the living person of God as revealed in Scripture and a list of His attributes.

Perhaps the following example will help to illustrate. Here is a partial list of characteristics of a well known figure in American culture:

Lived in the Midwest.

Rationalized dishonesty.

Shrewd

Associated with disreputable people

Keen judge of character

Lived with an aunt

Do you feel like you know this person after reading this listing of facts about him? Probably not. Now let me identify him by name: Tom Sawyer. For those of us who have read the book (or seen the film) an immediate sense of this character floods through our minds. But notice, we “know” him because we know the story.

Chronological Teaching Program

During the past fifteen years a significant amount of development of evangelism and church planting programs has been carried out by Trevor

McIlwain based on using the Old and New Testament as narratives. It has become the church planting *modus operandi* for New Tribes Mission and is being used to varying degrees by most evangelical mission agencies.

The program as developed by McIlwain is composed of seven phases and is available for phases 1-4 in the nine volume series *Building on Firm Foundations*. The following table provides the salient features of each phase:

Phase 1:

Scripture covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ.

Target audience: Unsaved and those not clear concerning their salvation. Believers untaught in the Old Testament Believers wishing to reach others with the Gospel.

Emphasis: Salvation. Man's need of salvation and God's provision through Christ.

Phase 2:

Scripture covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ

Target audience: Believers, particularly new believers.

Emphasis: The security of the believer in Christ. Constantly remind them that all God demanded from them as sinners has been provided for by Christ.

Phase 3:

Scripture covered: Acts (overview)

Target audience: Believers, particularly new believers.

Purpose: To continue the story following the Ascension of Christ. To provide historical and geographical background for the remainder for the New Testament. To use the infant church in Acts as a model for the developing and emerging church in the tribal situation.

Phase 4:

Scripture covered: Overview of the rest of the New Testament (especially the Epistles).

Target audience: Believers, primarily new believers.

Purpose: Complete the teaching of the overview of God's revelation which began in Genesis. Make believers aware of their position in Christ and to teach them how to appropriate Christ's life through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Emphasize God's holy standard for every part of

the believer's life. Teach new believers their God-given position, gifts, and responsibilities as members of a New Testament church. Teach the scriptural requirements and ministries of pastors and elders. Teach God's future plan and program for His Church, Israel, and the world.

Phase 5:

Scripture covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ.

Target audience: Maturing Believers

Emphasis: Sanctification in the life of the believer. Emphasize the spiritual training received by the disciples.

Phase 6:

Scripture covered: Detailed study of Acts. Expository teaching.

Target audience: Maturing Believers.

Emphasis: Holy Spirit's guidance, training, and sanctifying work in the early church and the life of the apostle Paul.

Phase 7:

Scripture covered: Detailed study of the Epistles. Expository teaching

Target audience: Maturing believers

Emphasis: The church and the walk of the believer.

It should be emphasized that the point of this program is not simply to teach or tell Bible stories, but in telling them to highlight the themes that are significant to understanding the concepts that are foundational to the Gospel. As such, God is to remain the primary focus, not the human characters.

Phase One is the most crucial in that it deals with salvation and forms the foundation for the teaching phases that follow. In teaching through the stories in Phase One, the following doctrinal themes are emphasized in the context of the biblical narrative:

Person and Character of God

1. God is supreme and sovereign. God was the only One who lived "...in the beginning." Therefore, He is totally independent of everything and everyone. The angels were created to serve God. He made them, so they rightfully belong to Him. God had the authority to place man as manager over the earth because God created man.

2. God communicates with man.

When God placed Adam in the garden, He told him he could eat of the fruit of any tree except the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God called out to Adam in the garden. God reasoned with Cain.

3. God is omnipresent and omniscient. God did not need anyone to teach Him how to create everything. God was able to put the sun, moon, and stars high in the sky because He is everywhere. Adam and Eve could not hide from God because He is everywhere and knew where they were.

4. God is omnipotent. God created everything out of nothing, for nothing is impossible to God. God's power holds the sun, moon, and stars in the sky. God was able to create everything in only 6 days because He is almighty.

5. God is holy and righteous. He demands death as the payment for sin. God prepared the Lake of Fire for Lucifer and his fallen spirit followers. God told Adam that he would die if he disobeyed and ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God killed animals in order to make clothing for Adam and Eve. Adam died.

6. God is loving, merciful, and gracious. God created everything good and beautiful in this world for man to enjoy because He is loving. Although Adam and Eve deserved to die and go into everlasting punishment, God promised a Savior who would deliver them and all mankind from Satan's control and bring them back to God. God provided clothing for Adam and Eve.

