

Theo-storying

Reflections on God, Narrative, and Culture

by
Robert H. Munson

© 2012 Robert Munson
MM-Musings Publishing (Baguio City, Philippines)

Original	November 2012
Revision A	June 2015
Revision B	November 2019

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	4
Introduction	5
Chapters	
1 Story #1 . The Useful Bowl	9
2 Stories as an Experience	15
3 Story as a Living Tapestry	22
4 Cultural Relevance and Cultural Resonance	27
5 St. Paul and the Theo-Story	35
6 The Story and Theology	41
7 Mythic and Parabolic Functions of Stories	49
8 Role of Mythic and Parabolic Stories	55
9 The Story Wheel	62
10 Power of Parables	66
11 God in Proposition, Metaphor, and Model	72
12 Story #2. The Master Clockmaker	77
13 Images as Stories	81
14 Redemptive Analogy	86
15 Listener Response	92
16 Countercultural Contextual Storying	99
17 Stories that Teach	106
18 Something Old, Something Borrowed...	112
19 Theological Reflection	118
Conclusions	128
Endnotes	130
References	137
Stories Index	141

Figures

1	An Unfinished Tapestry	26
2	Dialectical Model	31
3	Cultural Dialectical Model	32
4	Results of a Strong Connection Between Myth and Culture	37
5	Results of a Weak Connection Between Myth and Culture	38
6	History Quadrants	44
7	Story Quadrants	51
8	A Classic Story Structure	58
9	Prodigal Son and a Classic Story Structure	59
10	Spiderman and the Prodigal Son	60
11	Story Wheel	64
12	Mending the Hurts	83
13	The Human “Trinity”	93
14	Golden Repair	117

Acknowledgments

It is strange that I felt the need to write about stories. With my background in Mechanical and Nuclear Engineering, before going into Christian Missions, my training may seem to many as completely inappropriate to look into stories and metaphors. And I suppose they would be correct. I consider this a learning and growing project. My formal ministerial training has been centered on Contextual Theology, and it is that area that compelled me to see story and metaphor as the best route to contextualize theology for different cultures. I hope that the reflective path I am on, a divine quest so to speak, will be of some benefit to others as well.

This has been a family project. My wife, Celia, has encouraged me in this writing, and has made suggestions to make this work valuable. Both she and my son Joel, have proofread it for me (along with a few close friends). Since Celia is a pastoral counselor, she values story, especially in terms of personal growth and healing. Rebekah provided two drawings for the book. It is great to be part of a supportive team, and even more so if they are your family.

Books are not meant to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we must not ask ourselves what it says but what it means.

-Umberto Eco

INTRODUCTION

God of the Story

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

This is how the Bible starts. The term “in the beginning” (b'eresith) has a subtle mystery associated with it. The beginning of what? Here are a few possibilities.

- **The Beginning of God.** This appeals to a pantheistic understanding of God, but appears to be Biblically unsound. The God of the Bible is a Creator God, and the world is His creation.
- **The Beginning of the Heavens and Earth.** This holds more promise, especially if one assumes that Genesis 1:1 is describing creation ex nihilo (out of nothing) as opposed to giving structure to a formless dark universe. Still, perhaps it is a bit redundant. “In the beginning of the heavens and the earth, God created the heavens and the earth.”
- **The Beginning of Space-Time.** In this era of Modern Physics, the interaction between space and time provides fuel for another viewpoint. God exists, and creates space-time. At one end of space-time is “THE BEGINNING.” The other end of space time is “ETERNITY.” Before (if that is a correct term) the beginning there was God and whatever, if anything, was with God; but space-time, the universe we call our home, did not exist. In the fullness of time, space-time will end and we will have eternity, with whatever characteristics it will have. This seems plausible.
- **The Beginning of the Story.** Before Genesis 1:1, the story, or grand narrative, that is related in the Bible, has not started. The story starts with the creation of earth, with the associated heavens, and ends with the new heavens and

earth-- and eternity. Eternity, then, would not be the cessation of time, but the end of the Great Story.

I am not sure we always have to choose one interpretation. I certainly believe looking at the Bible as a story holds merit. A story is:

“an account of characters and events in a plot moving over time and space through conflict toward resolution.”¹

The Bible obviously has characters and events, which takes place over time and space. It moves through conflict to resolution. To me, the bigger question is whether there is a plot.

A plot to me suggests a couple of things. First, it suggests intentionality. A recording of stuff happening does not make a plot. A plot, for fiction, involves crafting of events in a coherent fashion so that the early events link, and mean something, within the timeline of the story. In non-fiction, history, events are chosen and displayed in (again) a coherent fashion to give the events meaning within a timeline.

Because the Bible has God, working within history, as the main character, the protagonist, the story of the Bible has aspects of both fiction and non-fiction. The story of the Bible is non-fiction in that it claims, on the whole, to describe what happened, is happening, and will happen. The story of the Bible is like fiction because God is more than a character in the Bible, and more even than a historian, but the author of history. Thus, the story is more than simply the collecting of events, but the crafting/creating of events for the plot.

The dual qualities of fiction and non-fiction are difficult for some. Some focus on the human element of the story where God becomes more of a character and less of the author. On the other hand, some focus on God as sovereign author to the extent that people become nothing more than characters in a play--- props--, plot devices. It seems to me that the Bible works in “creative tension” between God as author and God as character.

Second, a plot suggests connectedness. On first reading, the Bible does not appear to be connected. It was written by different people over a long period of time utilizing different genres, in different languages, and set in different cultures. Does the Bible have a

sustained plot with intentionality, giving meaning to events, and connectedness giving causation of events?

I believe so. The plot elements seem clear enough. The most basic flow of a story involves;

- Normalcy
- Conflict event
- Building of conflict
- Resolution event
- Working out the resolution
- Return to (New) Normalcy

The Bible as a story can be seen as

Paradise → Paradise Lost → Paradise Restored
or
Harmony (God/Man/Creation) → Disharmony/Chaos
→ **Restoration of Harmony**
or
Purity/Perfection → Sin/Imperfection → Purity/Perfection

and more...

The basic flow of the plot can be argued about to some extent depending on the perspective of the reader. Even the antagonist can be argued about. Many point to Satan as the antagonist, with the Bible essentially being a war drama. However, most of the Bible focuses on us as humans as our own worst enemy. Satan provides little more than a supporting role in our chaotic rebellion. From this perspective, the Bible is more of a love story, from the perspective of the God as the one who loves, than a war drama.²

However, the resolution event is more clear. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus. This event provides the clarity to the thread of God's work in history. The divinity and humanity that is described as existing in Jesus brings the threads together. God is both author and main character of the story. Yet it is our story as well. We are characters in the story. We are also partly antagonist and protagonist. The divine and human are inseparably intertwined.

This book is a look at stories, not a look, primarily, at the Bible. But I believe it helps to start from the grand story and then work to the little stories within the grand story... including our own stories.

As an added note, I use the term “narrative” at times, and “story” at others. I will use the definition that a narrative is “the presence of a story and a storyteller.”³ One could argue the necessity of an audience. However, a narrative may still exist without an audience. Perhaps it is best to say that an effective narrative or an effective story has an audience, just as this book is effective only with a reader.

CHAPTER 1

Story #1

The Useful Bowl

This book is not about how to tell stories. If this is what you seek, you have opened the wrong book and have sought guidance from the wrong person. I have a friend, Ptr. Eric, who travels all over the Philippines training people in the art of storytelling, especially within the context of children's ministry. New Tribes Missions provides guidance in Chronological Bible Storying, particularly for non-literate communities. This book is also not about how to write stories. A fairly modest goal of this book is to get people to value the story as, not merely a conveyor of information, but a necessary part of truth. Related to this is the idea that theology is not simply illustrated by stories, but that stories are part of God's message, and provide the necessary structure of theology. Yet, this book, further, is not a book on Narrative Theology.

Despite muddying the waters as to the nature of this book, I would ask that you would move forward regardless. We will start with a story. This story is in written form, but is meant to be spoken (because of its parallel structure and rhythm in places) so try reading it out loud.

“THE USEFUL BOWL”

George and Dora were a retired couple. Their children had moved out and had young ones of their own. They did not have a great deal of money, but had enough to finance their mutual hobby---junking. Junking, for those of you who don't know, is attending yard sales, flea markets, auctions and the like, and purchasing items that they feel are undervalued. When their basement started getting uncomfortably tight, they'd sell their treasured finds at the same type of events where they were purchased, completing the cycle.

Did they make money at this? Rarely. The joy was in the journey, not the destination. However, on this particular Saturday, at this particular flea market, Dora saw what she wanted right away. She showed it to George. George was not totally convinced that it was the work of art as Dora contended. However, George did agree that the price was right. It was a large ceramic bowl. It was white and had hand-painted flowers on it. Dora knew she must have it. She haggled with the vendor for a few minutes and eventually it was hers.

When they finished their junking, they returned home. Dora carefully unwrapped her bowl. She took it into the kitchen where she washed the bowl, scrubbed the bowl, rinsed the bowl, and dried the bowl. Then she took the bowl and placed in her cupboard. And there it sat-- but not always.

Sometimes George and Dora would invite guests to their house. Oh, it might be a relative, a neighbor, a co-worker, a member at church-- it did not matter really. The typical evening would go something like this. Dora would do some serious cooking, while George would set up the dining room. At some point during preparation, Dora would go to the cupboard and take the bowl out. She would place it in the center of the dining room table. Then she would fill that bowl with all sorts of fresh fruits... whatever they could get at the market.

Eventually their guest, or guests, would show up. They would sit at the dining room that served drawing area, talking with one of the two while the other would carry out the finishing touches of the dining table. When fully set, all would sit around the table, and George would lead in prayer.

"Our Father. We thank you for the food that you daily provide. We thank you for the strength you give. And we thank you for our guest. May you be glorified in this fine evening. Amen"

They would then eat. Somewhere along the line, the guest might mention something like "What a beautiful centerpiece you have!" or might not. From the bowl the guest might grab a banana or a mango or an apple. After the dinner, they would clean the table. Dora would remove the fruit from the bowl, and would take the bowl to the sink. There she would wash the bowl, scrub the bowl, rinse the bowl, and dry the bowl. Then she would put it in the cupboard.

Now in a typical story, you repeat the important elements of the

story so the listener gets the gist of the pattern. But I am sure you are an intelligent audience, so I am sure you can recognize the pattern. Guest, table, bowl, fruit, clean-up, wash, scrub, rinse, dry, cupboard. That wasn't so tough was it?

One day, though, George was in town doing some shopping and he met someone new. This man was homeless. We will not be so unkind as to call him a tramp or a bum. I am sure George had passed many such men and women over the years, but this day he felt compassion for the man. George thought to himself,

"I should help this man."

"I could take him down to the local mission where he can get some help. But... we are only three blocks from the mission. I am sure he is well acquainted with the mission, and the last thing he needs is a three block free taxi ride."

"I could give him some money. But... if he uses it for something which is self-destructive, then I really haven't helped him, have I?"

"I could take him out to dinner. But... Dora is already making dinner by now. I would hate to disappoint her."

"I know! I will bring him home to dinner."

I probably should bring up the fact that it is not a good idea to bring a stranger home to dinner without considerable warning. Fortunately, Dora had a good and kindly spirit. She recognized the need of their guest, and felt compassion for him. George and Dora brought in their special guest and George continued to converse with him while Dora continued with preparation. She began setting the table to accommodate a guest. In so doing, she automatically went to the cupboard and grabbed the bowl. She started toward the table and stopped. She looked at the bowl and their special guest and back at the bowl. Then she resolutely placed the bowl on the table. She next placed what fruit they had in the house in the bowl and continued with the set-up.

When ready they all sat down and, per usual, George blessed the food.

"Our Father. We thank you for the food that you daily provide. We thank you for the strength you give. And we thank you for our special guest. May you be glorified in this fine evening. Amen"

Their special guest ate very well, as one might expect of someone

who does not normally eat well and was uncertain as to when he would eat so well again. He dug into the bowl of fruit with gusto as well. And if a few rolls and fruit ended up in his pockets for breakfast, George and Dora were most understanding.

The three of them talked for a long time, and finally it was time for George to take their special guest to the mission. As they were preparing to go, they saw his shoes. They were old leather shoes that were torn up... hardly holding together. His feet seemed to be about the same size as George's feet. George went and got an old pair of shoes and some new socks for their special guest. However, when their guest started changing out they saw that the damage was not simply to his shoes. One foot, and the lower part of that leg, was torn up. The other foot wasn't that great either. Was he attacked by a dog? Maybe torn by barbed wire? Or glass?

They knew they could not let him go without some treatment. But what should they use? They had sold an old wash basin at their last sale. They could not have him stick his feet in the sink. It would be awkward to deal with their special guest in their bathtub. They could work on him with a hose outside, but that seemed too much like how one treats a dog. But Dora had it. She took the now empty fruit bowl, rinsed it out, and filled it with warm water. She added some soap and antiseptic. She then carried it, carefully, back into the dining room and put it in front of their special guest. Then they washed his feet. They scrubbed his feet. They rinsed his feet. They treated his feet and bandaged his feet. Then their guest put on his new socks and shoes, and rode with George as he took him to the mission. Was their special guest thankful? It doesn't matter whether he was, now does it? And could have George and Dora done more for this man? Maybe, but since few would do nearly as much as they did, I will speak no ill words. Dora cleared the table, and took the bowl and washed it, scrubbed it, rinsed it, and dried it. Then she put it up in the cupboard.

A few weeks later, they had another guest. This was a pastor at their church. Okay, I won't bore you with the whole routine. But while their guest was waiting, Dora automatically went to the cupboard and grabbed the bowl and started towards the dining room table, and stopped. She looked at their guest and at the bowl. Then she looked at the spot where they had treated their special guest's feet a few weeks earlier. What was she thinking? I don't know, but after a moment she resolutely took the bowl to the table

and set it down. She filled it with the best fruit they had.

Yet again I will skip some of the more predictable details. But late in the meal during polite conversation, their guest grabbed some fruit from the bowl and said,

"That's a nice bowl there. It has a rustic charm."

George and Dora then started telling in an excited fashion the circumstances regarding the special guest they had. When they got to discussing the special guest's feet and the bowl, their present guest started looking a bit alarmed and sick. He spat out the grape he was eating.

"Why that's disgusting. I can't believe you have this bowl on the table tonight!"

Well, truth be told, Dora could work up a bit of a righteous (?) anger. She responded, "What do you think? You think I don't know how to clean a bowl? I'll have you know that I washed that bowl. I scrubbed that bowl. I rinsed that bowl. And I dried that bowl. That bowl is cleaner than the day it came out of the fire."

"It has nothing to do with that," said their guest attempting to sound a bit apologetic, and defensive. "I am a pastor at our church and I felt honored when you invited me to come join you for dinner. But then I discover that you put on the table as a centerpiece a bowl used to wash a... umm... transient's diseased feet. And you have me eat out of it! How am I supposed to feel about this, anyway?"

Well, it seemed as if George was ready for just such a question. It's good to be prepared to answer questions like that. He reached up on the book shelf and pulled down a Bible and after finding his passage, began reading.

<If I was reading this story to you, I would open my Bible to Matthew 25, verses 31-46 and read it. To me, George sounds like a KJV or NKJV or, perhaps, Revised Standard sort of guy, so I would use one of those versions. But I will leave that up to you.>

George continued. "That's in the Gospel according to Matthew. I suppose you knew that. Now I want you to understand this point. We saw a man who was hungry, and we gave him some food. And in my understanding, that is as if we had given food to Jesus. We saw a man who was thirsty, and we gave him drink. We gave drink to Jesus. We saw a man who did not have a home, and we, for a few hours, gave Jesus shelter. We saw Jesus in need of some

clothing, so we provided some clothes to Jesus. And you know, we did see that Jesus had cuts and sores on His feet. So we washed Jesus' feet, we scrubbed Jesus' feet, we rinsed Jesus' feet, we dried Jesus' feet, we treated Jesus' feet, and we bandaged Jesus' feet. Now, pastor, please understand this. We were honored to do this for Jesus. This bowl, here, was honored in being able to do this for Jesus. And you, pastor, have likewise been honored by us, by having this honored bowl before you."

Final Thought

This story provides a theological message-- or perhaps a number of possible theological messages. You might like this story, you might hate this story, you might be indifferent to it. That is not really the point, nor particularly my concern. The key point here is that you managed to read several pages and I suspect you can relate the key elements of the story and perhaps the lesson. This is not surprising since stories (or more specifically here, parables) have memory aids built into them. These are talked about more in Chapter 10). It is unlikely that several pages of rules or propositional wisdom will be recalled by most readers. Poetry at one time was easily remembered by people, but in modern society it appears to be stories that are recalled and inspire action.

- Our minds naturally take in stories and work with stories.
- Our minds think in terms of stories and metaphors.
- Our minds operate with the cadence, flow, trajectory, and sound of stories.
- Our minds, both consciously and unconsciously, seek to understand the present, see its causation in the past, and predict its repercussions in the future.

We do more than that-- we seek meaning in the events and causation. Once one selectively chooses events due to having a common theme and puts them together in a logical way to express the relationship between the events, one has already begun to make a story.

Stories, for lack of a better way of saying it, are what we do and how we live.

CHAPTER 2

Stories as an Experience

The term “Theo-storying” is, to be completely forthright, a made-up term. Storying, or the art of the use of stories, has long been used to entertain, inform, and inspire. It has also been used as a medium for the transmission of theological truth. And one could stop there. Theo-storying could be the use of stories to transmit propositional truths about God and the Christian faith. I think however, it is more than that. Let's try the following as a definition:

Theo-storying is “the act of creative reflection on God, and our associated relationships with Him and each other, crafted artistically into the medium of the story, so as to allow the listener to join in the reflection through experiencing the story, being challenged by the story, and inspiring further questions.”

Let's work through the proposed definition.

1. Creative reflection. Theo-storying should neither be a rehashing of dogma, nor be (inherently) heterodox. It should, however, push and challenge our understanding of truth. It should look at theology from a different perspective. It should provide a new voice to old questions as well as new questions.

2. Crafted artistically. Storying (both the creation of stories and the telling of stories) is an art. Storying in this case would normally be a short story or anecdote rather than a novel or epic. It should draw interest and entice the listener. But regardless of the form, creativity and imagination are required to create the story and transmit the story.

3. Medium of the story. The story is the medium but it is also

inextricably intertwined with the message. If one ends with “the moral of the story is” or “the lesson we can learn from this is,” such a lesson would only be one prepackaged idea drawn from the story... not the total sum of all possibilities of the story. If the story could be adequately summed up in one sentence, the story, does not adequately inspire theological reflection.

4. Experiencing the story. We are given the opportunity to be drawn into the story. We tend to learn best through reflection on our own life experiences (and sometimes through the life experiences of others). A good story allows us to join into the story... often from the perspective of different characters. Doing so, we experience, reflect, and learn.

5. Challenged by the story. A good story doesn't just tell us what we already know, or what we already believe, or what we already believe we know. It challenges us culturally, theologically, and personally. *An example of a personal challenge: The parable of the ewe lamb, challenged King David. The story did not challenge him culturally or theologically... he knew theologically and culturally what should be done and the story did not question that. Rather, it challenged him personally when he was told that he was experiencing the story from the wrong perspective. He was experiencing it taking on the role of the wise kingly judge, when he should be experiencing it in the role of the rich neighbor.*

6. Inspire further questions. Good theo-stories don't just give the full answer. They inspire questions. They might inspire questions because the story seems unfinished, or because the story doesn't explain why things went in one direction versus another, or because it suggests conclusions that are personally uncomfortable.

What are some good questions associated with theo-stories?

