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## Nurturing Narrative Evangelists

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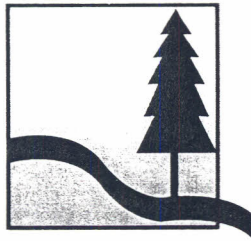
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# Nurturing Narrative Evangelists

BY MARK LOVE

*It is my argument that evangelism means inviting people into (the biblical) stories as the definitional story of our life, and thereby authorizing people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways.<sup>1</sup>*

Brueggemann's biblically grounded suggestion concerning the nature of evangelism requires the church to think carefully about the kind of nurture it must provide for evangelists to grow in its midst. His suggestion conceives evangelism in terms that are primarily narrative. People become Christian by hearing the Christian story and deciding to live within its trajectories. This is different from many past and current conceptions of evangelism. Rather than inviting persons into the framework of the unfolding narrative, many evangelists present potential converts with a series of propositions to be believed. These two different approaches require different skills from persons who might be involved in evangelistic work. This article proceeds on the assumption that Brueggemann's suggestion stands on firmer biblical and theological footing than do propositional approaches to evangelism. This shift in thinking about evangelism will require related shifts in how we conceive of the role of the church and the work of the evangelist in the economy of evangelism.

## Propositional Pedestrians

Evangelism in the modern era has been characterized by the quest for propositional truth.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach might begin with proofs for the existence of God, follow with arguments for the trustworthiness of scripture, con-

tinue with proofs of the resurrection of Jesus, and end with an appeal to assent to the truth of scripture. Here evangelists function as apologists, drawing from rational argument reasonable evidence for the truth claims of the gospel. They are scientists, often equipped with facts in the form of charts and fill-in-the-blanks questionnaires. They are salesmen, demonstrating the obvious reasonableness of following Jesus.

However, these one-size-fits-all approaches assume a precise commonness of human experience and a static understanding of the gospel which, in the extreme, are reductionist. While these approaches are simple, they are often also simplistic. They fail to explore with depth and nuance the human condition or the variety of images and meanings that accompany the cross. Moreover, by distilling the scriptures into propositional points, the dramatic character of scripture is lost. Biblical narratives are seen as husks to be shed for the benefit of some timeless or universal point. Because of this, larger and more dynamic meanings of the gospel are wrested from the evangelist in favor of a gaggle of proof-texts.

Finally, this pedestrian view of evangelism may often fail at the most critical juncture. Propositions convince, but they do not always convert. A smoker may agree that smoking causes lung cancer and still not stop smoking. As Brueggemann suggests, "People do not change, or change much, because of doctrinal agreement or sheer cognitive appeal."<sup>3</sup> This may explain why such approaches to evangelism often depend heavily on sales techniques or emotional appeal. They often fail at the level of conversion.

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### Narrative Artists

Brueggemann's understanding of evangelism demands conversion. Richard Osmer states well the relationship between narrative and conversion:

It is not adequate to think of human commitment primarily as a matter of human will. Inviting our students to use their willpower to become more dedicated in their relationship to God is likely to be ineffective. This is because the human will is grounded in something deeper: the underlying story by which humans make sense of their lives. Only a reinterpretation of this story—what we call **personal identity narrative**—influences the various decisions and choices people make.<sup>4</sup>

Conversion is a narrative enterprise, not something that can be reduced into a simple scheme. As Brueggemann suggests, "There may be a quick conversion, but there is no easy conversion, because conversion means to be uprooted from the fabric of meaning and security to which we are long habituated."<sup>5</sup> Narrative evangelists explore the complex of colliding narratives that mark the work of conversion.

To switch from a propositional model of evangelism to a narrative model requires a different set of assumptions and, by extension, a different set of skills. First, the one-size-fits-all approach, dominated by apologetic concerns, often assumes a common terrain between the gospel and the experiences of the listener. Propositional evangelism, therefore, calls persons into realities they already know or experience, albeit at a different level. Enlightenment, inspiration, moral willfulness, personal

improvement, or other forms of previously held values or beliefs are often held out as the goal of evangelism. Narrative evangelism assumes that one's story cannot simply be augmented or expanded to include God; a competing narrative that demands radically new perspectives and allegiances must interrupt it. As William Willimon suggests:

The gospel is not a set of interesting ideas about which we are supposed to make up our minds. The gospel is intrusive news that evokes a new set of practices, a complex of habits, a way of living in the world, discipleship. Because of its epistemological uniqueness, we cannot merely map the gospel onto our present experiences. The gospel is not an archaic, peculiar way of naming our typical human experiences through certain religious expressions. The gospel means to engender, to evoke, a particular experience that we would not have had before we met the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

The words "engender" and "evoke" (words different from "convince" or "argue") suggest more than just the extension of a person's perspective. They suggest the construction of an alternative reality. Brueggemann's suggestion for preaching follows for evangelists:

