

1-1-1990

Let me Tell you the Story: Places to Begin

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Recommended Citation

Carter, Kelly (1990) "Let me Tell you the Story: Places to Begin," *Leaven*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss4/11>

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LET ME TELL YOU THE STORY: PLACES TO BEGIN

Where I begin my evangelistic studies depends on the place in life and the knowledge of the individual with whom I am studying. Assuming that the person with whom I am studying knows little or nothing about Jesus, I usually start with Luke 7:36-50, the story of Jesus in Simon the Pharisees home, where the sinful woman anoints Jesus' feet. This story includes mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and the response of love and faith by the forgiven. It also includes the opposite extreme of self-righteousness, legalism, and judgmentalism. It further shows that all are sinful and that Jesus deserves to be honored. Verse 49 specifically asks the question, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" After Luke 7:36ff I will in subsequent studies discuss several passages in the gospels which teach about Jesus' divinity, his power and authority, his knowledge, his love for mankind, his sacrifice, etc. The goal in all of this is to first get the non-Christian to understand and to respond, as a sinner, to Jesus. Once they know these things, or if they knew them at the outset, then I can move into specifics about repentance and baptism. The key is to primarily focus on Jesus, and not on the church, as we've done so much in the past.

Kelly Carter
Victoria, B.C.

When I encounter a person who is just beginning to search for answers to spiritual questions I use the Gospel of John as a starting point. I do this for a number of reasons, the most significant being the use of dialogue in the narrative. I believe this to be especially helpful in communicating Jesus as a real and historical person to the modern mind. I have found generally that people who have never seriously read the Bible are under the impression that all Bible subject matter is about angels, miracles, parting of seas and such things which have little or no connection with their own world.

The dialogue between Jesus and the people he encountered is particularly observable in the New International Version. Contemporary searchers can identify with the exchange of dialogue of the woman at the well, the Nicodemus encounter and the entire variety of dialogue to be found in John 9. The questions asked and the responses of the people are very comparable to questions and responses the modern might express today.

I encourage people to read the gospel through with an eye for Jesus' attitude toward people. I discourage them from getting distracted by subjects like demons, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, etc. We come back to these things in

time, but the first thing I have them do is get to know Jesus and the compelling power of his life. This forms the framework upon which all other teachings can be fitted.

Gary Cleveland
Oshkosh, WI

Let me show you a way to trust again.

Once in history God stepped out from behind the curtain - from behind the mysteries and "the big questions" and even the script - and took center stage: in the person of a village carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth. He came out where he could be seen and heard and touched...in real life and real relationships. He is fun at a party; he offers new life, always a chance to start over; and when you're caught literally naked before the world, he reminds your accuser of their sins. These stories are gospel! What they tell us is that God loved us enough to become one of us and then die for us. Then he was resurrected, liberating us from our slavery (our obsession-avoidance reaction) to the fear of death.

When we finally see God this way, we know that we can trust him. Going one step farther, we can trust the life he is giving us.

Drawn from the Gospel of John (Esp. John 1:1,14; 14:9)

Dale Pauls
Stamford, CT

My faith-sharing has been strongly influenced by this statement from Helmut Thielicke: "We should listen with the ears of God so that we can speak the Word of God." I believe that listening has been largely absent from our evangelism with the result that our words fail to address heart-hungers of others. Thus in my time with people I do a lot of listening. I want to know about their fears and anxieties—the things that keep them awake at night. I also want to know what their past experiences with God and faith are. I listen to find out if they sense that God is for them or against them. Do they feel accepted by God? Have they felt disappointed by God, or by God's people?

Once I begin to have a feel for their concerns, I am in a position to speak good news. I look for ways to address the particular issues they have raised. Although I have no standardized approach, I usually try to focus their attention upon the life of Jesus. My favorite place to do this is from the Gospel of Luke. Luke's portrayal of Jesus the Man of compassion is readily received. Using Luke's Gospel also makes it easy to make the transition to Acts where he described what changes occurred in the lives of people who believed on Jesus.