- **What next?** In the Bible, we don't know what happens to Jonah after chapter 4 of the book. We don't know (for sure) what happens to Jephthah's daughter. What did the Prodigal Son's elder brother do next? In missions we often do case studies where the situation is set up but the ending is intentionally unfinished. We are supposed to place ourselves within a specified role in the story and say what we would do next and why. It is highly educational and far superior to memorizing a bunch of rules.

- **What if?** What if Pharoah had let Moses and the people of Israel go without a fight? What if Judas had confessed and asked for forgiveness? What if Job did curse God? What if Zedekiah had stood up to the power elite in Judah and followed the advice of Jeremiah?
- **Why?** Why did Judas decide to betray Christ? Why did God place enticing fruit in the garden and then tell His inquisitive creations not to eat it? Why did God save us through a blood sacrifice? (Was God “handcuffed” into doing it that way, or did He choose that way as a lesson for us?)
- **Who?** Whose perspective do you connect to in the story. What if you placed yourself in a different perspective. What if you were not one of the Israelites invading Canaan, but a person living in Jericho desperately trying to protect your family? What if you were the Levite, in the story of the Good Samaritan, hurrying to your next appointment... perhaps afraid of being attacked, with no medical skills... how would you respond seeing the dying (possible dead) man... honestly?

But there is more. Stories are part of the message. In this, one is going along with the popular Marshall McLuhan statement that “The Medium is the Message,”¹ the idea that the message as it is received is an amalgamation of the medium used and the purposed content. There is a growing belief that theology is inadequately handled by propositional truths. Stories are not merely a vehicle to transmit a propositional truth. If stories were transporting truth without affecting truth or being a part of that truth, at the end of the storying process, the hearer or reader could simply extract that truth and discard the story, like the waxed paper that can be discarded from a fast food lunch. However, the story IS part of the truth. Narrative Theology and Asian Theologies place a greater focus on the story over just “facts.” Likewise, new ways of interpreting the Bible, to a large extent a book of stories, sees the story as part of the teaching.

Let's take a simple example. Consider Daniel in the Lions Den.² Not wishing to repeat the entire story here, I will simply review a few of the narrative elements.

Daniel lived in a position of power, yet precariously so, since he worshiped a foreign god (Jehovah) within an alien regime (Medo-Persia). Enemies of Daniel got the boss of Daniel, the emperor, to pass a law limiting acceptable forms of prayer/worship. Daniel's past habit of publicly praying three times to Jehovah now put him at odds with the new regulations. Daniel decided to continue his practices in defiance of these regulations. His enemies saw and reported him. With Daniel's "crime" exposed, the emperor sorrowfully agreed to have the punishment side of the law carried out. In this case, Daniel must be placed in the lions den (with living hungry lions). Generally, this would be considered a death sentence. The punishment was carried out. The emperor was sorrowful, could not sleep, and hurried to the lions den the next morning on the slight hope that Daniel was still alive. Calling into the den, the Emperor was delighted to hear Daniel still alive. Daniel's God sent an angel to protect Daniel from the beasts. The emperor removed Daniel from the den, and threw Daniel's enemies into the den, quickly to be consumed.

This type of story is pretty simple. The good suffer wrongfully but are eventually rescued and exalted.

And we could stop there. Adolf Jülicher, believed that parables (in this case, parables as in "stories of Jesus") have one essential point.³ So in the extreme case we could argue that the message of the story of Daniel in the Lions Den is:

Obeying God may lead to conflict and danger, but ultimately will lead to vindication and success.

This is a nice affirming lesson, whether or not it is always true. One problem is that the medium, the story, is awfully long and convoluted for a simple final purpose. One could simply replace it with a much shorter propositional statement (like the one listed above). Or one could make a much simpler story that carries the end message. Simply arguing that the longer version is needed for context or for entertainment does not seem adequate.

Jülicher's work with stories, particularly parables, sought to correct the tendency of taking allegorization of a story or extension of an analogy too far. This will be talked about more in a later chapter. However, one reason I have problems with the one-story, one-point theory is that when I write a story, I often have multiple points. Consider the story of "The Useful Bowl." The point to the respondent/ reader/listener, in part, depends on the role the individual chooses. If the person chooses the role of the religious leader, the point would be different from the point gained from the vantage point of George or Dora, or the narrator, or even the bowl. If I can write a story with more than one point, it seems reasonable to suspect that God can as well.

Instead of looking for one point or one message, one can consider many applications, many purposes, many propositional truths. The challenge, however, is to determine which ones are universal, which ones were intended, or which ones are relevant? For example, in the story, Daniel prayed publicly. Should one take that as something we should always do? Can private prayer also be valuable? Daniel continued to pray publicly, when he simply could have found a more private place. Was he morally constrained to continue praying in public on the same schedule? Does God promise to always save the godly from danger and to punish the evildoer? If a good person dies for doing good, does that demonstrate that he was bad or his actions were bad? Can the story be treated as a list of promises that we can claim whenever we want?

The basic problem with inductively drawing broad conclusions here is that a story is essentially a case study. Case studies have educative value but one cannot determine what is normative from a single case. For example, Hebrews 11 describes numerous faithful people, being tortured and killed by evil people without the vindication described in Daniel. Vindication of the godly (at least this side of death) is not a universal truth. It seems as if the one-point message is too limited, and grabbing many points (especially as universal life lessons or propositional truths) is challenging because it is not clear what should be accepted as such and which things should not.

Another Option

A better option is to recognize that **Stories are something that we**

experience. Stories give us options that normal experience does not offer. Take for example the story in chapter 1. Since the story is written in third person, the reader/listener has choices as to what character or role to experience. As noted earlier, experience it in the role of George or Dora. One can be the beggar, or the pastor. One does not even have to choose a human character... one can be the bowl or the omniscient narrator. Each of these provides a different perspective with its own sets of problems, opportunities, and lessons. And you as a hearer don't need to choose only one perspective.

Stories become who we are and become part of our personal truth. As stories become part of our experience, they become part of us. We are with Daniel (or perhaps in our minds become Daniel) as he considers his response to the new edict. We are with him being judged guilty of a law that should never have been enacted. We are with the emperor feeling the personal guilt of allowing himself to be duped by others leading to hurting a friend. We are with Daniel, fearful and faithful, as he is about to undergo his punishment. We are with Daniel as he calls out from the pit, "Oh King Live Forever....." One of the best arguments for reading the Bible is NOT that it is true. A multiplication table is true. So is the periodic table of the elements... true enough, at least, at the time it is published. One could take a bunch of true statements in the Bible and compile it into a 20-page pamphlet titled "Good and True Stuff." Frankly, it's been done. It is doubtful that would do much for us. However, as we read the Bible stories, poetry, and people, they become part of our own lives and experiences, and transform us. This transformation is a divine act-- yet it is also a human act, since God has designed us to be humans... humans changed by the stories we experience.

So what is the conclusion of this matter? How should the stories of the Bible be read? In many ways like how we experience life. We experience God working in our lives and are guided to what is right, good, and true. Likewise, in the stories of the Bible we also experience and gain insight of God working in these experiences.

You might feel that this is a wishy-washy form of Biblical interpretation, and to some extent such a view is justified. Certainly, there are times when the Bible gives the lesson or lessons of the story either by direct statement or by context. But that is also true of life. Some lessons come easy and some do not. The lessons that

challenge us the most are the one that we will struggle with the most. Our minds, like King David will desperately seek a perspective that absolves rather than convicts.

Final Thought

When it comes to the Bible, it may be more valuable not so much to ponder if we are ready to read the Bible, or study the Bible, but are we ready to EXPERIENCE the Bible. If we read the Bible, in part, as a story, a story in which we are active characters, perhaps there is much more for us to find than reading it as a book of declarative statements. Likewise, when we share the Bible with others, it may be better to draw them into the experience of the Bible rather than a list in theological truths with prooftexts.

This is not surprising. The stories in the Bible interconnect with each other... and with us. In fact, that is the point of the next chapter. Our own stories provide a “living tapestry” that also interconnect with the stories of others.

CHAPTER 3

Story as a Living Tapestry

While, technically, we can tell stories about a can of tomatoes, most stories involve people (whether real or fictional). However, only fictional characters can really have a “life-story.” Since a story involves a series of events that connect and relate to support a plot/theme, a fictional character can have just that. A fictional character can exist without a hidden life or hidden motivations. Such a character has nothing beyond what is in the text and in the perspective of the author/creator. A complex fictional character may have the appearance of a significantly rich “life” so as to involve many stories. However, for a living person, there is far too much in life to really be a single story.¹

Consider my life. I could write a story of my life titled, “Bob Munson, the Good Father.” This story would be a collection of events from my life that shows me being a good father. The collection, with connecting chronology, would obviously support the theme of me being a good father. That is pretty simple. On the other hand, it would be just as simple for me to make a completely different story. That story could be “Bob Munson, the Bad Father.” This story would involve different events, or a different perspective of the same events, all linked together around this new plot/theme. I have many other stories as well... too many to count.

Bob Munson, the Kind-hearted Altruist

Bob Munson, the Selfish Jerk

Bob Munson, the Lovingly Humble

Bob Munson, the Proudful Nuisance

Bob Munson, the Successful

Bob Munson, the Failure

..

As I said, there are too many stories in our lives to say that we only have one. If we say we have only one we are often simply focusing too much on one. Sometimes that can be a problem. Consider the following example.

Years ago, I was a mechanical engineer at a large corporation. Two friends of mine asked me to turn in their resumés. Both had a complicated educational and work history. But both were doing better now. One of them, I made a few minor suggestions regarding the resumé. The changes were made. I turned it in, and he was hired (probably not due to me... but I was glad to help in some small way).

I had bigger issues with the other resumé. It had this message written between the lines of text, "I am basically a failure... you really shouldn't consider hiring me." I told my friend that he should change his resumé. I noted that he is sending the wrong message (telling the wrong story). The right story should be something like this: "I used to be directionless, but now I know who I am, and what I can do. My recent track record shows how much I have changed, and you would benefit greatly from hiring me." Sadly, the rewrite of the resumé still kept to the old theme, so I did not turn it in. My feeling was that he was focusing on the wrong story in his life.

Rather than looking at one's life as a single storyline or history, it may be better to think of one's life as a series of storylines or "story threads." These threads are not independent of each other since they are brought together in one's life. Once one adds different possible perspectives and interpretations, the same events may be part of several different threads. The result is that a person's life may be seen as a tapestry of story threads.

In narrative counseling, therapy involves listening to people's self-stories. I am not an expert in this form of therapy. However, it is built around the model of a story as being a thread. One looks for thick threads and thin threads. A thin thread is one with very few details. With the limited details, the story has only one perspective and one

interpretation. I will give a thin thread from my life.

“I was a shy nerd in school. I was poor at sports. I struggled during my tour of duty in the US Navy. I have changed careers a couple of times because I have never really fit in.”

This is a thin thread. It gives little details and leaves few options for interpretation. The title of this story could be “Bob the Loser” or “Bob the Misfit.” A Narrative Therapist may try to “thicken” the story so as to have more details, giving opportunity for other perspectives or interpretations. Perhaps with more details the story thread could become “Bob Learning and Growing Through Life’s Challenges.” Or perhaps the therapist may work on focusing on a different story thread... “Bob the Competent and Wise.” Far too often we suffer because we write our own story thread for our lives and then try to fit everything about ourselves within that narrow plot.

We can take the metaphor (life as a tapestry of story threads) further. Threads do not simply come together, they come together defining a new shape, texture, and pattern. One might say that the tapestry is the sum total of the individual threads, but this is not true. It is how the threads intersect, entwine, and interact that make one tapestry distinct from another. Figure 1 shows an unfinished tapestry. Until eternity, our stories are unfinished so our tapestry is unfinished. But the tapestry is more than the threads. It is also more than just the weave, because the weave comes together to produce an image that cannot be figured out merely by looking at the threads. We cannot really understand a person’s life by looking at a few of his/her stories/plots. In fact, an understanding of the person’s life may require a perspective that we simply lack. When Jesus said, “Judge not, lest ye be judged,” one point that could be taken from the statement is that we should not judge hypocritically or judge lacking love. There is, however, the implication, I believe, that we are incompetent to judge. We only see the outside (the perceived story threads), but God can see the heart (see the entire pattern within the weave).

And of course the metaphor can still be extended. If our lives are the stories that we are involved in, then we are interwoven with the

lives of others. We are part of others in whom we share stories, and others are part of us. A different metaphor is used by John Donne to say a similar thing.

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manner of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.²*

Another way the metaphor could be looked at is in terms of our relationship with God. One way would be to look at our fallen state. A quick and obvious way would be to describe our lives as a weaving that was removed from the loom prematurely or with the interweaving of God's story in our lives removed. However, while it may fit the metaphor of a tapestry, it does not fit the metaphor of our lives as as a tapestry of stories. That's because it implies that we have a full weaving of stories at birth. To follow the metaphor as I have posed it, we can think of our lives as potentially displaying the image of God. However, because of our fallen state, our lives don't weave with God properly, and we have stray threads that should not be there. So the image of God is still on the tapestry of our lives, but is distorted. Growing relationally with God, gradual sanctification, is a process of restoring what we were designed to be.



Figure 1. An Unfinished Tapestry³

Final Thought

The metaphor of our lives as a tapestry of stories opens up a lot of new ideas. Constraining the fabric to being made from stories limits the range of the metaphor, but also opens up new possibilities. Most stories involve relationships so if we understand that our lives are described (and in some ways defined) by our relationships, we can see our lives as interwoven with the lives of others. In fact, it would be difficult to have a self-identity that is not dependent on these relationships.

CHAPTER 4

Cultural Relevance and Cultural Resonance

Within churches, we are often told that we have to make the message of God, “relevant.” Relevance relates to the culture of the recipient/responder.

“Cultural relevance is achieved when the audience recognizes what you've created as something that reflects their culture.”¹

Utilizing a cultural icon or celebrity may give one relevance. Knowing fads and jargon can give one relevance. However, cultural resonance is something more.

“Cultural Resonance is achieved when your audience uses what you've created to talk to each other about something meaningful that they've been observing in their culture.”²

It gives voice or imagery to something already felt or experienced.

Things that are relevant, may not resonate. TV provides a barrage of advertisements. Many of these are full of cultural relevance (jargon, celebrities, popular music, faddish styles, etc.), but never truly resonate with the audience. Likewise, many things that resonate may not have relevance (or at least may not be relevant in the sense of connecting in artifacts and behaviors that are unique to the specific culture).

One of the great (non-fiction) stories of the 20th century is the sinking of the Titanic.³ It is the story of a ship that “cannot sink” that sank. The story has been told and retold, with several books,

movies, and numerous TV specials. It is hugely resonant with present society. However, one could argue that its relevance is second-hand. That is, the story itself is not relevant (with oddly dressed people riding a transcontinental steamer through a sea of icebergs a century ago) but its story adaptations are culturally relevant, along with resonant.

But why did a story like Titanic become so important as to be embedded in modern American (and beyond American) culture? I don't necessarily know. But here are a few possibilities.

- "Fickleness of fate." A series of unlikely occurrences lead to devastation. Americans (and people in many other cultures as well) do not like fate. It is not surprising that there have been numerous TV specials and investigations seeking to discover "the real reason" Titanic sank. We revolt against the unknown... especially when our very lives are at risk. We walk in a world with blinders on, but those blinders are blocking our view forward. We can see the present, what is around us. We can see the past, or at least remember where we had been. But we cannot see even one second into the future. That is quite terrifying.
- Social injustice. The sinking was made more problematic by a social system that helped ensure that 2nd or 3rd class passengers were less likely to survive. This revolts against the egalitarian sensibilities of Americans, among others.
- Hubris. The "unsinkable ship" (words of a journalist, not the engineers, builders, or owners) was handled cavalierly in a dangerous area and sank. The lack of lifeboats (whose number was inadequate due to out-of-date ship regulations) again smacks of a certain unwarranted pride.

Cultural and Sub-cultural Resonance and Counter-cultural Resonance

Some stories may resonate with the audience but for other reasons. Even within one geographical area the effect may vary widely for different populations. McCurdy separates populations into three

groups: Cultures, Sub-cultures, and Micro-cultures.⁴ A Sub-culture is a smaller group with distinct cultural variations that lives within a broader culture. A Micro-culture is essentially a sub-culture that is uniquely defined only part of the time. For example, taxi drivers have a unique routine, language, and way of living only part of the day. At other times they melt back in with the surrounding culture or sub-culture. For the purpose of resonance, it does not seem to be necessary to separate between sub-cultures and micro-cultures. However, another type of resonance worth considering is counter-cultural resonance. So we will look at cultural, sub-cultural, and counter-cultural resonance.

Cultural Resonance relates to the broad culture. Take two cultures-- the cultures of the United States and the Philippines (since these are the two I am most familiar with). Although both countries are multicultural, there are still elements that tend to bind together the societies as a whole. Some stories provide meaning, or put into a memorable narrative form, what the people in that culture are already thinking. For the United States, the bombing of Pearl Harbor may be one of those stories. The United States seeks to live peacefully with all peoples (at least by American self-perception). However, when attacked in an unprovoked manner, the US will come together as a people, fight, and win. The story of Pearl harbor is in line with a broader theme within the culture of narratives that go back to "Remember the Alamo" and "Remember the Maine," "Remember the Lusitania," and looks forward to "Remember 9-11."

Cultural resonance in one culture may be a mystery to another culture. Supposedly, many Japanese pilots yelled "To Hell with Babe Ruth" as they bombed Pearl Harbor. While this reference to Babe Ruth may be relevant to American culture, it is hardly resonant, since it is hard to see how the statement encapsulates the sentiment leading to the violence of Pearl Harbor. Likewise, with 9-11, it is hard to see why the terrorists would choose the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Perhaps the World Trade Center was chosen because of the failed attack a few years earlier. Maybe it was chosen because of the mistaken hope that an attack on the buildings would lead to a destructive domino effect. Symbolically, to Americans, the World Trade Center means far less than the Statue of Liberty. Destroying the Statue of Liberty would resonate far more from a cultural standpoint. The attack on the Pentagon, even more

so, makes sense only from a foreign perspective. From an American perspective, the Pentagon is little more than a very big (military) office building. The White House or Capital Building, perhaps, would be more meaningful targets.

An example of cultural resonance in the Philippines could be the execution of Jose Rizal. Rizal who promoted freedom of the Filipino people from the colonial ruler, Spain. He was executed for writings considered treasonous by the colonial rulers. However, his death was an inspiration to the Filipino people and led, ultimately, to their liberation. The theme of peaceful opposition to tyrants is also repeated, with the assassination of Benigno Aquino and then the bloodless “People Power” revolution against, then leader, Ferdinand Marcos.

Sub-cultural Resonance is similar but would focus on stories that resonate with a smaller distinct culture that exists within the larger culture. The most enduring of these stories are those that speak to oppressed groups. These may include the story of the Golem to Medieval European Jews, or the story of Rosa Parks to African Americans in the 1960s. Although the story may be resonant only to small part of the broader society, the function of subcultural resonance is the same as cultural resonance. It puts into narrative form a self-perception or cultural value. In so doing, it provides cultural identity and affects, and supports, their worldview.

Counter-cultural Resonance is a bit different. It can exist in either a cultural or sub-cultural setting. Imagine societal change based on a dialectical model shown in Figure 2. A thesis and its antithesis fight and create, ultimately, a synthesis. That synthesis then becomes a new thesis which soon comes into conflict with a new antithesis.