It is the steady surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age. The preacher has an awesome opportunity to offer an evangelical world: an existence shaped by the news of the gospel.<sup>7</sup>

The work of world construction demands more than paint-by-the-numbers, canned-approach pedestrian evangelists. It demands artists, or to use Brueggemann's term, poets. By artists and poets I do not mean painters and lyricists. Rather, these are persons who can imagine faithfully a gospelsed world and make it available to others. Artists stand with a palette full of colors before a blank canvas, able to interpret the subject in tones, hues, and subtleties that communicate to the intended viewer. Poets are able to choose from the glossary of the gospel words that are daring, liberated, unaccommodating, evocative, and passionate. Evangelists as artists evaluate their context and select from a story-formed heart appropriate mediums and messages to provide a meaningful alternative world.

Unfortunately, this way of conceiving evangelism requires more than just a training weekend with a fill-in-the-blanks format. Narrative evangelists are not so much trained as grown. In the novella *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean reports the words of his father: “All good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.” Nurturing evangelist-artists requires more than a handy outline of proof-texts and sales techniques. Narrative evangelists grow from the rich exploration over time of the narratives of faith.

### Narrative Skills

Leighton Ford suggests that conversion takes place in the collision of narratives present in an evangelistic context.<sup>8</sup> I would suggest that four narratives are at work in narrative evangelism: God’s, the speaker’s, the listener’s, and the Spirit-led community’s. Artists must be able to sense the interplay of these narratives to provide a meaningful alternative world. This requires certain skills and aptitudes that many in our churches sorely lack. Though we have been able to quote scripture to support propositions, we have lost a vital sense of the dramatic elements of the biblical narrative that give the faith converting power. I would like to suggest five areas that must be nurtured in the life of the narrative evangelist.<sup>9</sup>

*Awareness of personal narrative.* While faith is never private, it is personal. Few in our churches possess the words to describe how God has been active in their lives to save them. They understand their faith as a set of beliefs that they possess rather than as the dynamic working of God in their lives to bring them to completion. My sense is that churches that encourage their members to explore their own stories for evidence of God would naturally and by necessity become more evangelistic.

*Fluency in the word of the cross.* A personal story cannot be sorted faithfully apart from an understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Not everything in the Bible flies under the banner of gospel. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus forms the core of the gospel (1 Cor 15:1–9) and is broad enough in its reach to establish faith, sustain it, and extend it. Paul expressed extreme confidence in “the word of the cross” to produce converts. Moreover, straying from this gospel brought from Paul the sternest rebuke (Gal 1:1–5). The church, created by the gospel, has no entrepreneurial license to preach whatever it fancies.

Sadly, it seems that the church often lacks confidence in the word of the cross. Many evangelistic approaches hope to attract with messages on family, morality, or even something as problematic as “creation science.” This lack of confidence stems from an inadequate appreciation for the depth and texture of the cross as a place of meaning.

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While the gospel outline is sparse, no single image or explanation can exhaust its meaning. For example, Paul uses a variety of images to explain the meaning of the work of God in the cross of Jesus (justification, reconciliation, propitiation, and redemption, to name a few). Notice that the story of the cross remains the gospel. The message of first importance cannot be distilled into some principle. The gospel is not a list of ten essential doctrines or commands. It contains no explicit, detailed theory of the atonement. Neither is it a manual for church discipline or an explication of the doctrine of the Trinity. The gospel remains stubbornly a narrative. Having said that, however, the word of the cross is more than just the basic rudiment of the faith; it is also the surpassing wisdom. It pours forth in a multitude of images and captures every aspect of the church’s life. Narrative evangelists must be fluent in the images and meanings resident in the work of God on the cross.

*A grasp of “the story.”* The gospel preaching of the early church carried the authorizing seal “in accordance with the scriptures.” The story of the cross cannot be told without reference to the larger story of God’s dealing with humankind. Jesus must be understood within the context of God’s dealings with Israel for the sake of his creation. Those of the Stone-Campbell heritage often see the story of the church in discontinuity with the rest of the biblical narrative. The Old Testament is often annexed from saving truth as a divine strategy gone awry. Paul, however, sees a basic continuity in the story of Israel in relation to Jesus and the church. He understands Christ in relation to the promises made to Abraham, Moses, and David. As Ben Witherington suggests, “Paul’s thought is grounded

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in a grand narrative and in a story that has continued to develop out of that narrative.”<sup>10</sup>

Narrative evangelists must learn the contours of the grand biblical narrative. God reveals himself in his mighty deeds. A holy God evades easy description and does not give himself to a neat résumé listing of qualities or divine attributes. God’s person is known through the complexity of story. We can speak of God faithfully only as we know and tell his story.