7. God is faithful and immutable. God finished all that He planned to create. When He begins a work, He always finishes it. The immediate result of Adam and Eve's sin was death. Their bodies began to die, and they died spiritually. God gave Seth to replace Abel because He had promised a Deliverer and the Deliverer would come through the line of Seth.

Fallen Mankind

1. Man is a sinner. He needs God and is helpless to save himself. Adam disobeyed God when he ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God refused the clothing which Adam and Eve had made.

2. Cain and Abel were born sinners because their father Adam was a sinner.

3. Man can come to God only according to God's will and plan. God refused the clothing which Adam and Eve had made. Cain's offering was rejected because he did not come to God according to God's will and plan. The ark had to be built just as God instructed.

4. Man must have faith in order to please God and be saved. Abel's offering was accepted by God because he came in faith. Noah built the ark as God instructed because he believed in God to save him from the flood. Abraham believed God when he offered up his son Isaac.

Satan Opposes God

Satan fights against God and His will. He is a liar and a deceiver. Satan hates man. Satan disguised himself and deceived Eve. Satan led the descendants of Noah to worship false gods. Satan guided King Herod to kill the babies in an attempt to kill Jesus.

Jesus Christ the Deliverer

1. Jesus Christ is God. The angel told Mary that her son would be called "...the Son of the Highest..." It was right for the wise man to worship Jesus because He is God. John recognized Jesus as the promised Deliverer.

2. Jesus Christ is man. Jesus was born as Mary's son. Jesus was tempted by Satan. Jesus' human body was transfigured.

3. Jesus Christ is holy and righteous. Jesus is without a human father, so He is sinless. When Jesus was baptized, God said that He was fully satisfied

with Him. Jesus did not give in to Satan's temptations.

4. Jesus Christ is the only Savior. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that He would be lifted up like the snake in the wilderness. Just as God gave the Israelites manna from Heaven to save them from physical death in the wilderness, so God sent Jesus from Heaven into the world to be the only deliverer of sinners. Peter recognized that Jesus was the Deliverer whom God had promised.

Dramatic Results

There are numerous stories from countries all over the world that recount dramatic responses to the Gospel after the Old Testament foundational teaching had prepared the people to respond in faith to the message of the cross. The clarity and depth of the testimonies is thrilling. They refer to Christ being their sin-bearer, the perfect sacrifice that fully satisfied God's righteous demands on their behalf. Significantly absent are references in their testimonies to what they have done to obtain this new standing with God. Most importantly, the Word of God has changed their worldview. They have been transformed from animists who believe that they can manipulate the supernatural realm, to followers of Christ who come empty handed to the foot of the cross just as expressed by the words of the old hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."

Beyond the clear testimonies are stories of changes in behavior that are expressions of an inward change that can only be the result of a deep work of God. One example is a vignette that was related to me by Wayne Gill, a missionary among the Chimane people of Bolivia. The rainbow is the most dangerous and feared of spiritual beings in the Chimane worldview. Most sickness and death is attributed to the actions of the rainbow. Because of this, Chimane hide in their houses when a rainbow

appears in the sky. One afternoon a rain shower forced a group of young Chimane men to stop their soccer game to seek shelter. After the rain stopped, a brilliant rainbow appeared right next to the soccer field. As Wayne observed this scenario, he recognized it as an opportunity to see if the truths of Scripture had truly taken root in their thinking. He watched them look at the rainbow and briefly engage in animated discussion after which he could hear a peal of laughter as they went back out on the field to continue their interrupted soccer game. Their actions were a clear indication that their worldview had been changed at a very deep level. What they had done was life threatening in the Chimane worldview, yet, they had put their lives on the line. Truly, their actions spoke louder than words.

Summary

In searching for effective means of communicating the Gospel, we find in the narrative structure of the Bible God's choice for communicating with mankind. As missionaries from countries all over the world have used the biblical narrative to lay a foundation for the Gospel, they have given testimony to the power of scripture to bring new understanding to those they teach.

A common objection to this mode of teaching is that it takes too long. There are situations where this is a problem since we do not always have all the time we like and need. However, in our concern about time, we must be very careful not to neglect foundations for Christian faith and life, for in so doing we may end up with a beautiful Christian structure built on a wrong foundation of animism (or on humanism in our modern world). How much better to follow Paul's exhortation to build as a "wise master builder" so that what we build will be genuine and will last.

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Videos

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