Logical Positivism sought assurance of truth by setting up tests for true statements. However, as people began to be drawn to this viewpoint, others (perhaps more emotionally than cognitively at first) were repelled by it. As the dissenters developed their own thoughts, these thoughts began to directly conflict with the Logical Positivists. Problems with Logical Positivism began to be exposed (including

the fact that Logical Positivism itself did not meet its own standard for truth). This conflict produced a somewhat more humble, yet still positivistic and empirical modernism. However, failure of modernity to address major social problems, private experience, and the more important life questions, set the seeds of postmodernity. This pattern of conflict is likely to never end since no system is likely to ever be perfect. Further, perfection of a static system within a dynamic universe is likely too transitory anyway.

Figure 3 shows the same dialectic model but in terms of culture and counter-culture. Of course, the question is, where does the antithesis/counter-culture come from? It comes from dissatisfaction felt by some by the inadequacies of the dominant culture.

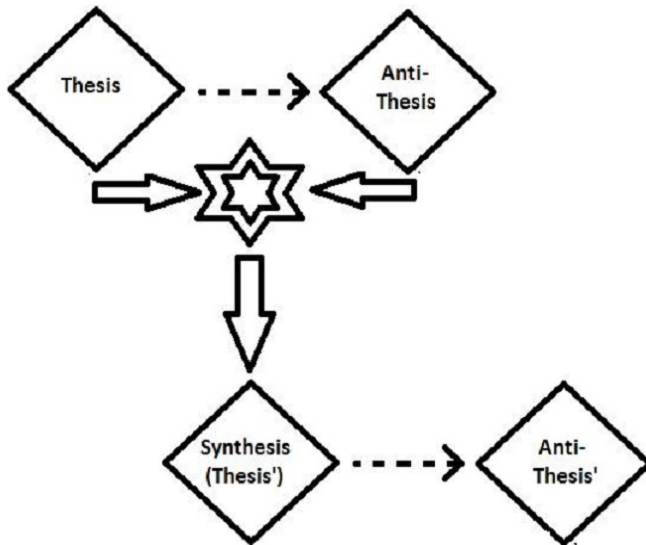


Figure 2. Dialectical Model⁵

Cultures form naturally to meet the societal needs of its members, but NO culture completely/adequately meets all of these needs. Additionally, in some cases events or technological changes occur that give power to change. Technological changes in the last three centuries have provided impetus to the challenging of Confucian society built on stability and static hierarchal relations. Cultures built on the myth or unending expansion and victory (such as,

historically, in some Islamic and Native American cultures, as well as cultural triumphalism among some Christians) were challenged by invasion and colonization, and the perpetuation of evil. From such failures or inconsistencies, the seeds of counter-culture form and grow. If that is true, the Thirty Year War exposed an already existing feeling of many that Christians killing Christians over religious denomination was foolish. World War I exposed existing doubts that Christendom would lead to heaven on earth. World War II (and “the bomb”) exposed doubts that technology/science is our “savior.”

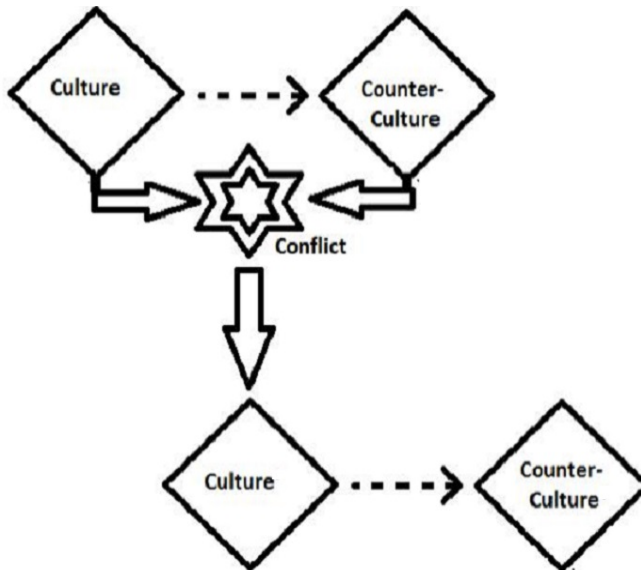


Figure 3. Cultural Dialectical Model

Consider European religious history. Western Europe was dominated by Catholic (Roman) thought and practice. Additionally, there was a Catholic culture that developed that was more in line with Latin culture than Germanic culture. The inadequacy of Catholic culture to meet Germanic needs seemed to aid in the spreading of theological dissent. Even though theological dissent would occur at many points of time and space, it was with Huss, Tyndale, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin (and others) where dissent caught on in the local culture. In some places, such as in England, the dissent/protest appeared to be more a rejection of Roman

control than acceptance of Protestant doctrine. Catholicism, with cultural tensions, created the Protestant movement. The Protestant movement, in turn, led to a reformation within the Catholic church centered in the Council of Trent. As there were protests against the Catholic culture in places, there were also protests against the Protestant culture in other places. So places like Ireland and Poland maintained a strongly Catholic culture as a reaction against Protestant (or Eastern Orthodox) neighbors even though their own cultures set them considerably at odds with Latin culture. Conflict between Protestants and Catholics led to the Thirty-Year War, which reinforced a growing aversion to denominational war. While a dialectic model probably does not adequately describe the complexity of the occurrence of the 16th and 17th centuries in Western Europe, it clearly helps visualize the chain of events that occur due to cultural conflict.

So What Does This All Have to Do With Counter-cultural Resonance?

Counter-cultural resonance in stories involves a narrative that speaks to the secret or at least repressed doubts of the society one is in. The story of Titanic challenged the idea of man's ability to fully control nature and fate. This story also fits in with the Babel narrative of the Bible. God cannot be challenged by human endeavor. *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding, provides voice to the seeds of doubt about the inherent goodness of "civilized" man. *Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck challenges the notion that free-market Capitalism is good for all, while *1984* by George Orwell similarly challenges the same beliefs regarding Bolshevism.

One can always argue about what is cultural or sub-cultural or counter-cultural resonance. In the end it doesn't really matter that much. However, for the purposes of this book, I would like to suggest the following:

Some effective stories resonate culturally or sub-culturally. One can call these stories "myths."

Some effective stories resonate counter-culturally. One can call these stories "parables."

In other words both resonate. Myths support the cultural or sub-cultural beliefs or values they are in. They are a supportive and bonding narratives within the group. On the other hand, parables challenge counter-culturally, They speak to the voice of dissent that already exists in the society, giving it a narrative that focuses the challenge, promoting change.

We will continue to expand on our (functional) definitions of myth and parable in a later chapter.

Final Thought

One way to understand a culture would be to work inductively from the stories that have gained traction in a culture. For example: What values have existed in European culture to make folktales such as Little Red Riding Hood popular? The fact that these stories were often told by parents to children suggest a mythic role (promoting cultural beliefs/values) rather than a parabolic role (providing voice to cultural dissent). What about the story of King Kong? What does it tell us about modern society? Is its popularity because it supports cultural values or challenges them? The fact that the story seems to humanize an animal and dehumanize people might suggest that it assumes a parabolic role... making us sympathetic to the monster and helping us to see the monster in ourselves.

Effective theo-storying requires us to understand the culture that we are working in. Our stories must resonate with the culture (or counter-culture) supporting the good and challenging the bad.

CHAPTER 5

St. Paul and the Theo-Story¹

Stories, particularly myths, are connected to a culture's worldview "because they explain, integrate, validate, and sanction the culture's belief system."² In Chapter 7, we will go for what I feel is a better definition of myth. Myths are not always old, and are not trivial. The myths of the American West strongly reflect and impact American self-perception, while the Aryan myth in Germany both drove and justified Nazi policies. Myths draw their power from the cultural worldview and provide power back to that worldview. Attempts in the past, often by Christian missionaries, to eradicate myths have often proved fruitless. The attempts may seem well-meaning, *"But myths are not easily destroyed or changed by external pressure... In fact, overt prohibition usually tends to greatly increase the overall value of myth."*³

The Bible is a book of stories that comes together into a larger story. As Christians, we might argue that these are the only stories we need- at least from a ministerial or personal growth perspective. Yet I believe this is not the case. Consider the following story:

Once upon a time, there was a city full of prosperous people. Everyone was happy, at least those who were in charge. Suddenly, a malevolent supernatural force descended upon the city. People started dying for no apparent cause. Nothing they could do could stop the killings, and they could not even name who or what was the source. The local religious groups all failed to stop the scourge. So, in desperation, members of the city traveled to the island of a cultic priestess who let them know that some spirit was getting revenge for the evils perpetrated by the residents of the city. Based on this information, they sent an emissary to find a powerful shaman who lived on a

different island. The shaman came to the city to find the spirit and purify the city. He was able to determine places in the city of special power to the killer. At each power center, an arcane blood ritual was carried out. Once all of the power centers were located and the gory rituals completed, the killing spirit, never named, left. The city was freed, the shaman rewarded, and the city chose to remember this story through memorials and oral legend.

Myths express our inmost beliefs and fears. The above myth, or perhaps horror story, describes in general terms an alleged event associated with the city of Athens in the 6th century BC. The shaman was Epimenides. The story became part of the mythology of ancient Athens.⁴ Paul used this story when he was witnessing to the Athenians. As an expert of the Hebrew Bible, Paul should have had no problem drawing from the stories of the Bible. Yet he did not. Let's consider why not.

There are many definitions for "myth". Let's try one. According to Millard Erickson, ***"Myths are literary devices used to convey a supernatural or transcendent truth in earthly form. ... They usually present the words or works of a divine being."***⁴ Again, we will play with definitions in the Chapter 7, but for now, this will work. Myths are not just great epics of the past. They work their way into popular culture in many forms. *"Ancient myths die hard. They continue in disguise in popular culture long after they are rejected in orthodox religious thought."*⁵ Many of the horror movies (and other forms of horror media) may well be a place where mythology is hidden and at the same time exposed in popular culture. In the Philippines, aswang, tiyanak, "white lady" (all supernatural or semi-supernatural beings of Filipino folk-culture) and others find themselves popularized in cinema. Vampires and werewolves may have been greatly modified by modern cinema, but still carry elements of their roots in ancient European folklore.

Don Richardson used the story of Epimenides in his book "Eternity in Their Hearts" as evidence that God is reaching out to all cultures of the world.⁶ This argument would be greatly strengthened if the story of Epimenides in Athens is true. However, as a myth, the historicity of the story is not critical. Myths have power, not from historicity, but from the underlying belief system of a faith community. *"The great myths always developed within particular*

faith communities. To lift them out of those contexts is to distort the very truth to which they point.”

Ripped from their faith community, myths become folktales--interesting, curious, stories that have little more purpose than to entertain. While ancient myths were conveyed to the community through the skilled storyteller, modern myths are conveyed to the community through the scriptwriters, actors, and cinematographers.

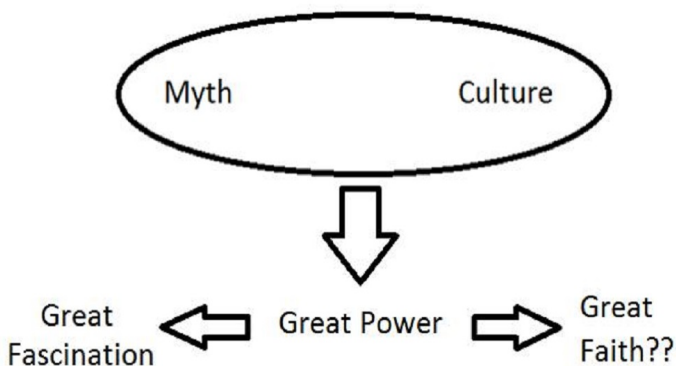


Figure 4. Results of a Strong Connection Between Myth and Culture

Consider Figure 4. When the myth has connection to the culture worldview, it has greater power. This manifests itself in greater fascination, or in some cases, fear. One might surmise that this leads to greater faith, that is, greater belief in the underlying myths and cultural principles.

A second possibility, as shown in Figure 5, would be where myth is separated from the culture. This might occur when the story is part of a different culture (such as the outsider's view of Simon Bolivar's exploits in freeing the peoples of South America), or when the story is never directly tied to any particular worldview (such as "The Wizard of Oz"). In these, the stories are neither empowered by the culture nor build up that culture. The result is little power, as seen in little fascination/impact, and (perhaps) little faith. Entertainment is the only use, as pertaining to culture at least.

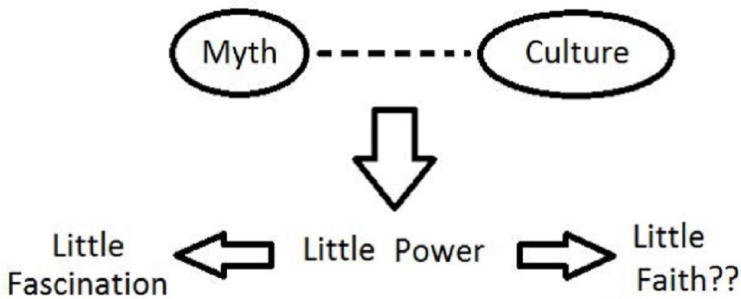


Figure 5. Results of a Weak Connection Between Myth and Culture

It is worthy to note a few caveats. First, fascination here does not mean popularity. “The Wizard of Oz” may be a more popular movie than “Dracula”, but “Dracula,” arguably, has more fascination as can be seen by movies, novels, and comic books that have sprung from it, along with vampirologists and vampire cults. Second, some myths may transcend culture. Joseph Campbell would include myths involving the Hero Cycle⁸ in this, while Sigmund Freud would include the Oedipus myth. Third, and tied to the second, some stories may draw their power from archetypes that provide the basis for our self-understanding as humans.

Theological Reflection

Many Christians attack the power they see in non-Christian stories. The Apostle Paul, however, gives another possible response to that power. The power in myth can be utilized to transform lives. In Athens, Paul did not use stories from the Hebrew Bible. Rather, Paul used the Greek myth of Epimenides and the Unknown God as described in Acts 17:16-34 when he spoke before the Areopagus in Athens.

But.... “Did Paul use the myth of Epimenides and the Unknown God at all?” Clearly Paul did not tell the story. However, it is possible to use a story without relating it. If someone says “Cry wolf”, one is

drawn into a well-known cautionary tale, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”. For those familiar with it, telling the story is redundant. The words “cry wolf” are enough. There are, in fact, several things that indicate that Paul was intentionally drawing from this myth.

First, the myth contrasts the impotence of the idols of Athens with the power of the unknown god. Paul makes the same comparison in his speech. For Paul, idols are worthless and the Unknown God is the God of heaven and earth. Second, several important items link it to the story. Idols and the monument to the Unknown God are in the speech and myth. In fact, the myth explains the existence of this specific monument. Additionally, Athens is the primary setting and, in fact, the Areopagus is specifically mentioned in the myth. Third, Paul seeks to describe the unknown god. This very thing was the mystery in the myth. The myth tells of the existence and power of the “Unknown God,” but leaves the god’s character unknown. Paul provides the final chapter of the myth. Finally, in case there is still any doubt, Paul actually quotes Epimenides in his speech. In the poem Cretica, Epimenides says about Zeus, “For in thee we live and move and have our being.”⁹

So How Did Paul’s Approach the Members of the Areopagus?

A. Paul started from a point of common interest: religion and worship of God (or gods). He built this off of knowledge and arguments the listeners were familiar with. These include idols and reference to the myth of Epimenides.

B. Utilizing this myth, Paul spoke of the characteristics of the Unknown God, answering some unknowns from the myth (and confirming the testimony of some Greek poets about this god).

C. He developed an argument against idols that follows naturally from the myth and from Platonic thought. Idols have no power (as demonstrated in the myth), and in fact the use of material things to represent the gods is degrading (consistent with Platonic thought).

D. He then transitioned from the Unknown God to Jesus and the resurrection. In this sense, he used their worldview as the context for expressing the gospel.

Paul avoided many errors we might be tempted to do today in similar circumstances. He did not condemn the Greeks. Their profuse use of idols, the decadent lifestyles of many, and polytheism lent itself to moralistic condemnation. Nevertheless, Paul did not do this, and in fact, stated that the Unknown God has overlooked their ignorance up to this point. On the other hand, he did not simply define their worldview as good. Rather, he critiqued aspects of their worldview, even using some aspects of their worldview to criticize other aspects—demonstrating that their system lacked self-consistency. Additionally, he was willing to commend those cultural aspects worthy of commendation. This form of critique could be described as “countercultural.” Countercultural contextualization will be discussed in a later chapter.

Paul showed knowledge of their worldview. He demonstrated knowledge of Greek material culture, mythology, and philosophy. Even though Paul had a vast knowledge of Hebrew Scripture and Jewish teaching, he did not use them directly in Athens. The reason was simple... the Areopagus had little knowledge, if any, of Hebrew Scripture and Jewish teaching. As important as the Bible may be, its impact is limited where the cultural connection between its stories and the local culture is limited.

Final Thought

Some have condemned Paul for using a nonscripture-based method of gospel presentation. They note his limited success there. However, to be fair, it seems doubtful that any method would be particularly successful with a group that had “heard it all before.” Luke notes, in fact, that there was some success in that difficult place.

In the early second century AD lived a Greek Christian named Aristides. He wrote the earliest extant apology of Christian doctrine. This work was for presentation to the emperor of Rome, and later became part of a highly popular ancient Christian work, Barlaam and Josaphat. He lived in Athens, and dressed in the philosopher's garb of that time. I believe he could have been a spiritual grandchild of Paul, and certainly followed his example in helping to make God's message understandable to a polytheistic culture. Paul's work in Athens was worthwhile.

CHAPTER 6

The Story and Theology

The fact that much of God's revelation in the Bible is given to us as story (or narrative) may suggest that story is not just a vehicle for theology (study of God and His workings). Perhaps, additionally, sound theology is not merely embedded in narrative, but narrative is embedded in sound theology. In the 1970s there was the growth of what is sometimes called Narrative Theology. I am not planning to strongly support or contradict various aspects of that movement (or movements) but note a few areas of worthy dialogue as it relates to Theo-storying.

Narrative Theology tends to be a reaction to the emphasis (overemphasis) of the Enlightenment on reason. Reason has its place, but it disconnects from much that is good in being human. Sound reasoning that is built on a foundation of misguided or evil assumptions leads to horror. Additionally, and relatedly, Narrative Theology seeks to connect with community (within the Christian perspective, the community of faith, or the church) lessening the focus on individualism.¹ As noted in the Introduction, effective narrative has three components:

- story
- storyteller
- audience

Biblical scholarship often focuses on the discovery of propositional truths that are embedded in the story. Sometimes this effort appears to be disconnected from the genre (such as historical narrative, parable, poetry, etc.). Form Criticism (discovering the structure and interpretation of specific genres) has helped to give insight to many passages, including narrative sections of Scripture. However, success still often is seen in separating the divine truths from the

narrative packaging.

Additionally, Biblical Scholarship has often been disconnected from the intended audience, with its own unique worldview and culture. Historical Criticism sought to analyze the story within its historical context, but (to me at least) real critique based on the intended audience did not truly come of age until the Biblical Theology movement in the 20th century.

Form Criticism and Biblical Theology helped gain insight to stories and the importance of the audience. However, the former may still devalue the story (seeing it as simply a passive vehicle for truth), while the latter assumes that the only audience is a specific group of people in a specific culture at least two millenia ago. But if one recognizes the story as part of divine revelation, then the story does not necessarily have to be dissected to arrive at truth. And since stories provide a metaphoric/symbolic structure, the possible insights may extend beyond the obvious ones within the cultural system. John Goldengay noted this limited view, *“Traditional interpretation assumes that Biblical authors aim at clarity and precision, not open with potentialities.”*² The use of story, metaphor, and poetry suggests that clarity and precision were not the main goals. They provide a range of relevant meanings, but that range is not meant to be limitless. Many seem to invite lively discussions.