*A nuanced reading of the human condition.* Many efforts of evangelism fail because of a lack of sophistication in the diagnosis of the human condition. The blanket charge of “sinner” is all too easily pointed back in the direction of the church. Too often we preach a message focusing on “sins” (isolated acts of immorality) instead of Sin (a disease of the human heart that can motivate even our “good” actions). Such a shallow diagnosis leads to easy evasion on the part of the listener. Moreover, such a moralistic understanding of sin offers a reduced salvation that depends too heavily on human will and decision and not enough on the grace and empowerment of God.

The drama of the biblical narrative revolves around the complex relationship between a holy God and a rebellious creation. The biblical portrait of humankind under the power of sin is textured and nuanced. Narrative evangelists explore this textured world, not only as they read the text, but also as they read in the contemporary culture. They must recognize the disease of sin in the world even as they recognize it in themselves. This is confessional work. Evangelistic conversation cannot comfortably speak in “us” and “them” cadences if the human condition is deeply explored.

*Skills of discernment.* A recovery of narrative understanding of the gospel often results in more active notions of God’s participation in evangelism. God is active in bringing his story to fruition. He continues to woo and

call people under his reign. John Wesley identified God as the great evangelist in the church. Tony Ash, in a previous issue of *Leaven*, cites nine different narratives in Acts where the work of the Spirit produces the occasion for witness. If God continues to be active in ushering in his kingdom by the Spirit, then evangelism requires spiritually discerning persons to recognize and join his work. As Ash points out, this is evangelism “on our knees,” seeking God constantly through prayer and other disciplines.<sup>11</sup>

This listening posture also aids the evangelist in relation to those hearing the good news. Not every prospective Christian’s story is the same. While some may be asking the question of Acts 2, “What must I do to be saved?” others begin with basic questions of meaning and human longing. Once I studied with a woman for well over a year. I threw everything I had at her—gospel studies, studies from Ephesians and Romans—to no apparent benefit. Finally I said, “We’ve pretty much covered everything I have to say. What do you want to talk about?” She began to describe the recent past of her life as a wilderness and doubted very much that God could find her in the wilderness. Wilderness! A few minutes into the telling of the Exodus story, tears began to flow. She was moved by the gospel from Exodus as it spoke to her life situation. God was present in the wilderness! He was present in her wilderness! I would never have thought to go there apart from listening to her story. Evangelistic artists must be prayerful listeners.

### **A Saving Dynamic Environment**

Narrative evangelism proceeds from the recognition that God is loose in the world, establishing his reign. Given this active view of God, Brueggemann correctly suggests that “evangelism is no safe church activity that will sustain a conventional church, not a routine enterprise that will support a societal status quo.”<sup>12</sup> Many would begin evangelistic renewal at a methodological starting place. We desire that small-group strategy or set of study materials that will enable us to do the work of evangelism. These are but cosmetic approaches to evangelism that sell short the need for deeper changes in favor of a quicker, safer, methodological fix.

A narrative approach to evangelism requires a vital sense of God’s active participation in the church’s life. The life of the church must brim with the emergent realities of God’s immanent work. For instance, worship must capture the dramatic nature of a narrative faith. Instead of

conceiving of worship as isolated acts, we must see it more as a dramatic reenactment of the gospel. God must be enthroned on our praises as we celebrate our movement from death to life in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. His mighty acts must be proclaimed—acts not only of the past but also of the present. A church doing narrative evangelism must have a testimonial witness to the continuing work of God in its midst. This is vitally important in a postmodern context where individuals look less for rational proof and more for narrative coherence. In other words, more and more people will determine the truthfulness of the faith by looking at how the life of the church measures up to its message.

A church involved in narrative evangelism will find itself caught up in the active moving of God. Evangelism is transformed in such a context from duty to adventure. Artists nurtured in such an environment can invite people into the converting adventure of God's unfolding story.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 10.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the effect of modernity on evangelistic practice, see my paper "Evangelism in the Third Millennium: Theological Perspectives," delivered at the 1998 Christian Scholars Conference, Pepperdine University.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Osmer, *Teaching for Faith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives*, 42.

<sup>6</sup> William Willimon, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Leighton Ford, *The Power of Story: Discovering the Oldest, Most Natural Way to Reach People for Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 14.

<sup>9</sup> My work in this area with the East County Church of Christ has focused on the production of four narrative guidebooks, two of which are complete, two in prospect. The first, *We Believe, Therefore, We Speak*, allows the participants to trace their own story in relation to the word of the cross. The second, *Charting the Story*, enables participants to grasp the grand biblical narrative. The third, which I hope to produce by January 1999, will use Luke's gospel to trace the story of Jesus. The final notebook will allow participants to understand baptism in a narrative context.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Ash, "Evangelism on Our Knees," *Leaven* 1, no. 4 (1990): 11–14.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives*, 129.