Don Crittenden
Bloomington, IL

As a local evangelist, it is my personal goal to have two personal Bible studies with non-Christians at least 5 days every week. My first objective with each student is to help them get a grasp of God's overall plan from creation through eternity after judgment. This 60-90 minute survey of the Bible often helps them to put together in order all the scattered Bible stories they have heard for

years and brings to the surface many unanswered questions they have. Most importantly, it helps them to see how and where they can be a part of God's eternal plan through faith in Christ Jesus. My next objective is to help them understand from Ephesians 2:1-10 what their sin has done to their relationship with God and what God has done to solve that problem. Jesus is clearly seen as the centerpiece of both of these studies. Finally, since God's saving grace comes through faith in Christ Jesus the next study is about what action, on man's part, is involved in saving faith and acceptance of the free gift of eternal life in Christ. The conversions recorded in the book of Acts provide repeated examples, for ongoing studies, of people responding to the gospel of Jesus Christ and becoming a part of God's eternal family, the church.

Jerry Tallman
Rochester, MI

My hunch is that I could have baptized Sheila within a month of our first meeting. Yet, it took nearly a year. I do not apologize for a single lost day.

Sheila wanted so badly to be religious. Her grandmother, who had been a great influence in her life, had recently died. Questions surrounding death had led her to search for transcendent realities. Her new boyfriend had introduced her to the Church of Christ Bible Chair. Her association with these folks produced several religious questions as well

— most of which had nothing to do with the gospel. She came to me hoping to find an easy resolution to the questions of her life.

Sheila was kind, intelligent, responsible, and caring. She would make a productive member of any organization including the church. But did she need to be saved?

We began our study by addressing some of her initial questions. What would be the eternal destiny of her unbelieving father? What was the biblical view of women? Having cleared the preliminaries we turned our attention to the Gospel of Mark trying to find the identity of the person Jesus.

After reading Mark's account of the good news Sheila came to my office distraught. This was not who she expected to find. This Jesus seemed harsh and demanding beyond the capabilities of the disciples to respond. More than that, Sheila was concerned with the fact of the cross. Why did God's story find suffering as its focal point? Why was there so much conflict in the Jesus story? Shouldn't this story be more about love?

I was sorely tempted to explain away the offense of the cross, to make the Christian story more palatable to her sensibilities. But I remembered that the cornerstone was also the stumbling block. "The word of the cross was foolishness to those who are perishing, but for those being saved, it is the power of God." The only consolation I could provide to Sheila was that at least she was struggling with the right issue.

We moved to another portrait of Jesus as we embarked upon a study of the Gospel of John. At the same time, I gave her a copy of John Stott's book, **The Cross of Christ**. Slowly, the realities of the gospel became apparent. She began to appreciate the gap between God's righteousness and our sinfulness. "The message of the cross" began to break her

heart.

Toward the end of our studies together Sheila would cry as we read scripture together. Her tears were filled both with sorrow for the reality of the cross, and with joy for the heart of God that was revealed in the sacrifice of Jesus. I was confident in telling her that I could see the Spirit of God at work in her life convincing her of the truth of the gospel. The gospel found a sure spot in her heart after she listened to a sermon on the cross preached by Leonard Allen. She was changed. Given the culmination of her experience with the cross of Christ baptism was an obvious conclusion. She wanted so much to be a part of the story of the cross.

The morning she was baptized she came with a cross that she had found in her grandmother's belongings. It had become the most precious symbol of her decision to follow

Jesus. That morning she was crucified with Christ.

She had come wanting answers, wanting to be religious. She found something deeper and more. She was converted to the way of the cross. She was saved.

I could not help but wonder how many persons are robbed of this great salvation due to our impatience or desire to chalk up another statistic. I could not help but wonder how many persons we had baptized into their own values rather than into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. I could not help but wonder how deep and meaningful the salvation found in Jesus could become to me. For the truth is, I was changed. I knew that through the experience of the cross I was being saved. By focusing on Jesus and his cross salvation had come to the student and the teacher.