Let's take a possible example. Many for hundreds of years have argued about the Biblical stance on slavery. Those who seek a propositional understanding have difficulty since the Bible clearly allows slavery, even if that support of the practice is muted. But suppose one looks at the stories (both full narratives, and the metaphor stories). One sees a number of different types, as related to slavery.

- Where God's people are the oppressed, there are stories that show how to be faithful to God while still existing within the economic and political structure. The Book of Daniel includes stories like these.
- Where God's people live in a society where slavery of some sort is an economic is seemingly necessary (such as where economic power is tied to land ownership), stories provide understanding of proper care for those who live oppressed. Some of the story examples in the Mosaic Law include

these.

- Where God's people are oppressed in a place of gross social injustice, stories are also included of liberation and freedom. The Exodus and the Book of Judges include examples of these.

When we experience these stories, they interact with our own story. The Abolitionist Movement arose in the US and England where Christians were in a position of power, while living in a society where slavery was an economic convenience, not an economic necessity. Hardly surprising that those enslaved saw the stories of liberation as resonate with their situation. Dalit Theology in India and Black Theology in the US find great meaning in the story of the Exodus. And they should, since that story resonates on many levels with the Dalit situation with caste, and the African-American situation with race-based oppression.³ Taking the Bible as a collection of propositional truths and deontological statements can bring one to the statement “God approves of slavery.” It is much clearer in the stories that God is a god of liberation.

Narrative Theology and Historicity

For me, Narrative Theology tries to be too much. I see Narrative Theology as a tool. It should not necessarily replace Systematic Theology. Further, I don't see everything as narrative. I am more in line with the Chicago group in believing that narrative provides meaning for the chaos of events in history and our lives. Our lives are not inherently narrative in form. Related to that, I don't see history as one story or that one's life has only one story.

Additionally, many Narrative Theologians have taken subjectivity to the point that historicity or objective truth becomes meaningless. Even if one rejects objectivity, intersubjectivity should be respected. For example, if 40 people are in a room and 39 of them see a large bear walking through the crowd, we can't “prove” the bear is an objectively true and present... danger. But 39 people, over 97% of the subjective perspectives, share the same common perception, that should not be viewed as meaningless.

Consider Figure 6 above. Stories can be divided into four quadrants divided by two axes. One axis is concerned with historicity. Is the story historically true or untrue (non-fiction or fiction)? The other

axis is concerned with whether the issue of historicity matters. Let's consider the four from the standpoint of an Evangelical Christian perspective.



Figure 6 History Quadrants

Quadrant 1 would be Historically True, and the historicity matters. For example, from a Christian standpoint, I believe the Resurrection of Christ is a true story, and the truthfulness matters. If Jesus was executed and died, it is quite possible that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy and “got what was coming to him.” The resurrection made it clear that He was reliable, blessed by God, and worthy to be followed.

Quadrant 2 would be Historically Untrue, and this matters. A competing and contradicting faith history, such as in the Quran or the Book of Mormon, fits into this situation (again from a Christian perspective). While I am sure one could work out an accommodationist stance, generally the history tied to these books is interwoven with a faith that places itself in conflict with historic Christianity. (Again, you may disagree on this point.)

Quadrant 3 would be Historically True, but its historicity doesn't matter. For me, the Book of Jonah or the Book of Job would be in this category. I do happen to consider the two books as describing

in narrative form historical events. But suppose that was not the case. Suppose they were fictional parables. That wouldn't affect the purpose of the books, and would not have an impact on the historicity of the Bible as a whole, nor the message. Truthfulness of the stories matter, Biblically, not necessarily the historicity of the stories

Quadrant 4 would be Historically Untrue, and this doesn't matter. An example of this could be the Parables of Jesus. Most would assume that these stories are fictional. However, if they were based on actual events, that would not change their message and purpose.

For me, valuing the subjectivity of historical narrative (or any narrative) does not necessarily make historicity meaningless. Even though postmodernity has pointed out the difficulty of recognizing the objective, the intersubjective (that which is found by comparing and integrating several different subjective perspectives) still has a value that should not be ignored.

Interpreting Narratively

Interpreting and arguing a passage narratively is distinctly different from other methods of interpretation. One keeps the passage in narrative form, or even converts the passage to a narrative form. Let's take a Bible verse that is not inherently narrative. Try II Corinthians 12:14 (I'll use KJV here).

Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you; and I will not be burdensome to you: for I seek not yours, but you: for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.

This verse is of big concern here in the Philippines. That is because of a common Filipino practice. Parents commonly do not save up money for retirement. Rather, they invest in their children with the expectation (both tacit and explicit) that the children will financially support them in their old age. However, some have used the above verse as an argument that this cultural trait is unbiblical.

How could one deal with this puzzle. **First**, one can pull out one's Greek lexicon and look up terms and then see if insight can come

from the grammar and syntax. I don't see this sort of analysis helping much here. **Second**, one can look at the context. The context is Paul's argument to the Corinthian church that he has not been a burden to them. Rather, he has been one who gives, not one who takes. The context suggests that the section about parents and children had an illustrative function rather than a didactic function. That is, the relationship between parents and children was listed not to instruct on familial relationships, but to illustrate his relationship with the church of Corinth.

A **third** way to analyze the passage is with what I might call "battling prooftexts" If a verse says a confusing thing, it is good to see if other verses appear to concur, appear to contradict, or appear to modify the hypothetical interpretation. I Timothy 5:4 and 8 show that Paul believes children should take care of their parents, at least if they are old and in need. Jesus also explicitly attacked the use of theology to justify not providing for needy parents. Of course, if there were no direct contradicting passages one might have more of a difficult time. Even here, one can get caught firing back and forth different passages (didn't Jesus say that to follow Him, one must leave and even hate one's parents?).

A **fourth** way to interpret the passage is to look at it culturally. Since the statement in II Cor. 12:14 about parents and children appears to be illustrative, understanding the Hellenistic culture of that time should help clarify what it was meant to illustrate.

This method has merit, as do the others, but let's look at a way that is more **narrative-symbolic**. Looking at II Cor. 12:14, there are several stories embedded in the verse.

<1> Parents see their child in need and give to the child to meet that need.

<2> A child sees his parents in need and gives to the parents to meet that need.

<3> Paul comes to the church of Corinth and seeing them in need, gives to meet that need.

<4> (Implied) Paul comes to the church of Corinth in need, and Corinth gives to him to meet that need.

Paul says that <3> is correct, not <4>, and this is illustrated by the fact that <1> is correct, not <2>. If one put it into story logic, <1> → <3> AND ~<2> → ~<4>. The logic is set, but at this time, one should

note that critical parts of the stories are missing. The most important is the qualities of the characters. Starting with stories <1> and <2>, there are two options. One is that the child is young and the parents are adults. The other is that the child is an adult and the parents elderly. For stories <3> and <4>, there are parallel options. One is that the Corinth is immature, and Paul is an adult spiritual parent. The other is that Corinth is mature, and Paul is an elderly spiritual parent.

Since the stories are connected, the characters should be the same or parallel. This leads to two integrated stories.

<A> The child is young and the parents are adults. The church in Corinth is immature and Paul is the adult spiritual parent. The lesson here would be that the church of Corinth as a spiritual immature group would be cared for by Paul (rather than the other way around) just as adult parents would care for their young child. Young children don't take care of their adult parents after all.

**** The child is an adult and the parents are elderly. The church in Corinth is mature and Paul is the elderly spiritual parent. The lesson here would be that despite Paul being old and feeble and unable to take care of himself, he won't ask the capable mature church of Corinth to care for him, for it is the job of elderly parents to take care of their adult children. Adult children don't take care of their elderly parents after all.

Which story is true? It is <A>. Why? Paul describes Corinth as immature, but does not describe himself as old, feeble, helpless. Additionally, the imagery of a parent caring for a young child is more universal and normative than the imagery of an old person caring for an adult child. If the second was the correct one, special note would need to be made to direct the reader/hearer to that understanding. For example, suppose the following story: "A boy got into a fight with a neighborhood dog, and one had to go to the doctor to get stitches for a bite." Which went to the doctor? It could be either, but unless special note was made either by explicit statement or by implication due to the context (such as telling a joke), we are meant to assume the normative roles of the players.

That was a long path to a fairly obvious (or at least should be obvious) result. But in principle, ignoring the story aspect of a text, or trying to draw truths from a story without considering the story itself, can lead to confusion.

Final Thought

Recognizing that a community may gain special insights from the Bible due to a subjective situation does not make all possible interpretations equally valid. Don Richardson speaks of a tribe that found cultural resonance with Judas' clever betrayal of Jesus. The broader context of the story of Judas makes it clear that the Bible must challenge their cultural value here. This is where parables come in. Parables resonate, but also challenge culture. More on this in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 7

Mythic and Parabolic Functions of Stories

Definitions

As I have said or implied previously, there is no real agreement on definitions for the terms “myth” and “parable.” The term “myth” was used in chapter 5, but the definition used (as supplied by Erickson) is one of many. Part of the problem with defining the terms stems from the fact that these terms predate technical definitions. This is compounded by the fact that these terms have been utilized by different fields of study that have specific interests that are in conflict with each other. Those interested in cultural anthropology, folklore, literature, and theology are invested in these terms, especially the term “myth.” A layperson also has interest and may give a range of responses. One may focus on myths being old. Another may focus on myths being in opposition to “science” (“science” being another extremely loosely defined term). Yet another may focus on the heroic or divine nature of myths. Still others may see myths as etiological-- providing explanation-- “just so” stories of times past.

Theologians tend to see myths from a more functionalist standpoint. Myths exist to explain things to people regarding their culture and beliefs. Myths may be true or false. The Iliad by Homer appears to be VERY loosely tied to the historical events of a war in the Aegean Sea thousands of years ago. The element of historicity is interesting but not necessarily important. The function of the story to Greek self-understanding is not bound to whether the story is completely historical, completely fiction, or something in between. Curiously, while theologians say that myths may or may not be historical, from my experience at least, theologians typically presume that myths are not historical (a more layman understanding of the term). That's a shame.

For the purposes of this book, a functionalist understanding of myth will be used, following the thoughts of Claude Levi-Strauss and

John Dominic Crossan.¹ However, because of the confusion in the term, this paper will not focus on the term “myth” but on “mythic function.” Utilizing this and tying it to the idea of cultural relevance gives,

Mythic function: *A story has a mythic function if it supports, justifies, or explains a social or cultural norm or ideal that resonates with that culture.*

Parabolic function: *A story has a parabolic function if it challenges or contradicts a social or cultural norm or ideal of a culture, resonating instead with deep-seated values within a counterculture.*

If one takes the definitions for “mythic” and “parabolic” and extends them to the noun forms, also utilizing the idea of cultural resonance, then:

Myth: *A story that has power within a certain culture because it resonates with the culture’s deep-seated values.*

Parable: *A story that has power within a certain culture because it resonates with the deep-seated values within the counter-culture (or gives voice to doubts within the dominant culture).*

The use of the term “parable” can be problematic, just as can the term “myth,” described earlier. The various stories of Jesus are commonly called parables. Yet not all would fit the definition of parable shown above. This, however, seems no reason to throw away our definition. Rather, it seems best to recognize that some terms can have more than one definition.

Consider Figure 7 for a moment. Four quadrants are set up based on their role or function within a specific culture. The x-axis provides a range from being culturally resonant to being culturally relevant. Since a story can be both resonant and relevant, we will assume that on the left side are stories that are relevant but not resonant, while on the right are those that are both relevant and resonant. The y-axis is a range from being challenging to the dominant culture to not being challenging to that culture.

If a story has resonance and is challenging to the dominant culture (meaning it has counter-cultural resonance), that can be said to be a parabolic story. If a story has cultural resonance but is not challenging, but rather is supportive, to the dominant culture, it can

be said to be a mythic story. If a story is not truly resonant, but is still culturally relevant, and challenges in some sense the dominant culture, it could be described as being a revelatory story (revealing something new to the culture). If the story is culturally relevant but not challenging, it could be described as being an illustrative story.

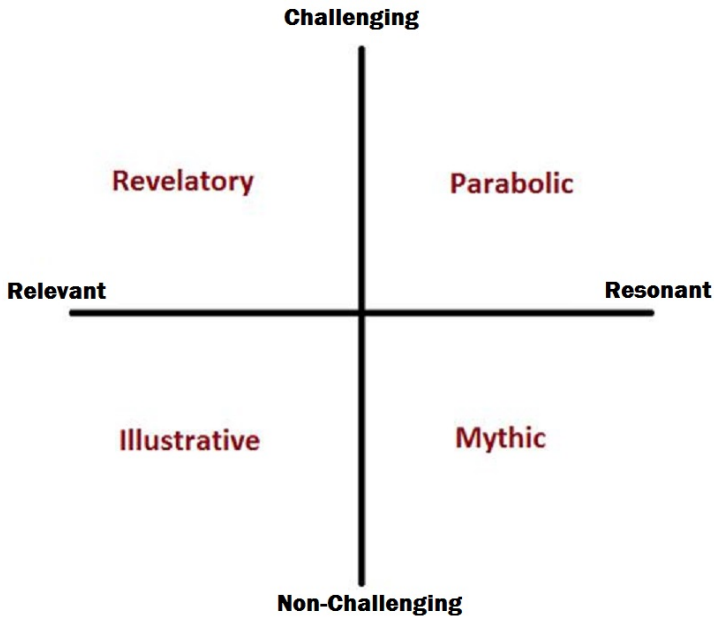


Figure 7. Story Quadrants

Consider a few examples.

A. The Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-8). The story in itself does not have the earmarks of resonance. A person sowing seeds certainly is culturally relevant but, having been raised in farming country, I just don't see the story speaking to people in the culture on a deeper level. It also does not really challenge people in that culture. It could be said to be an illustrative story. It tries to explain to people how others respond to God's word. The fact that Jesus actually does interpret His story in terms of explaining the abstract with the concrete (rather than challenge or support cultural values) gives credence to this view.

B. Parables of the Kingdom. There are several short stories that describe the Kingdom of Heaven (like yeast put into dough, like a tiny seed, etc.) These again don't have the qualities of cultural resonance. However, they do challenge people's thinking about what God's kingdom is (and is not). As such, these could be described as revelatory stories. The kingdom of God arrives as a lamb not a lion. No Judas Maccabeus in this revolution.

C. The Parable of the Good Samaritan. This story is culturally resonant. Determination of "Us" versus "Them" is a hot topic in most all cultures. It strikes at the heart of the fears and hopes of people in that culture. However, the question is whether it is mythic or parabolic. If the story had as its hero a Jew, or a Jewish religious leader, it might be said to be mythic. The Mosaic Law enforces the value of hospitality and care for strangers and aliens. However, the switching of characters (the unhelpful Levite and Priest, and the caring sacrificial Samaritan) challenged the dominant cultural viewpoint, but most likely resonated with the feelings of the counter-culture that religious leaders are too often focused on religious piety rather than love and care for the needy. This makes it a parabolic story.

D. The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). This story is unusual because it has both mythic and parabolic components. A story that involves the question of children growing up and drifting away from the family would probably be resonant in nearly any culture. And the story follows a typical mythic path. The mythic component will be dealt with more in the next chapter. But after the son is restored into the family, poorer but wiser, the older brother comes into the picture. His sanctimonious complaint has a parabolic quality. The older brother was saying what most listeners would be thinking, so when the father challenged the older brother, the listener is likewise challenged.

E. The Useful Bowl. This story may or may not be culturally resonant. The test is how a culture embraces the story or does not. The story has not had the chance to be tested in this way. However, I believe it has the earmarks of a potentially counterculturally resonant story. It challenges false pride, and challenges common understanding of what is honoring. The use of a religious leader at the end makes it countercultural for a religious listener. However, for someone who has been "turned off" by religion, it is possible that that aspect of the story would be more mythic-- supporting what

they already suspect. So whether it is parabolic or mythic in function may depend on the sub-culture it is addressed to.

F. Into the Old Testament. Parables in the Bible are not limited to Christ. Two of the more interesting parabolic stories from the Old Testament are the Parable of the Ewe Lamb, and the Parable of Jonah.

The Parable of the Ewe Lamb was spoken by the prophet Nathan to King David in II Samuel 12:1-10. The story could have easily been a mythic story. Nathan speaks to King David and talks about two men... one rich and one poor. The rich man selfishly took the one thing that the poor man valued. Instead of finishing the story, he asked King David to finish the story. David finishes the story with appropriately mythic vengeance against the one who exploited the poor. In so doing, he took on the role of the hand of vengeance-- a righteous judge. But then Nathan provides the twist. King David had taken on the incorrect role in the story. He was not the righteous judge, but the guilty exploiter. In a sense, this is like the Good Samaritan in that a mythic story becomes parabolic by reversing roles. Additionally, bringing the listener into the story through (1) giving him the opportunity to choose the ending, and (2) explicitly naming the listener as 'the bad guy' gives the story special impact.

The parable of Jonah is more complex. One can imagine a mythic version of this story. The prophet Jonah was asked preach against Ninevah (reminiscent of Moses and the Pharaoh). Jonah immediately begins his trip to Ninevah and preaches against Ninevah. The Ninevites (like the Pharaoh) reject the spokesperson of the "god" of an insignificant nation. Then Ninevah is destroyed (like Sodom and Gomorrah) and Jonah is victorious (like Elijah on Mt. Carmel).

The basic structure of a classic Old Testament mythic story is there, but everything is turned on its head.

- Jonah, God's prophet, is rebellious and petty
- The pagan sailors are empathetic, and pious
- The repugnant Ninevites are truly repentant
- God is patient with Jonah and Ninevah, and clearly reluctant to act with vengeance against the city and its inhabitants.

The story is a bit like the Good Samaritan in that the structure of the

story fits well with a myth, but the characters are swapped around making the “bad guys” the ones that the listener is ultimately prone to identify with and respond to favorably.

The story of Jonah really works best if spoken rather than read, and best in an interactive group setting. In this situation, the listeners respond emotionally to the characters based on their own culture (prejudices and all). Eventually, the listener begins to see God as a Universal God, seeking out all people, not just the Jews. This understanding of God has been in Judaism (Psalm 68, the book of Ruth and a number of other places) but the view of a God seeking out all peoples tended to become a counter-cultural understanding. Often the focus of the dominant culture was not on its role as a “blessing to all nations” but its identity as a unique chosen people of God.

I believe that a look at these stories should demonstrate to readers and listeners that the narrative form is effective, perhaps even necessary, to provide God's truth to us.

Final Thought

Several of the parables are simply myths where characters are reversed. One can imagine the old story from the silent film era of the dastardly villain (spoofed as “Snively Whiplash” by Jay Ward) , the innocent young woman (“Nell”), and the hero (“Dudley Dought”). The trio promotes a law and order heroism, selfish evilness of the man who would destroy what he cannot have, and the general purity and helplessness of youthful femininity. Simply by switching roles, the function of the story completely changes. For example making the police officer the villain would bring up issues of abuse of power and question the positive role of government. Making the woman the hero would challenge the presumption of helplessness of women. On the other hand, making the woman the villain would challenge the stereotype of innocence.

A good story is like a jewel with many facets. Each facet of a jewel provides a reflective and refractive surface to add to the beauty. Likewise, a good story has many facets that can be discovered with some time and effort. Modifying the roles in the story or changing the perspective of the story provides an amazing range of functions and messages. This will bring out beauty that was not first noticed.

Chapter 8

Role of Mythic and Parabolic Stories

With the definitions for mythic and parabolic given in the previous chapter, a few obvious points result. First, clearly, the term myth or parable cannot be applied generally to a story, but only within the context of a resonant culture or counterculture. A story may be a myth in one culture, a parable in another culture, and simply an interesting (or uninteresting) story in a third culture. The story of David and Goliath¹ is mythic in function to the ancient Israelites. However, one could imagine a culture where David and Goliath has a parabolic function. A highly disciplined and militarized culture may find itself cheering for Goliath. David and Goliath may, for them, be a cautionary tale where strength, discipline and maturity are not always enough to ensure victory. The hearer must be taught the sad truth that all matter of training and weaponry can be overcome by “a lucky hit.”

Second, even if a story has mythic power (or parabolic power) in two cultures, it may have it for different reasons. Since each culture is different, its interpretation of a story may be different. For example, in the story of David and Goliath, the mythic interpretation is that Israel is God's people, and if the Israelites obey God and trust God, they will succeed even in the face of overwhelming odds. In the case of the American culture, the mythic function is different. Goliath is the powerful unfeeling corporation or government bureaucracy. David is the seemingly powerless individual. However, when he stands on the side of what is right and refuses to give up, “David” (the individual) can be victorious over ‘the machine.’

As a third point, there are common themes in myths and parables that transcend culture even if their role in the culture varies. The basic story of David and Goliath is repeated throughout history. In the Philippines there is the story of Magellan and Lapu-Lapu (as will

be described below). The story of the 300 Spartans and the Persian army (or the battle of the Alamo) provides the same basic function even if there is the added twist of a temporary setback.

Digging a Bit Deeper

Since missions involves expressing divine truth in a way that is accessible to a specific culture, the proper use of stories with mythic or parabolic functions within the culture is valuable. Few people are impressed by propositional truth. Most find narrative far more compelling... as long as it hits home with the culture it is shared in.

Thus, understanding the culture and utilizing (or creating) stories that resonate mythically or parabolically is vital for being both an agent of change and an agent of preservation.

The story of David and Goliath is built around a more universal construct... a seemingly weak protagonist overcoming a stronger antagonist. In the Philippines, a comparable story is the story of Magellan and Lapu-Lapu. It fits the definition of a myth because it resonates with a deep Filipino worldview. The story is well-grounded in history even if romanticized by some. It is, for example, unlikely that Magellan personally fought Lapu-lapu. In the event, Magellan was a Portuguese explorer serving Spain to explore the world for purposes of the spice trade. Magellan landed in the Philippine archipelago around 1521 and began trying to convert people and place them under the authority of the Catholic Church and Spanish flag. Lapu-Lapu, a leader in the region, refused to obey Magellan. When Magellan tried to intimidate Lapu Lapu and his men (that behavior worked in Central and South America), a battle ensued in which Magellan was killed and his men routed. Only a few survived to make it back to Spain.²

For its mythic quality, the characters needed to be redefined. At that time, there was no such thing as the Philippines (simply an archipelago of islands having many local tribes and leaders) but Lapu-Lapu becomes the representative of the peace-loving Philippine people. Magellan was an explorer and spice trader who in an act of utter foolishness forgot his charter and dabbled in local politics (a dangerous thing even today in the Philippines). However, Magellan comes to represent the powerful and violent outside imperialist (whether it be Spain, America, Japan, China or another). So in its mythic form, the historical story of Magellan and Lapu-Lapu

becomes the rallying story of the Filipinos quest for peaceful self-determinacy in the face of more powerful outside powers.

In missions, it is good to recognize that stories that are important to us may be unimportant in another culture. It may even have the opposite effect (as Don Richardson noted in *Peace Child*, the tribe he was working with found Judas to be the protagonist of a myth demonstrating the power of clever deception).³ It requires a deep understanding of the beliefs of a people to successfully predict the effect. On the other hand, though, there are common story structures that transcend culture that provide a pattern to build stories. Joseph Campbell describes one such as “The Hero's Journey” noted in “The Hero With a Thousand Faces.”⁴ Another story that seems to transcend individual cultures is the one shown in Figure 8. After a quick read, one may be tempted to already come up with the details of the story as shown in Figure 9.

While the story of the Prodigal Son from the Bible may be an obvious example of this structure, it is not alone. Consider the left column in Figure 10. The origin story for Spiderman also fits this structure. It, likewise, can be thought of as a story that resonates with culture. We would probably call Spiderman a myth, since it provides a story that supports a regional value system. In many cultures, This message would not be mythic, but parabolic, in cultures where the use of power for personal gain or even self-aggrandizement is promoted (even if opposed counterculturally).

With regards to the Prodigal Son, what message would the story as shown in Figure 9 provide? Probably it would be something like “Father Knows Best” or “There's No Place Like Home” (Wizard of Oz also has a mythic function built off of this story structure). But the lesson of the story above supports rather than challenges the culture (at least most cultures), so it has a mythic function rather than a parabolic function.

**Young man
in good
stable family**

**Realizes that he
is missing out on
the "good
things" in life**

**Rejects family
norms and enjoys
success for
awhile**

**Suffers loss and
repents foolish
behavior**

**Restored to
family poorer but
wiser**

Classic Structure

Figure 8. A Classic Story Structure



Figure 9. Prodigal Son and a Classic Story Structure

Young man lives with aunt and uncle and works and studies at college.

Young man in good stable family

Young man lives on a big farm with father, brother, and many workers

Bit by a radioactive spider he realizes he can do so much better doing his own thing.

Realizes that he is missing out on the "good things" in life

Asks for his inheritance from his father to go and do his own thing

Leaves his former life and begins staying out late earning money as a professional fighter.

Rejects family norms and enjoys success for awhile

Leaves and lives a wild life which he greatly enjoys for awhile.

Because of his own selfishness, his uncle dies. He regrets the life he has been living.

Suffers loss and repents foolish behavior

He is left broke and friendless. Realizes his foolishness and determines to ask forgiveness from his father

He returns to college and regular work, caring for his aunt, but now also helping others in need.

Restored to family poorer but wiser

He is welcomed by his father and restored to good standing in the family

Spiderman

Classic Structure

Prodigal Son

Figure 10. Spiderman and the Prodigal Son

So... should we call it “The Myth of the Prodigal Son” rather than the “The Parable of the Prodigal Son“? No... as noted in a previous chapter, Jesus did an amazing thing. He attached a parabolic ending to a mythic beginning. The elder brother promotes a mythic ending... acceptance back into the family but suffering shame and loss (“poorer but wiser”). However, the father provides a parabolic ending, magnanimously forgetting, forgiving, and celebrating. It violates our cultural sense of justice, and makes the obedient elder brother appear unsympathetic.

Final Thought

The story format in Figure 8 is applicable to a virtually unlimited number of stories. After all, one could argue that the structure is the same as the Grand Narrative of the Bible. Man is living as a created child of God in harmony with both God and Nature. Man gets greedy and decides that God is holding back from him. He rejects God and goes his own way. But going his own way eventually means great suffering and loss. Man gradually realizes his own foolishness and (with the miraculous working of God as Savior) he is able to return, restored into the family of God in a state of restored harmony.

At this point there are two ways the story can go. In some forms of Christianity, the story transitions to “Purgatory.” Purgatory is the mythic ending. It satisfies our cultural demand for justice... the erring one may be restored, but only after first being punished (purged) of his/her sins. Yet the Bible appears to show that the Grand Narrative is not merely mythic, but parabolic. The ending is full forgiveness and restoration. God welcomes back those who repent with no regard to our concept of justice. That is certainly an ending that should shock any of us.

CHAPTER 9

The Story Wheel

Figure 11 shows what I am calling the Story Wheel. It is based considerably on the work of John Dominic Crossan and Sheldon Sacks.¹ However, I feel there is one category that is implied but missing. That is the antimyth. With the addition of the antimyth, the linear spectrum of stories becomes a circle.

Myth and Antimyth

<Remember, with this functionalist view of myth, it is not about being true or false... rather it is about its function in a culture. Myths can as easily be true and historical as they can be fictional or legendary.>

The underlying “myths” of Christianity are considerably different from the underlying myths of Islam and Buddhism. As such, the myth in one faith would be an antimyth in another faith. That is why one is left in a bit of an awkward situation when someone says something like... “Don’t Christians and Muslims (and perhaps other groups) worship the same God?” The argument behind that is that we both worship the one true God, creator of all things. If we both believe there is only one God who is god by His own nature and that this same God is the one and only creator of the universe, it seems silly to say that we worship two different Gods. But, in truth,

“God” in Christian culture is not a propositional concept but the God of the story of Christianity, revealed in the Bible. “God” of Islamic culture is also not a propositional concept, but described through the Quran. The question is actually whether the “myths” of Christianity and Islam are compatible. If they are not compatible, then the gods of each are not the same. The God of Christianity is the God of the Bible, of the incarnation and of the resurrection,

while Allah of Islam is the one of the Quran and the Hegira. I would argue that the Bible and Quran correctly function as antimyths to each other... despite having a number of common threads. After all, it is hard to imagine any two major works that would disagree on everything.

Apologue

An apologue supports or defends a culture. Fables and folktales typically do as well since they tell stories commonly with morals that are consistent with the belief structure of the culture. Most movies ultimately seek to support the worldview they are in. *“A simple, ordinary guy, gets caught in a web of evil machinations. Although not a “born hero” he sees his need to stand up and be counted to help the innocent common people. Despite horrendous odds, the little guy is able to conquer with the help of a few unlikely supporters.”* This story could be seen as an American “Action Story” since it doesn’t have a very strong lesson. On the other hand it can be seen as a rehearsing of the Classic American myth of an honest, hard-working, individualistic “David” who through courage and good American know-how is able to fight off the evil “Goliath.” But perhaps it is best seen as an Apologue in that it defends the American David myth indirectly by perpetuating it through an “action story.”

Action Story

An action story describes the culture without a lot of judgment. One could argue that most stories are action stories. On the other hand, one could argue that there are no true action stories since all stories are linked to the culture and support or challenge them in some manner. That is why an Action story covers a region of the story circle both on the supporting and challenging side of stories. Action stories always speak to the culture but do not have such conversation as their main focus.

Satire

Satires poke fun at cultural traits. While some are sharp, they typically lack a strong positive message. They commonly point out something wrong or unworthy through humor or light attack. But

they don't directly point the way to something better. In religious circles, satire is often not highly appreciated. It is thought of as irreverent.. even blasphemous. While blasphemy can be clearly seen as wrong... a little irreverence has its place. We need the challenge of the dig, the poke at ourselves, and what we, often secretly, hold most dear.

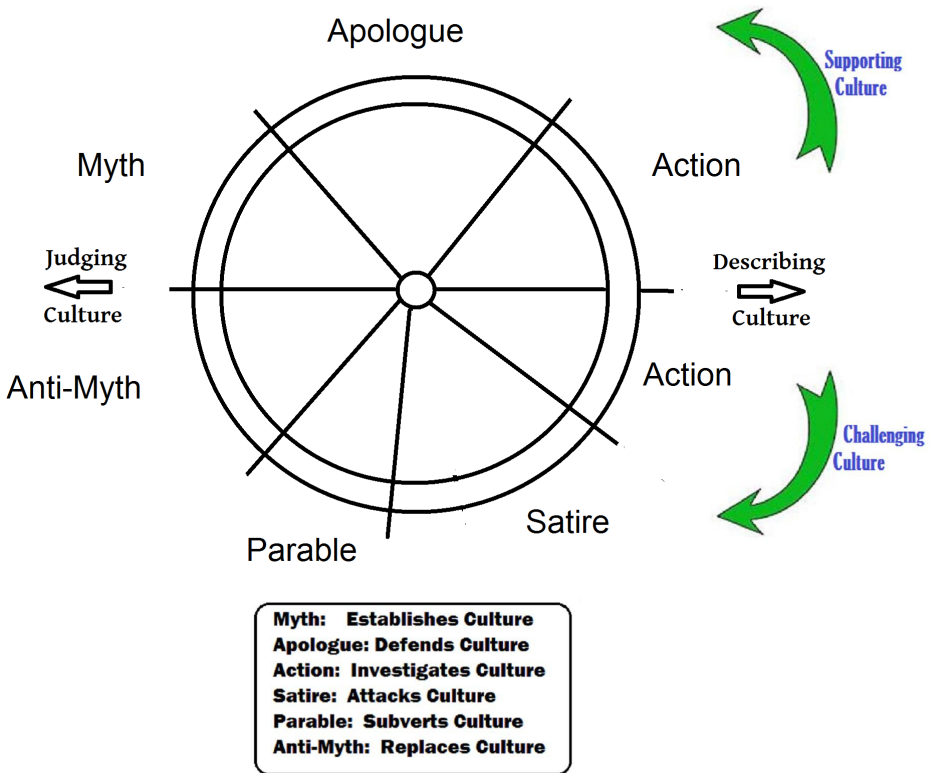


Figure 11. Story Wheel

Parable

Parables subvert culture. They take a myth and twist it to challenge the underlying cultural presuppositions. They don't seek to replace the culture. Rather, they open the thinking of cultural members to something bigger than their previous views could accommodate. A Parable is different from an **Antimyth** since it broadens thinking

without necessarily replacing old views. Essentially, an antimyth would be a myth of a competing culture. There is no clear demarcation between parable and antimyth. However, an antimyth could be thought of as seeking to replace a culture, while a parable could be thought of as seeking to fulfill a culture.

Which of these are the most valuable in Christian literature?

Probably all of them have a place at times. However, when the purpose of the writing is to change the mind of the reader, a countercultural (rather than anti-cultural) approach is probably best. Thus parables should have a prominent place in Christian writing.

David Tracy² notes that religion is supposed to be rebellious, in conflict with the culture it is in. The reason is that religion (personifying it for a moment) is supposed to see the culture around it with clear eyes. It is then supposed to say to that culture that there is an Ultimate Reality that is above and beyond what one experiences in the surrounding world. A religion claims access, on some level, to that Ultimate Reality, and points out its clear superiority to the flawed and failed “experienced reality.” When a religion stops seeking to challenge that culture and instead simply encourages and maintains that culture (indeed becoming an “opiate of the masses” as a maintainer of the existing power structure) it has failed in a profound way.

It is in parables in its challenging function (leading to cultural transformation, not cultural replacement) that stories most clearly are religious. But that is not to say that parables are enough. In speaking of narrative theology, the following quote could equally apply to religion as a whole:

“If one tries to reduce stories to “all one type” or to use the term “story” indiscriminately, one will produce a theology simply inadequate to account for all the work stories do. A narrative theology of myth without parable would be stifling; of parable without myth would be baffling; of action alone would be boring. Narrative theology must attend to all the types of stories.”³

CHAPTER 10

Power of Parables

Going to church as a child, I learned that a parable was an “earthly story with a heavenly meaning”. This is a nice and (obviously) memorable definition. I never forgot it. However, what really defines a heavenly meaning? Is an ethical story a parable? Should one separate parables (heavenly message) from fables (“earthly” message)? Later, I learned a parable is “an extended simile”. This was a way of contrasting with an allegory, which was seen as an “extended metaphor”. The obvious problem with that meaning is that it is disconnected from its purpose. As noted in a previous chapter, I find a more functionalist description to be more useful. But with all the talk about cultural relevance, cultural resonance, etiology, and such, the most important fact, regardless of the definition used, is that parables are powerful. Here are some reasons.

1. The first power of the parable is that it engenders change. It is supposed to challenge our preconceptions and beliefs, and point us in a new direction... a new orientation. This goes back to the idea of counter-cultural resonance. It provides plot, voice, and imagery to the doubts and concerns within the broader society/culture. Feelings of doubt are empowered when they are labeled with words. These words become more powerful when they are brought to life by story. The story becomes part of the experience of the hearers and changes who they are.

An interesting example of this, to me, is in dystopic literature or movies. Examples include *Metropolis* (the great silent movie), *Brave New World*, *Space Merchants*, *1984*, and *Soylent Green*. There are many more. Essentially, they take an existing cultural value or condition and extrapolate it to hideous ends. Dystopic stories do not

attempt to predict the future, but critique the present. The hope is that the ugly picture of the future will serve to show the true nature of the present situation, as looking at the portrait of Dorian Gray would show the true nature of its subject. Success is achieved if the culture is affected by it and changed.

The book 1984¹ became of added interest as the year 1984 approached. People were noting the considerable differences between the story 1984 and the actual situation in that year. But of course, that wasn't really the point. The book, written by George Orwell was named 1984 as a juxtaposition of the year of its authorship (1984 versus 1948). The book was not written to be predictive, but to be cautionary. Success of the book did not depend on predicting the future, but changing the future.

2. The second power of the parable is that it is memorable. Years ago I worked for Northrop-Grumman. I remember that during the first week we were in orientation class. There, the VP of Engineering told us a parable. It is pretty much the only thing I remember from orientation. Here it is.

*Back in the 1800s were two small companies that made buggy whips... Smith Brothers and Jones Brothers. The vision statement of Smith Brothers was **"We seek to make the best buggy whips in the world."** Jones Brothers had a vision statement **"We provide navigational control solutions for the world."** The first vision statement makes a lot of sense, while the second one is rather strange... correct?*

However, by the 1890s the horseless carriage (automobile) was becoming viable and that began the demise of the horse-drawn buggy. What happened? The Smith Brothers company kept growing, for awhile, gaining market share in the buggy whip market. The Jones Brothers market share of the buggy whip market kept shrinking. BUT... this was because Jones Brothers began developing steering and control devices for automobiles. So over time Smith's Brothers became the dominant company in a dying market, while Jones' Brothers moved into strong niches in automobile, boat, and eventually airline navigation and controls.²

The lesson is that our vision limits or guides our behavior. To grow

in a changing world requires flexibility, and flexibility requires broad vision. This story has the quality of a parable. It surprises the typical listener. The hearer may at first find it amusing that one buggy whip company would describe itself in terms of navigational control systems. However, by the end of the story, it makes sense. Words that describe a narrow vision may indeed doom an organization. While this may not be a “heavenly” parable, I have found it useful in both business and Christian missions. However, the most important part of the story is that it provides a narrative of a new idea in a way that is memorable. Again, it was the only part of the orientation that I remember over two decades later.

The importance of being memorable should not be underestimated. Christians are commonly encouraged to read their Bibles, or memorize individual Scripture passages. Christians are rarely encouraged to memorize Bible stories because they are naturally memorable. Mnemonic devices used to be highly prized. However, with the increase of educational methods that focus on analysis over memory, and with technological aids (“paper brains” and electronic devices of many sorts), mnemonic aids receive less focus. They are found intentionally in church sermons with “**technical mnemonics**” such as having various points of the sermon starting with letters that form an acronym. Technical mnemonics can be useful, but tend to lose their value as soon as one jumps to a different language or culture.³

But good stories, and here I am focusing on parables, also have a mnemonic quality to them. These utilize “**conceptual mnemonics**”... things that are not so strictly tied to language or culture. Some methods include:

- Substitution
- Exaggeration
- Action
- Poetic Structure (This includes both technical forms such as using rhythm and rhyme, and conceptual forms such as the use of parallelisms. This can include the “Mnemonic Triad”--utilizing two items to establish a pattern, and then emphasizing the third breaking the pattern.)
- Repetition

- Contrast or Reversal of roles
- Humor
- “Twists.” This is not just having a twist ending. It can include subversion of tropes (common storytelling patterns), and forcing the hearer to shift perspective.

Some of these may be thought of as literary devices more than mnemonic aids. Yet their effectiveness comes, partly, from the fact that they spark interest and stick in the mind. Parables use many of these.⁴

3. The third power of parables is that it attracts interest. Having attended seminary in Asia, I have been told many times that the Eastern mindset is built around stories. This is supposed to be in contrast to the Western mindset that is propositional. However, I have some doubts regarding this. While it is true that Western preachers and theologians tend to be propositional, and have a fascination for the Pauline Epistles over much of the rest of the Bible, I don’t think this is true in the broader Western Society. People will pay good money to watch a movie or buy a comic book, but can hardly be talked into attending a public lecture or debate.

Consider the origin story of Spiderman again (Yes, I used to be a comic book collector). It begins with a young, somewhat self-serving, college nerd, and ends with a man of power and responsibility. In fact, the story is really a parable that teaches the lesson **“With Great Power There Must Also Come... Great Responsibility.”**³ This lesson contrasts the normal (though oft unspoken) human view that great power means the ability to accomplish great self-gratification. This story was hugely successful as a comic book and developed into a hugely popular series of movies. The story is now part of the shared cultural experience in much of the world, and exists in many media forms including comic book, comic strip, cartoon, and movie (to name a few). In teaching a Theology & Culture class here in the Philippines, I used the origin story of Spiderman, and found all were well familiar with it.

Essentially, a parable as a form of narrative is a rhetorical tool. In other words, it is created with the intention of attracting attention. A parable that does not attract attention, or can be converted without loss into a pithy moral, should never have been a parable in the first place. As Craig Blomberg notes,

“the power of the narratives is obviously lost by means of propositional paraphrase, as is a portion of their meaning. One must therefore not assume that dogmatic affirmations are adequate substitutes for narrative theology. Each has its place, and neither may be jettisoned.”⁶

4. The fourth power of parables is that it can become part of the conceptual framework of the modified culture. Many stories have a message that goes well beyond the story so that the message is recognized and understood within the culture, even if the story is not known by people within the culture. Many people understand the concept of a “good Samaritan”--- one who helps those in need even without relational ties or hope of personal gain--- without knowing the parable by Jesus, or even knowing what a Samaritan is. A lesser number of people, but still many, know what is meant by a Pyrrhic victory, success whose cost is too great to justify what is gained. Those familiar with the term may know nothing of Pyrrhus and his victory over the Romans. Additionally, a Trojan Horse, a gift given that is in fact a trap, is a well-known concept even for those unfamiliar with ancient Greek poetry. These concepts have become part of the framework of the culture. As such, their power has transcended the narrative.

Final Thought

It is not surprising that Jesus used parables. They engender change, they are memorable, they attract interest, and they transform culture. While Jesus did use many methods of teaching (perhaps modelling, or incarnational modelling, was His most important method), He, however, is most well-known for parables. When I am saying this, I am using the more general definition for parable that includes thinking, myths, parables, revelations, illustrations, and apologues. That is okay because the original term, parabola, was used quite a bit differently than it is used by myself or other people today. The point is, parables are memorable and effective. The historical stories of the Bible, and the parables, tend to be the parts of the Bible that nominal Christians, and even non-Christians, know. Many may know a few bumper sticker phrases

like “Judge not, lest ye be judged” or “Love your neighbor as yourself” or some form of the Golden Rule, but it is in stories that abstract concepts become accessible.

So it is not surprising that Jesus used parables. A bigger question is “Why are they used so rarely by Christians today?”

CHAPTER 11

God in Proposition, Metaphor, and Model

When we speak of God, we tend generally to use negative propositions, or metaphors. The jargon terminology relating to this is “apophatic theology” or “via negativa.” Consider some negative propositions:

- God is omnipresent (present in all places)
- God is omniscient (all-knowing)
- God is omnipotent (all-powerful)

At first, these don't sound negative, but they are. We are finite beings and are only familiar with finite things. We can adequately comprehend being constrained to limited places. We can adequately comprehend having limited knowledge. We can adequately comprehend having limited power. Essentially, when we say God is omnipresent, we are saying, “You know how everything we are familiar with or imagine is limited in space? Well, God is not like that.” Most propositional statements about God boil down to this sort of negation of our own experience or understanding. Propositional understandings are limited. Much of our propositional statements about God are developed inductively from the Bible, not stated explicitly. Nothing wrong with inductively-developed statements. Some Unitarian groups have made a lot from the fact that the Bible does not use the term “trinity.” Of course, the concept of the Trinity is inductive. (Note. Even though the “trinity” of God sounds like a positive statement, it still is more negative since the idea emphasizes a quality that we don't have nor fully understand.) The risk of inductive statements is that we begin to interpret Scripture from the inductive qualities rather than from the texts that the quality concept was drawn from. Some have argued that the omnipotence of God means that God can do all things. The problem

here is two-fold. First, the term itself does not imply this. Being all-powerful means not limited by that which is limited by power. It does not imply God may not be limited by other things unrelated to power (such as goodness, honesty, or the very nature of power itself).. Second, since the term is drawn inductively from the Bible, (and to a lesser extent, observation of His creation) the term should not be a primary source for understanding God. We may come to the conclusion, from the Bible, that God cannot fail in doing what He wills to do. We may come to the conclusion that God cannot break His promises, lie, or violate His own nature. These limitations help us understand God and are part of our understanding of God's "omnipotence."

While propositional statements about God tend to be negative, metaphors are typically positive statements. That is because metaphors tend to link the abstract and the concrete. Commonly, metaphors help in understanding the abstract, the invisible, and the transcendent. Metaphors are extremely powerful conveyors of meaning. A metaphor links together two concepts that do not go together... "a word or phrase used inappropriately."¹ "Metaphors have a relatively determinate meaning without being exhaustively specifiable."² That is, it provides meaning, while still providing room for mystery and discovery. Recall from a previous chapter the metaphor of the human life as a tapestry. That metaphor links a concrete item (a woven tapestry) with an abstract item (a human life experience). This connection can open up many areas of thought and investigation. Because, however, of the connection with the concrete, the range of comparisons is more controlled than a propositional statement that links two abstract concepts (such as "Life is an Adventure.")

Dennis Nineham (in the epilogue to "The Myth of God Incarnate") says that people...

"find it hard to believe in God because they do not have available to them any lively imaginative picture of the way God and the world as they know it are related. What they need most is a story, a picture, a myth, that will capture their imagination while meshing in with the rest of their sensibility in the way that Messianic terms linked with the sensibility of first-century Jews, or Nicene symbolism with the sensibility of philosophically-minded fourth-century Greeks."³

The obvious implications of this is that many (most?) people in the modern or post-modern, globalistic or pluralistic, worlds picture something they label “God,” and that picture does not fit with their worldview. This disconnect leads them, naturally, to unbelief (or at least agnosticism). Another way of saying it is that people invent an unbelievable god (from the raw materials provided by their own culture), and in rejecting their own creation, reject God.

Gordon Kaufman describes God as symbol.⁴ Describing the God we worship as a symbol is not rejecting God, but recognizing that there is a difference between the “Available God” (a picture or image of God that we create in our minds) and the “Real God” (the self-existent One). Once we get a firm understanding of the difference between the “God Who Is” and the “god we construct,” we can see the problem that people today have in believing in God.

PEOPLE TODAY LACK THE RESOURCES NECESSARY TO DEVELOP A PICTURE/ UNDERSTANDING OF GOD THAT IS BOTH ACCURATE TO HIS TRUE NATURE AND COMPREHENSIBLE, BELIEVABLE, AND RELEVANT WITHIN THEIR PRESENT WORLDVIEW.⁵

But whose fault is that? If people view a construct of God who is violent, uncaring, and judgmental, are we justified to blame them for the poor image? If people view a construct of God who is grandfatherly— kindly, doting, and a bit out of touch— can we condemn those for accepting such an image? An obvious (even necessary) way of explaining who God is is through metaphor. When we say “The Lord is my Shepherd” we are taking the image of a shepherd, a keeper and protector of sheep, and relating it to God (and relating us to the sheep). Obviously, in many ways God is very much unlike a shepherd... but on some level the concept helps us understand God (if we understand what a GOOD shepherd is like).

Jacques Derrida notes that metaphors exist somewhere between nonsense and truth.⁶ Take the good shepherd example. On many levels it is nonsense to say that God is a shepherd. Clearly, He is not so employed. He neither looks like a shepherd nor, in most

ways, behaves as a shepherd. Yet on another level, it is possible that the image of God as a good shepherd expresses a profound truth about God that we would have trouble fathoming without this symbol/metaphor. Metaphor then provides a bridge between:

Context “A” — Metaphor — Context “B”
Is Not — Metaphor — Is
Nonsense — Metaphor — Truth

Along the same lines, Paul Ricoeur sees metaphors not as allegories, or figurative language, but existing as tension between two literal concepts that do not normally relate. As such, much of their value comes from the ability to shock.⁷ Consider the metaphor, “God is Love.” Clearly, God (a concrete living being) is not Love (an abstract concept). Rather, the truth comes from the shock and challenge of the interplay of the ideas. A metaphor then also implies the negation. When Jesus said “I am the bread of life” or “I am the light of the world,” these are metaphors since the negation of each is true. Jesus is NOT bread. Jesus is NOT light. God is NOT (literally) love. God is NOT (literally again) our father.

A metaphor is to be understood, in part, in terms of meaning, but also in terms of value. Metaphors have as “their nature always to express ideas better than could be achieved by extended explanations.”⁸ Therefore, if something can be fully explained without a metaphor, the metaphor has little value. It may be nothing more than a literary ornamentation. But metaphors can become “worn out” as the ability to shock is taken away, or when the metaphor becomes reified.

Metaphors for God are useful, but they can lose their power. When Jesus spoke of God as His (and our) Father, this was a shocking new idea with little support within the Hebrew Bible. Its power was tied to that shock value. Once an idea becomes comfortable, it risks becoming trite, it risks becoming theologized, it risks becoming a definition. Embracing the Fatherhood of God as a definition has led to much foolishness at times. Some have tried to explain why God can only be thought of as a Father and not a Mother, or that God is “male” and not “female.” Metaphors can drift into heresy by misdirecting people so as to obscure the God Who Is, or by being

taken as literal and so, again, obscuring the God Who Is. We often talk about Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King. However, only one of these is literally true. Jesus was a prophet. Jesus was literally neither a priest nor a king. Rather, the terms “priest” and “king” are useful metaphors for certain aspects of the nature and role of Jesus.

Sometimes a metaphor is found to be relatively stable, coherent, comprehensive and broad in scope. At that time, we might no longer talk of it as simply a metaphor, but as a model. For example, according to McFague, “God as Father” is more than simply a metaphor, but can be thought of as a model. However, a model does not mean that it is any more real... it just means that it is broadly useful. God is not literally my father (a biological relation)... yet God can be understood effectively in a broad set of situations through the metaphor/model of an idealized father.⁹

Metaphors are powerful, important, and dangerous. In cross-cultural settings, it is a challenge discovering appropriate metaphors. One might decide that God can be contextualized into another culture successfully with a simple metaphor. We might say that God is Allah (the Muslim understanding, that is) or Bhagavan. We might say that Jesus is an avatar. But there is a lot of cultural baggage that must be dealt with using such comparisons. The inadequacy of these other terms is not a problem any more than the limitations of the term shepherd should keep us from using that for describing Christ. The power of a metaphor must be balanced by respect for the limitations and dangers.

Final Thought

Stories give substance to symbols and metaphors. To understand God, we need symbols and metaphors, and so we need stories. Symbols, metaphors, and stories about God are not the God Who Is. They are a tool. Carefully and respectfully utilized, they can help people understand God better. Carelessly or disrespectfully utilized, they can make God seem unbelievable, or worse, create a false god in the mind of the hearer.

CHAPTER 12

Story #2

The Master Clockmaker

This is a story about a clockmaker many years ago. Now if you are interested in details about the guild system of Medieval Switzerland, please go to a library and look it up. You won't find it here. This particular fictitious clockmaker was a master of his craft and had a couple of journeymen and several apprentices under his tutelage. Many families desired to have their sons work and learn under him, but the master clockmaker was very selective. The two most senior apprentices were named Johann, or Heinrich If no one is bothered, I will simply call them John and Rich. One day, the master clockmaker asked his two senior apprentices over to his private workshop and offered an unusual deal.

“John and Rich,” said the master clockmaker, “do you see this clock on the wall here.”

For the sake of simplicity, let us assume that they could indeed see, and had seen many times before this particular clock.

“This clock” continued the master clockmaker, “ was made by myself in my youth. It is the clock that earned me the honor of master clockmaker. Two years ago, I was able to earn enough money to buy back my masterpiece. It may be the most accurate clock in all of Switzerland.”

Maybe he did not say this, since this would almost certainly have been unnecessary exposition, for the two apprentices were well aware of these facts. But your weren't. Let's get back to the story.

“You two have developed as apprentices, and do a fine job making parts for our clocks. However, it is time for you to spread your wings and move on. I want you two to build your first complete clocks. I would like to offer a bit of a twist. I love a good competition, so here

is my offer. I want your first clocks to be complete by the first day of the June. On that day at noon your two clocks will be mounted on the wall next to my clock. I will be the only one allowed in here for a month, and I will touch the clocks only to reset the weights. I want your clocks to have the bells disabled. I don't want to confuse the people in the shop on when to start and stop work with bells going off at different times from my office. On the first day of July at noon, we will all go into my office. Whichever of your clocks agrees more closely with my clock will earn the maker 5 ounces of gold. How does that sound to you?"

Well it sounded great to them, so they started right in on the challenge. About 4 days into their work, John had a clever idea. He smiled to himself, and changed his design somewhat and moved ahead. Rich did not have a clever idea and did not smile or change his design. He just plodded ahead with his work.

Both were done by June 1st. The clocks were set at noon and the weights were set to go. The master clockmaker put a cloth in front of each of the apprentice's clocks. That was that. Each day, the master clockmaker would go in and reset the weights on all three clocks, but would never look under the cloths that hung over the faces of the apprentices' clocks. That month sure seemed to take a lot longer than other months. However, the master clockmaker's clock assured all that June was simply 720 hours, as is typically the case.

I have no interest in boring you any more than necessary so we will slip ahead to July 1st at 11:59 AM. In the office were the master clockmaker and John and Rich, waiting with great anticipation. The master clockmaker's clock rang at noon, and the clockmaker tore off the covers from the apprentices' clocks. The clock of John showed exactly noon. The clock of Rich showed 12:08. All were quiet for a few moments and then the master clockmaker smiled.

"John, you have been very clever. You disconnected the minute hand and left it pointing at 12. By doing this you almost guaranteed a win. Rich, I am afraid you have not been very clever. You did nothing more than make a clock, and it is 8 minutes fast. John, you win the five ounces of gold. I congratulate you on the win. I send you out into the world to seek a name for yourself. I am sure you will go far."

"Rich," he continued. "I am afraid someone has to lose, and

although you created a fine clock, you are the loser. Tomorrow, you will have to come back to work here if you are willing. But rather than being an apprentice, you will now be a craftsman in my shop.”

John decided to speak finally in this story. “Master, I certainly appreciate the congratulations and the gold. Yet I feel that in some way I am being punished for winning, while Rich here, is being rewarded for losing. Why must I leave to seek my own way, while Rich is brought in as a craftsman?”

“John,” replied the master clockmaker, “you are in no way being punished. You are a winner, and the world loves winners. I am sure you will achieve worldly success. And frankly, five ounces of gold will help greatly on the way. But you have to understand this: although the world loves winners, I am not the world. I do not seek winners— I seek clockmakers. And I found one today.”

About the Story

The story could be thought of as a transformation of the story of Cain and Abel. Like Cain, John wins and also loses, and like Abel, Rich loses and ultimately wins. Arguably, this also says something about God. God's blessings are not necessarily how we often see them. After all, blessing in many ways has more to do with being esteemed or honored, than being prosperous, successful, or happy.

Of course, one might read the story and come up with different connections. There are some elements of the Parable of the Talents, or to the story of Jacob and Esau. Of course, it is not a requirement that a story links to a Bible story. However, they often do because many Bible stories have supracultural themes.

This story probably at its most resonant when it is seen in terms of two brothers seeking approval from their father, or two people seeking the approval of their god.

Reflecting on the Story

A story is most effective when it is meditated upon by the individual and that individual comes to a personal insight or epiphany. While this may come from personal reflection or meditation... it is also triggered through dialogue with others. Conversation with the story is important, but so is conversation with others.

Did Rich know what John was doing to win the contest? After all, it matters if Rich's honesty is due to integrity or if it is due to lack of cleverness. If one seeks to apply the story to our relationship with God, one might assume that the clockmaker is fully informed of what is going on... not only of John's dishonesty, but Rich's motivation. If that is the case, one might presume that the clockmaker was aware of Rich's competence AND his integrity.

But speaking of motivation, what was the motivation of the clockmaker? Did he do the test to determine who was more competent? Did he do it to test integrity? Did he do it to test both? One might be reminded of the Biblical Parable of the Talents. In it the master is testing his servants. It ultimately was a test of their faithfulness. But, one might wonder, likewise, what the master would have said to a fourth servant... one who was faithful, yet incompetent. Would he still receive a "Well done, good and faithful servant!"?

One might imagine that integrity without competence would not be enough to satisfy the clockmaker (but that is just speculation).

What does this story suggest about life? Should life be viewed as a test of God? Or not? From Romans we learn that "All have fallen short of the glory of God," just as all fall short of the master clockmaker's clock. Biblically... In what ways did John win? In what ways did Rich win? Which type(s) of winning is more important?

The story ends... but one can seek to extend the story. What happens John and to Rich? In the story of Jacob and Esau, the cheater matures and eventually is blessed by God, not just by his father. On the other hand, the honest one ultimately was also successful. Is that possible here? Could John learn and ultimately come to good? And what happens to Rich? What does his life come to.

CHAPTER 13

Images as Stories

Images are symbols, and as such they have themselves (as an image), the thing they represent, and the thing that is supposed to be created in the mind of the viewer. Images can exist as multiple types of symbols. One form is a **“Pure Symbol.”** Any letter of the alphabet is a pure symbol because the “meaning” of the symbol (for example, the letter “T”) is purely arbitrary. There are lots of pure symbols. The dollar sign (“\$”) is another one. There is no obvious reason why this symbol would have the meaning it does versus any other symbol. Another type of symbol is an **“Iconic Symbol”** or Icon. In this case the symbol is supposed to remind one of the thing it represents. It may not be perfect. An image on a restroom may suggest to a person that it is for men only or women only. The image does not really look like a man or a woman, but the symbol reminds one of a man or a woman. The symbol people use for a star (whether it be, 4-point, 5-point, 6-point, 8-point or otherwise) is supposed to remind us of a star even if it doesn't truly look like a star.

Another image form is a **“Discursive Symbol.”** In this case, the image is made up of parts that have explanatory purposes for their inclusion in the image. An example of this is a graph (bar, line, pie, or otherwise). Another example would be the Yin-Yang symbol. In both cases, the different components of the image/symbol provide additional information regarding the meaning. Yet another form of an image is as a **“Presentative Symbol.”** Here, the meaning is not as directly stated, and the components work together towards a common meaning.¹ For example, the painting by Michaelangelo of God and Adam is a presentative symbol. As a fresco painting on the Sistine Chapel, we see God in the heavens actively reaching out to contact, touch Adam. Adam is on earth, and is also reaching, perhaps, out towards God, but at best in a half-hearted fashion. The

painting expresses the understanding of the Creator actively seeking a relationship with His creation... an attitude that is not wholeheartedly shared by the creation. The painting has meaning in addition to this and there is no single component of this symbol that alone gives this meaning.

Cultures change, so symbols change. The representation of a symbol may stay unchanged over time, but as the culture changes, the meaning of the culture changes with it. This is healthy and normal. I have heard people say how ironic it is that Christians wear a cross (or crucifix) around their neck as a form of jewelry or as a mark of their faith. These people suggest that it is akin to people wearing an electric chair decoratively around one's neck. Yet, it is really not strange that a meaning will transition considerably over two millenia..The electrical chair is a symbol of death and punishment. Today, the cross is so intertwined with the story of Jesus that is now more commonly seen as a symbol of life, not death.

Often images not only act as symbols, but they imply a narrative, or a story. Many paintings of Norman Rockwell, for example, appear to have a storyline implied through the imagery. Consider the image in Figure 12. The title of the image is "Mending the Hurts." Although the image is fairly simple, analysis of it can imply a certain story. The image certainly implies two characters. One is the patchwork doll. The other is the owner of the patchwork doll, perhaps a young girl from a poor family. Some might picture a third character, a parent or relative who made the doll. It works either way. The image shows a "NOW" situation-- the patchwork doll being repaired. One would probably assume that this involves the resolution of the problem in action. If that is the case, one can further imagine that the story starts with the patchwork doll being the favorite toy of a young girl. Sadly, a crisis occurs... a tear occurs and the doll is damaged. Perhaps a dog got to the doll and tore it. The child cries. At this point in time a choice presents itself--- keep it as it is, throw it away, or repair it. The mother comes and begins to repair the doll to delight the child the next day, or perhaps the child pulls out the sewing kit and begins painstakingly to repair her friend herself. Either way, the story ends with the joy of the successful repair of the doll and the restoration of child and doll. This tiny story is built off a presumption of realism. Fiction allows for fantasy so one could also have the story where the doll behaves as a living and thinking being.



Figure 12. “Mending the Hurts”²

Although cognitively, it may take a certain amount of conscious effort to come up with this simple story, viscerally, the emotions of the story can hit one well before the mind identifies the structure of the story.

Just as metaphors allow for a range of meaning, images allow some flexibility of meaning as well. Consider one of my favorite paintings, *The Neophyte*, by Gustave Dore.³ You can websearch an image of that painting. Dore did a number of sketches and paintings (including this one) based on the character of Brother Angel from the 19th century novel, *Spiridion*, by George Sand.³

However, while the intent of the painter is of some importance, more important, perhaps, is the message the painting tells the viewer.

The painting shows a young man in a monastery with other monks who are much older and appear to be worn out or suffering. But there are questions for the viewer to resolve.

1. What is in the mind of the neophyte. Is he young and idealistic? Is he wise beyond his years? Is he arrogant?

2. What is the nature of the other monks. Are they burned-out? Disillusioned?

3. What should we make of the contrast of the characters? One option is that the neophyte is foolishly optimistic and surrounded by monks who have become disillusioned because they now see things “the way they really are.” Alternatively, the neophyte may see things the way they really are, while the others have “lost their first love.” Additionally, the neophyte's look may show hubris that needs to be tempered with humility and patience, as seen in the other monks. And what do the old monks think of the young guy? Do they think him naive? Stupid? Does he remind them of themselves when they were young?

In the end, the painting provides the elements for the story, but not the story itself. The elements can be crafted into a story/message that expresses hope or despair, confidence or cynicism.

Some images nearly define the story, while some provide elements that can be great flexibility in crafting a story and the underlying message. The flexibility may not satisfy those who look for simple clear answers, but the flexibility provides opportunity for ruminations that are beneficial to the viewer.

The example of the painting, *The Neophyte*, provides an interesting example of the challenges in interpretation. Who can rightly interpret the painting? Or if a person looks at the painting and sees something meaningful in it, is it possible to say that he or she is correct? Since the painting was based on a book, presumably one could go back to that book and read it, if you can read French competently, and see in it authorial intent. Or perhaps that is a flawed idea and one should go to the painter and find out the artist's intentions. Or perhaps one can embrace a “death of the author” perspective and say that each person's interpretation is valid. Or maybe there is a single valid interpretation, but is discoverable only by experts. This argument is for another book--- actually many many books--- to wrestle with. However, sidestepping the issue of the “rightness” of interpretation, I believe it is safe to assume that one's own personal interpretation of a story or work of art is always important.

Final Thought

The Old Testament forbade the use of images to represent God. The fear was idolatry-- where the object becomes the focus of worship rather than what the image represents. It's a valid concern. However, we all do picture God in our minds in some form or another. Theo-storying can help that image (the God I Imagine) come closer to the God Who Is. However, there must always be caution in this so that the God I Imagine (the God I Construct) does not become the God I Worship--- or the God I Reject.

CHAPTER 14

Redemptive Analogy

Don Richardson has done a lot of work with Redemptive Analogies, in *Peace Child* and *Eternity in Their Hearts*¹ and more. Redemptive Analogies are important in faith. Sometimes, they are overtly part of a story. At other times the story is more implied by the symbology.

Consider some of the redemptive analogies in the Bible. All of these are redemptive analogies that are described as a concept, and yet imply a story. This is not a complete list.

1. *The Two Ways. A person is on a path. Suddenly he comes to a fork in the road. One path is wide and easy. The other is narrow and difficult. This is a critical moment. Which path will he take? This is structurally akin to the story, Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?"*²

2. *Redemption. We are as slaves who are up for sale to the highest bidder. We stand there naked-- exposed to the elements and to the prodding and jibes of prospective buyers. But God is there too. He gives the highest bid, purchasing us, covering our shame, and liberating us.*

3. *Justified. We are on trial... clearly guilty on all charges. But God, the judge, turns the tables by declaring us innocent on all charges because Jesus offered to take our punishment on Himself.*

4. *Ransomed. We have been kidnapped. We are tied up and alone. The kidnappers want far more money for us than anyone we know would ever paying or could even afford. But suddenly we are released. Christ has paid our ransom.*

5. *Saved. We are trapped in a dangerous place. We cannot survive where we are and don't know where we can go to be safe. Suddenly, Jesus comes and rescues us, guiding us to safety.*

6. Adopted. We are orphaned... having no name, no inheritance. But God removes our shame and gives us a new name, a new family, and a new inheritance.

There are newer analogies. The most well-known one is probably the Bridge Illustration. We are on one side of a deep deep ravine while God is on the other side. There is no way across and nothing we can do. The ravine is too deep and wide, and the walls too steep. But suddenly we discover that there is a way! Jesus has made a bridge, and in fact IS the bridge. We can be with God after all.

There are a few dangers with redemptive analogies.

A. Analogies always break down at some level. For example, if we see ourselves as ransomed or redeemed, the questions are “Who was our kidnapper?” and “Who was our owner?” With the two ways/two gates analogy, one can get the impression that to go from one path to another, once one is already on one, would be impossible (since real paths diverge). Taking an analogy too far can easily lead to error.

B. Related to “A”, there is a tendency to theologize analogies. Therefore, terms like justification and redemption lose the idea of being an analogy and become terms or reality (become “reified”). Analogies thus become “truth.” Thus when discuss the atonement of Christ, people often don’t argue about which analogy is useful or insightful, but which analogy is “true,” with the often unspoken assumption that if that one is “true” that all others must be “false.”

C. Related to “B”, analogies require commentary. It is dangerous to give an analogy without explanation. Without commentary, analogies are as likely to lead to confusion as to enlightenment. If we say that “Satan is a roaring lion” (a metaphor), we need some commentary to understand how the term is useful and how it is not. What happens when someone reading Lewis’s “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” discovers that a roaring lion is the savior of the “good guys,” and seems to serve as a Christ-figure in the story.

D. Related to “C”, useful analogies in one's time and culture can be a confusing burden in another. In Biblical times, Christ as the Good

Shepherd is useful. However, in the Philippines, very few tupa (sheep) are raised so the reference seems unhelpful. In the US and Australia, sheep are raised in ways that are very different than in Biblical times. When too much time is spent trying to explain the usefulness of an analogy, it may not be useful. Personally, I believe the value of this metaphor outweighs the challenges. On the other hand, Biblical redemptive analogies of Jacob versus Esau or Isaac versus Ishmael require such a high level of understanding of the Biblical history, it is doubtful that they would today be useful for most today. Muslims could be deeply confused because their belief system has a very different view that gives preeminence to Ishmael. Many others today might confuse the story with a sort of “divine” racism. Bruce Olson in the book *Bruchko*,³ gives another example. He pointed out that the illustration given by Jesus about the wise man (building on solid rock) and the foolish man (building on sand) would not be useful in some places. In the tribal group Olson worked with, they built using pole technology. For them building on rock would ensure instability while driving their poles into deep sand would provide a firm foundation. Analogies are useful (or useless or counterproductive) depending on the culture of the respondent.

Redemptive analogies are important, but they must be chosen wisely, carefully explained, and cautiously used.

Some fallacies regarding Redemptive Analogies

- Cultural Redemptive Analogies are created by God. Maybe I shouldn't call this a fallacy, but it is certainly doubtful. It has been suggested by Don Richardson and others that God creates redemptive analogies and we must discover them. Is that true? Possibly, but it is hard to be dogmatic about it. In some cases, such as the story of the Incan Emperor Pachacuti and the god Viracocha, or the Karen people and the lost great book, it sounds as if God had stepped into the culture to crack the door open to Christian witness. But to assume that this happens in every culture is not testable. In general, redemptive analogies are probably created not discovered,
- Some Cultures do not have redemptive analogies. This is a bit opposite of the first point. For example, Don Richardson,

being interviewed by Christianity Today,⁴ claimed that he has “fully studied the Quran” and found that there are no redemptive analogies in Islam. The reason is that every concept with a Christian connection (heaven, salvation, Jesus) has been distorted. I certainly greatly respect Richardson on his scholarship and effectiveness in missions. Still, I believe this is a flawed view. The first and obvious problem is that to have studied the Quran (the primary of the two uniquely Islamic holy books) is in no way saying you have studied various Islamic and Islam-influenced cultures. Redemptive analogies are culture-related more than book-related. However, I believe the main problem is a basic issue of what a redemptive analogy is. A redemptive analogy is a symbol. In semiotics (study of symbols) there are three components, the sign vehicle, the sense, and the referent. That is, the symbol itself, the thing it represents, and the mental image it helps create in the mind of the recipient. Let's apply this to the idea of a redemptive analogy:

To say that there is no redemptive analogy is to say that there is no story or symbol that exists or can be imagined that could help a person in Culture A to grasp a divine truth. Our commonality as humans (hope for the future, a desire for the truth and the divine, a need for relationship and love, recognition of our failure for perfection, and our own frailty) pretty much guarantees that there are things in our individual and societal experiences that are resonant with divine truth. Additionally, all symbols or analogies fail on some level, so it is not appropriate to say that because every analogy is corrupted, none can be used. Yes, every analogy is corrupt, if by saying that one means that they can lead to confusion. As said before, all analogies break down at some point, and all need some level of commentary. This leads directly into the next point.

- Redemptive Analogies have to be perfect to be beneficial. This is not normally said, but does appear to be commonly felt. So it must be emphasized that **ALL ANALOGIES BREAK DOWN AT SOME LEVEL**. Analogies help us to bridge the concrete and the abstract, the human and the divine. Take the very well-known extrabiblical redemptive analogy... the Peace Child. The peace child was human, not divine. The peace child was not permanent but was limited

to the lifespan of a human being living in a specific village. While Jesus was killed by the people He was given to (and thus made the sacrifice complete), the peace child must not be killed by the recipient to maintain the temporary peace. Clearly, this redemptive analogy has limitations. Recall what was mentioned earlier regarding Jesus as the ransom for sinners (Mark 10:45). The idea of a ransom implies a literal kidnapper. But who would that kidnapper be? Is it God, is it Satan, or is it someone else? Those who feel that certain cultures do not have redemptive analogies believe (in my opinion) that they must find a perfect analogy. Perfect analogies simply do not exist.

- Redemptive Analogies leads to syncretism or relativism. Finding correspondence between a cultural concept and a Christian truth can be tricky. For example, Hinduism has the concept of Moksha. Moksha refers to the release from the suffering involved in living in this world. To use the concept of Moksha to help Hindus understand the Christian concept of redemption does not mean that we are accepting the full understanding of Moksha (as it is tied to reincarnation, for example). Likewise, Taoism seeks harmony between the divine, humanity, and nature. Linking that to the Grand Narrative of the Bible (with harmony between God, Man, and Creation in Genesis 1 and a restoration of that harmony, through Christ, in Revelation 21) in no way necessitates a pluralistic relativism of belief. Again, commentary and caution are always needed.

I believe Christian missions is enhanced by the use of redemptive analogies, storying, and parables. However, a misunderstanding of their characters and limitations can take something useful and destroy it.

Final Thoughts

We all use redemptive analogies. This is because redemption (I am referring to the theologically-laden concept, not the analogy) is too abstract. We cannot wrap our heads around the concept.

We can create our own analogies that work for our time and place, versus recycle someone else's analogies and try to make them work for our time and place. Biblical analogies are of course

important since they are part of God's revelation to us, but we need to understand their proper roles, and not force them to battle with each other in an attempt to reify one over the others. We need to understand analogies for what they give us, both good and bad, versus utilize them carelessly risking the confusion that may result.

Chapter 15

Listener Response

Not everyone responds to a story the same way. One of my favorite movies is “Harvey.” It has a couple of my favorite quotes. They are both by Elwood P. Dowd, portrayed by Jimmy Stewart:

“Well, I’ve wrestled with reality for 35 years, Doctor, and I’m happy to state I finally won out over it.”

“Years ago my mother used to say to me, she’d say, ...”In this world, Elwood, you must be oh so smart or oh so pleasant.” Well, for years I was smart. I recommend pleasant. You may quote me.”

But that’s me. The first quote might be generally found humorous. However, the second quote doesn’t really make that much sense unless one knows the movie with its plot and characterizations. Still, even if two people see the same movie or hear the same story, there is no certainty that they will appreciate the same things. We are similar in many ways, but also so very different.

I like to talk about something I call the Human “Trinity.” We all have three parts to ourselves. These are:

- That which is like everyone else.
- That which is like no one else.
- That which is like some others.

One can look at Figure 13 for a way of showing this. That which is like everyone else is our **Humanity**. That which is like no one else is our **Individuality**. That which is like some others is our **Cultural Identity**. We have all three components. A healthy person is able to see themselves in all three ways while still recognizing that those three parts are all part of a single “whole.”

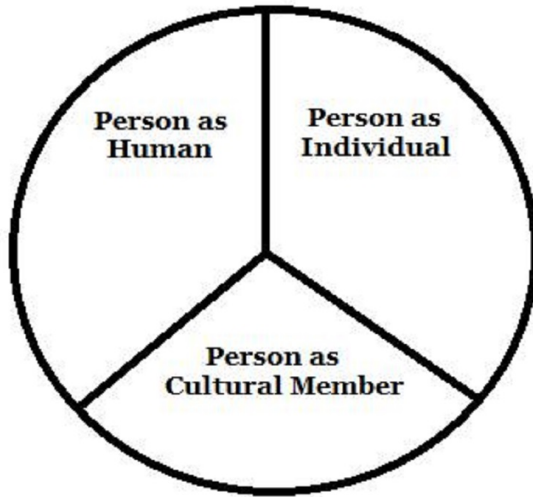


Figure 13. The Human “Trinity”²

Each person's response to a story is unique. While we may talk about cultural resonance, culture merely provides insight to the statistical tendencies of a group of individuals. It doesn't necessarily give clear insight into the response of an individual. For example, suppose statistics show that an American Pitbull Terrier is 30% more likely to attack unprovoked than a Border Collie. (I made up the statistic. In fact, American Pitbull Terriers, I have been told, are surprisingly docile if they were not brutalized to make them vicious.) Now suppose two dogs come toward you on a street. One is a pitbull and the other is a collie. Which one should you worry about? The correct answer is a bit of neither and both. Statistics provides no sure answer. Most dogs do not attack unprovoked, even “fighting” dog breeds. On the other hand, all dog breeds have the potential for a member of its breed to attack unprovoked. Just as one cannot be sure if the pitbull will attack or not, or if the collie will attack or not, one cannot be assured of how a person in a specific culture will respond to a story based on being a member of that culture.

The most certain way to make impact with a broad range of people is to tell a story that strikes a chord with people's humanity. One can get an idea as to how to tell stories that impact a person's humanity,

by building off of the great universal stories in history. Figure 8 in Chapter 7 gives an example of one such story. The Hero's Cycle mentioned in the same chapter is another one. The redemptive cycle seen in the Biblical Grand Narrative (and repeated in a smaller scale with stories of Joseph, Moses and the Exodus, Esther, and Hosea) provides a third one. There are more.

It is ideal if the story is based on universal stories that strike to our humanity. Still to truly impact a cultural group, it helps if the story has cultural resonance. Stories that connect with the humanity of members of the group (resonating on that level), that is then laden with cultural relevance (or resonance), can have great impact. For example, Jesus told three stories as illustrations in Luke 15. These are "The Lost Sheep," "The Lost Coin," and "The Lost Son." The last of these is better known as the Prodigal Son. All three seek to illustrate (and humanize) God's desire to have a relationship with each of us as individuals. All three stories start from a very human condition-- the fear and desperation associated with losing something very important to us, followed by the seeking and the ultimate joy of recovery. However, each story is laden with references that would strike home with the culture that Jesus was speaking to. Most of us can relate to lost money, or a "lost" child, but even with the lost sheep (a condition few today can connect to directly), there is a connection because there is still a connection to the universal fear of losing something.

The most certain way to make impact with one single person is to craft a story tailored to the individual. This, of course, means that one has to know the individual very well. For example, if one wanted to get a friend to stop smoking, one could tell a story of a person who suffers loss from smoking. But what type of loss? A person who smokes may have several types of losses:

- Loss of life expectancy
- Loss of general health
- Loss of money
- Loss of privileges (if it is a child with parents who will punish him for smoking)
- Loss of external beauty

and so forth. The type of story told would need to be based on the concerns of the individual. If the person is concerned about money,

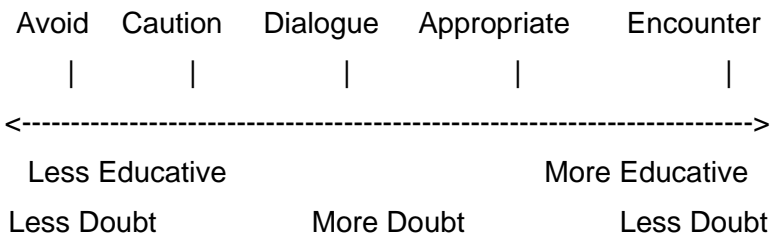
a story about how smoking affects one's skin and hair would not have much impact.

Respondent Attitude

Another thing that affects the impact of a story is the respondent's (or hearer's) attitude about stories. Let's return to the idea of responding to movies. Robert Johnson in "Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue (Engaging Culture)"³ speaks of different film responses.

- **Avoidance.** Films are all bad. Best to stay away.
- **Caution.** Films are often bad. Be careful to avoid any sort of heresy, or bad language or behavior.
- **Dialogue.** Films speak for themselves. Critique and interact with the film on their own terms, not our own.
- **Appropriation.** Films may have something important to tell us. Let's be ready to listen and learn.
- **Divine Encounter.** Films may provide us an epiphany or divine experience.

According to Johnson, these five attitudes describe five philosophies of critiquing movies. He notes that they fit into a spectrum where avoidance and caution are in the region of ethical critique. By that is meant that the critic looks at the movie regarding how moral is the behavior, visualizations, and scripting. If there is too much bad stuff in the movie, the movie is judged bad. Otherwise, it may be okay. Appropriation and Divine Encounter are on the other end, is where the critique is more aesthetic. Bad behavior and language may not be the main focus, but rather whether the film inspires and enlightens.



This, I believe, is a useful way of looking at films, at least from the standpoint of film critique. However, for individuals hearing stories, there needs to be some changes. We can keep the same spectrum. However, since this is a response attitude, rather than a philosophy for critique, there will be some differences.

Further to the right on the spectrum the greater the tendency to accept the story as having educative value. The further to the left, the less presumption of educative value is given. The whole spectrum can be seen as sharing the attitude of the story having entertainment value. After all, a story without entertainment value probably is unnecessary... just replace it with facts and declarative sentences (or say nothing). Combining these makes the definitions change a bit.

- **Avoidance.** Stories entertain, but should not be trusted to inform. Listen but don't learn.
- **Caution.** Stories entertain, but are not a good way to inform or educate. Perhaps they may have value as case studies or illustrations for difficult concepts.
- **Dialogue.** Stories entertain, but they also provide an alternate perspective and experience. Interact with them and see what they have to say.
- **Appropriation.** Stories entertain, but they also are an educational tool. We need to learn from stories.
- **Divine Encounter.** Stories entertain, but they also inspire and transform. We need to hear God's voice (or perhaps "divine wisdom") coming through the story.

But Which Response Is Best?

If one is telling a story with the purpose of informing and inspiring the hearer, which response attitude is best? The immediate thought may be that Divine Encounter is best. And in one sense that may be true. It is nice when the respondent already starts from the presumption that what you have may be, not merely true but, the TRUTH. But I might suggest that Dialogue is a better starting point. Why?

Dialogue, the center of the scale is most likely the highest position

of doubt and critical faculty. As one moves towards Avoidance, there is a lessening of doubt and critical faculty as one is more sure that the storyteller does not have something of value. Likewise, as one moves towards Divine Encounter, one is lessening doubt about the storyteller/story and lessening the critical faculty. Strong faith often comes from critical wrestling with doubt. It may not be desirable for the respondent to start from a lesser amount of critical faculty and doubt.

Take the example of the story of the Good Samaritan. An avoidance attitude is likely to lead the respondent to think that the Good Samaritan is a nice and pleasant story... but has no personal relevance or application. Divine Encounter attitude may lead to an uncritical acceptance of the story. That may sound good, but the uncritical acceptance may lead to a trite understanding ("It is nice to be nice to people"). Or, perhaps, the hearer will have an understanding of a deeper meaning, but not take time to see how to integrate the message with the hearer's life. On the other hand, Dialogue means that one is open to hear the story, interact with the story, and "wrestle" with it. Elwood P. Dowd may have "wrestled with reality" for 35 years, but we can and should wrestle with stories. We grow through the process.

One should not minimize the concept of meditation or rumination. It is a cognitive and affective wrestling with the story. Two of the greatest defenders of the faith of the 20th century, G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis, only came to faith through a long process of this sort of wrestling with truth.⁷ In the case of the Good Samaritan, what does it mean to truly love one's neighbor as oneself, when one's neighbor can be one who hates you? In the case of the the priest and Levite, is Jesus saying that religious piety should be set aside to help someone you don't even know or like? (*If you have read the Gospel Blimp by Joseph Bayly,⁸ one of the main characters begins going to church less often to invest time with a non-Christian friend on Sundays, to the chagrin of his Christian friends. Not completely a parallel story, but it does have elements of commonality.*) If loving one's neighbor includes friends, family, fellow believers, and enemies, is there any way in which one's actions should differentiate these relationships? Are you TRULY loving your neighbor as yourself while you are reading this paragraph about loving one's neighbors? The more you meditate, the more questions you are likely to have. Questions show that we are still learning, or at least open to learning.

Final Thought

The storyteller is also a respondent. Recalling that a metaphor is not exhaustively specifiable, meaning that there is always room for finding something new, stories also are a place for new discoveries. This is true even if the storyteller is the creator of the story. Take for example The Useful Bowl. In creating the story, I focused on the pastor, challenging his view of honor, among other things. But years later, I began to see a more interesting focus on the bowl. The bowl can be a metaphor for Christ. Christ faithfully took on the role of a humble servant (as a useful bowl does) and willingly was disgraced to provide healing for others. In so doing, He was ultimately honored... not in spite of the disgrace, but because of the disgrace. And since we are to follow Christ's example, we are also honored when we are "faithfully disgraced" for the sake of Christ.

Knowing Philippians Chapter 2, I already knew the lesson above, but the story helped me see it, not just know it. Years from now, I am sure I will focus on a different part of the story (like, perhaps the process of cleansing for the bowl, or the process of healing for the transient). We have relationships with stories and these relationships grow and wane, ebb and flow, as we mature.

For years, I focused on being oh so smart, collecting and memorizing facts. I recommend meditating on stories. You may quote me.

CHAPTER 16

Countercultural Contextual Storying

I believe that Countercultural contextualization best describes making the Christian message relevant and resonant in a specific cultural setting. The goal is to contrast the Christian message with the surrounding culture, but without being “anti-culture.” Counterculture suggests a critical agency to use the culture, esteeming the good, while challenging that which is false.

What is Countercultural?

Perhaps this is a bit late in the book, but it is worth mentioning briefly. For most people a counterculture is a group within a culture whose behavior, morals, and values are quite different from the dominant or “mainstream” culture. This view is fine to an extent. The problem with this description, however, is that the emphasis is on the differences. However, those in the counterculture are immersed in the broader culture and commonly share a large amount of the common thinking and behavior of that culture. Of course, for the mainstream, members of the counterculture appear far different because differences are far more visible than the similarities from an emic (insider) perspective. Consider the passage on the next page that was written circa 130AD and describes Christians much in terms of a countercultural group. They are so similar to their neighbors in so many ways (“not distinguished from the rest of mankind...”) and yet have a few critical differences.

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life.

Nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma as some are. But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvelous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all. They are ignored, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are endued with life. They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they abound in all things. They are dishonored, and yet they are glorified in their dishonor. They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless; they are insulted, and they respect. Doing good they are punished as evil-doers; being punished they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life. War is waged against them as aliens by the Jews, and persecution is carried on against them by the Greeks, and yet those that hate them cannot tell the reason of their hostility.¹

After reading over the extended quote on the previous page, consider circling the things that describe Christians as similar or indistinguishable from their neighbors. Then underline those characteristics that demonstrate their uniqueness from the broader society. One could simply describe this as the quality of a sub-culture. However, the term counterculture suggests a level of conflict, a conflict of ideas.

Subversive Fulfillment

Tied to this is the idea of the “subversive fulfillment” of symbols and cultural characteristics. By this is meant that each culture has good in it and the symbols/metaphors that are within the culture can be used to tear down (subvert) aspects of the culture that are destructive, fulfilling the potential of that culture to be a holy environment of God's people. As noted in Endnote 1 for Chapter 7, Crossan described parables as narrative that subverts the world. If that is accurate, then parables are perhaps the best form of narrative for subversive fulfillment and counter-cultural contextualization.

The idea that the Gospel comes as “subversive fulfillment” to a culture was put forward by Hendrick Kraemer, where the Gospel fulfills the needs found in cultures while also challenging much of the worldview and underlying beliefs. The same can be said of symbols and concepts. The following is a quote by Willem A. Visser ‘t Hooft,

Keywords from other religions when taken over by the Christian Church are like displaced persons, uprooted and unassimilated until they are naturalized. The uncritical introduction of such words into Christian terminology can only lead to that syncretism that denies the uniqueness and specific character of the different religions and creates a grey relativism. What is needed is to reinterpret the traditional concepts, to set them in a new context, to fill them with biblical content. Kraemer uses the term —subversive fulfillment and in the same way we could speak of subversive accommodation. Words from the traditional culture and religion must be used, but they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts.²

If the message of Christ is presented as an attack on the entire culture, it will be rejected, or accepted as a foreign faith acting as a thin veneer over the underlying worldview. Paul Hiebert would call this non-contextualization. I am reminded of the tendency of many from the Jehovah's Witness religion to label a wide variety of items (from birthdays, to Christmas) as pagan, and then rejecting them. Since almost everything has pagan roots at some point, one can quickly be straitjacketed by such a principle. Or one can look to the

Islamic practice of diffusion of faith (as described by Lamin Sanneh, contrasting translation of faith³). Both viewpoints in the end tend to bless a specific culture, whether it be New Testament Greek Christian culture, or 7th century Arabic culture.

If the message of Christ is not presented so that it is subversive or counter-cultural, if it is presented to be compatible with the broad culture (both good and bad), there is a tendency to create a syncretistic faith. Hiebert would describe this as uncritical contextualization.⁴

What is needed, using again Hiebert's terminology, is "critical contextualization." While others may disagree I see critical contextualization as best related to counter-cultural contextualization. Stephen Bevans in "Models of Contextual Theology" classifies the different forms of contextualization into several broad categories.⁵ It seems to me that the one that is the closest to the truth is the category Bevans describes as "Countercultural contextualization." He notes that some describe this form as "encounter contextualization" or "prophetic contextualization." I don't care for those terms since they appear to over-spiritualize a process that may or may not do justice to the term.

Repeating what was said before, Counterculture is not Anti-culture. An anti-cultural attitude rejects a culture without making the effort to recognize and redeem the good. A countercultural attitude rejects failings in a culture while living with and within, and even affirming other aspects of that culture. This suggests that a counter-cultural contextualization requires:

1. Understanding the symbols of the culture. If the basic characteristic of culture is its formation and utilization of symbols to provide the interface between individuals in society with the natural world, one cannot understand a culture without understanding its symbols.... its values, stories, myths, priorities.

2. Analyzing the culture through the eyes of Scripture. This process requires solid exegesis to avoid the extremes of cultural imperialism on one side and excessive accommodation on the other. In some cases, the analysis may lead to modest rejection of surface behaviors. In other cases, important aspects of the worldview must be challenged. However, the good should always

be affirmed.

3. Utilizing the symbols of the culture to challenge it. This should be done sympathetically, again affirming the good within the culture.

This is what Jesus did in the form of parables. Jesus used relevant symbols within the 1st century Jewish culture to challenge aspects of that culture. Wine, vines, shepherds, sheep, marriage feasts, light, salt, slavery, and other items ingrained in Jewish culture were used to challenge common perceptions and values in that culture.

Since parables are stories rooted firmly in the symbolic structure of a culture and attacks certain beliefs within that culture, parables are an important part in countercultural contextualization. Countercultural contextualization is grounded in solid hermeneutics. However, its application is definitely dependent on the creative and artistic.

Great, But Now What?

How can this be done? It is difficult to train to be artistic. But a few things come to mind.

A. Learn the stories that people in a culture enjoy to discover cultural themes. In the US, a dominant cultural trait is earned achievement (the Horatio Alger, “rags to riches” motif) rather than unearned (the Princess and the Pea). Another is the American Dream (economic ascendancy of a family over succeeding generations). Another could be the underdog as victor (David over Goliath). In the Philippines luck (suarte) and fatalism (bahala na) appears to be major concerns. Another could be the Philippine dream (educating children so they can get good jobs overseas and send money back home). Appreciation of the tragic hero (Jose Rizal or Benigno Aquino being excellent examples). An additional one could be the appreciation of getting along with one another despite substantive disagreement (pakikisama). One that seems happily to be disappearing, is the (unwarranted) sense of inferiority to foreigners. These traits provide the language of stories, but also the areas to challenge.

B. Read and watch stories that practice the form of the parable (challenging the cultural norms). This can be uncomfortable. A story that challenges an important part of American culture is likely

to be considered Un-American. Such writers may be thought of as being Un-American, or troublemakers. The same is true of writers who act in the counterculture of other cultures and nations. Christians in a particular culture tend to strongly distrust the counterculture, because it impinges on their own comfort zone---even if they themselves could be described as a countercultural group. But even if one ultimately rejects the messages of the counterculture after critical reflection, there is value in listening. A story such as “Citizen Kane” or “The Treasure of Sierra Madre” can challenge materialism--- while still being the product of capitalism. The irony doesn't eradicate the message. Listening to news from other countries (or other viewpoints within one's own country) may attack excessive nationalism or monoculturalism.

C. Master the short-story. I enjoy reading O Henry stories although they are decades old. They are often humorous, short, and have a twist at the end. Even today, “The Gift of the Magi” (O Henry) and “A Christmas Carol” (Dickens) are remembered and provide a challenge (if one takes the time to hear the challenge in the story). A good parable can be harsh or dramatic, such as “The Treasure of Sierra Madre,” but can also be given in humorous form (a similar message is provided in the movie “It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World” for example). Seek competence in the narrative form over the didactic, or polemic forms. Entertainment value is a real value. A good story with a good message that has little to no entertainment value is, simply, not a good story.

D. Practice. One can look at existing stories and parables and see which ones can be used or modified for a new culture. For example, I have seen the story of the Prodigal Son reinterpreted very successfully for the Highlands of Luzon. The tribal groups here have seen far too many of their children leave the rice terraces, lured to the big cities (such as Manila or Baguio City) and the corresponding vices there.⁶ The parable of the Prodigal Son only needs modest changes to be very relevant in showing the father who overlooks the shamelessness (*walang hiya*) of the son and risks personal status to forgive and restore him into the tight-knit family and village. Taking a well-established story or story form and changing perspective or roles can greatly surprise and change the message. The ability to easily change the message is a great opportunity and a caution.

E. Live it. Jesus created stories by living them. Jesus challenged

legalistic cultural rules of His time by violating them. These violations (grabbing grain on Saturday, or not ritually washing) may not be understood in a different culture, but they were easy to recognize in that culture. Stories are not simply told... they are lived out. Christians should always, in some ways, be card-carrying members of the counterculture.

Final Thought

It has often been said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Is this true? The jury is still out on that one. Sometimes, the sword has won out over ideas and writing. However, the impact of ideas and great storytellers has typically been greater than great warriors. Warriors must train well to use the tools of their trade well, and be sure of their targets and objectives. Those who are involved with “theo-storying” must, then, be even that much more concerned with their training and objectives. The research into the culture and the care in crafting illustrations, revelations, myths, and parables should be considered to be as much part of ministry as preaching, evangelizing, and discipling.

CHAPTER 17

Stories that Teach

While this book has emphasized parabolic stories, preachers today tend to focus more on illustrations. That is, they use stories to make their sermon points more clear. Based on the earlier discussion, these stories could be labeled as illustrations or revelations depending on whether they support or challenge culture. However, in either case the purpose is to add clarity-- a perfectly necessary role at times. They can take an abstract principle and put it into a form that makes sense.

Story #3

The first story might be viewed as more revelatory, at least in some cultures. It suggests the challenging concept, for many at least, that freedom comes from having limitations or restraints.

The Kite and the Clouds

Now I know some of you don't believe kites can think and see and feel. To be honest, I don't believe so either. However, let's just assume that this one particular kite could, to avoid unnecessary arguments later. A family that loved to go to the park owned this particular kite. On a fine windy day, they would go to the park and launch their kite into the air. These were glorious occasions. As you might imagine, the life of a kite tended to be quite dull most of the time. But as the wind caught the kite and sent it (seems strange to describe a kite as a he or a she) hurtling into the air, it really felt alive, and maybe in a sense it did become alive.

The kite looked around in wonder and thrilled at the twists and turns it could make while tethered to the ground. The kite was very happy. He was up a couple of hundred feet, yet it seemed like miles. But then he noticed them.

They were big fluffy white things going by above him. As you might guess, they were clouds. The kite thought to itself, "Soaring like this is great, but look at those things. They have nothing tethering them to the ground. They go wherever they like. They do whatever they want to do. I am stuck here as they see the world."

As more line was let out, it got closer to some of the clouds. It could see that the gusts of wind that would send it twisting would pull off wisps of cloud and fling others together. It soon became clear that the clouds were not things of themselves, but a loose collection of unrelated things. The clouds would change in shape and would grow and shrink based on laws of turbulence and thermodynamics. I am not sure of the kite's educational training so I don't know how much of this it understood.

"What a joy it would be," thought the kite, "to be so uninhibited. Oh, I wish I were so unconstrained. But I have these sticks that force me to stay one shape, and I have this tail that forces me to stay pointing up."

It watched further and saw one cloud come its way. It was lower than most of the rest. It soon became clear that the kite was going to be hit by this cloud. It did not know whether to be excited by the prospect or terrified. It had hit the ground a few times before, and did not like it. However, what did it feel like to be hit by one of these big white things?

Then it hit. Well, it did not really hit, more passed around the kite. It was amazed to find that it could hardly feel the cloud. It was a slightly wet, yet feathery touch. The water drops just ignored the kite as they moved along however the wind drove them. It tried to talk to the water drops, but got no response. The kite did not know if they could not speak or simply had no interest in speaking.

"Wow! What a rush!" said the ecstatic kite. "Wouldn't it be

great to be so unaffected by one's surroundings. I have to worry about trees, power lines and the ground. I am also forced to fly only at the whim of the one who holds my line. But they have no worries like that, they don't answer to anybody or anything. Oh, I wish I could be like that."

Wishes are funny things. Maybe they have no value or maybe they do. But sometimes wishes come true sooner than one would ever dream. In this case a gust came along and the knot that held the kite to the string gave out. In an instant it was free. However, before the kite could really begin to appreciate this new-found freedom, it sensed lack of stability in its flight. The wind began to toss and twist it violently and it soon found itself plummeting to earth. However, the kite never made it to earth. It hit the upper branches of a large oak tree. There it stuck with its crossbars broken, tail ripped off, and sail torn.

There it stayed for months as the elements broke its body down. Now, however, it rarely watched the clouds. Rather, it would love to dream as it watched kites dance in the sky.

Teaching the freedom comes through limitations is difficult and counterintuitive to many, so perhaps this story can help some. But one could use other stories. When my wife and I were young parents, our firstborn was full of energy and like to run around in our backyard. But it was hard to just let him wander because there were dangers that he could easily get into if we turned away for but a moment. So we had fencing installed. That fencing gave a large area in the back of the house in which our son, and then our daughters, could roam freely. We could let them loose in the backyard relatively unsupervised. So constraints/limitations increased their practical freedom. It would not be hard to make a story from this situation.

Creativity is also increased, usually, by constraints. A painter develops creativity through the limitations of the medium (such as canvas and paint), in a limited space (such as 1 meter square). Few creative people can overcome the challenge of creativity without medium limitations, or time limitations, or money limitations. In

painting, one of the most obvious creative challenges is to make a 2-dimensional medium create the illusion in our minds of 3-dimensional objects. Limits can drive both creativity and freedom.

Story #4

The next story is in some ways a kids story, but is meant to convey the fairly complex issue of redemption. In this case, redemption is not a metaphor for salvation. Here, redemption is the creative act of taking what is bad, or even evil, and making something good of it. It could be considered as being more illustrative than revelatory since in a church culture, at least, redemption is accepted (or is it?) but needs to be made clearer to some.

This story has two odd elements to it that may one might complain about. First, it utilizes, seemingly unnecessarily, characters from another story. In this case, it utilizes the same three pigs that were used in the classic children's story of the Three Little Pigs (and the big bad wolf). Second, there is a scatological element to the story--manure. While these two elements may seem odd, or even inappropriate, there are reasons for them. The three little pigs are useful because we want to compare three activities (reflection, restoration, and redemptions). And tying three characters that are already known to these three activities has a mnemonic element. Of course, one could have chosen three different characters such as the Three Stooges (Curly, Larry, and Moe). The story of the three little pigs is pretty embedded in many cultures, providing a level of relevance to the story. Regarding the manure, there are two main reasons for its use. Manure is an unpleasant item (like sin) that can be redeemed in a way that people can understand and appreciate. Additionally, the manure also acts to aid memory because of its hyperbolic role (house filled from floor to ceiling with manure). Unresolved issues in the story such as what or who caused the problem and what the first two pigs did afterwards, provides opportunity for discussion that can be beneficial.

Redemption and Three Little Pigs

Once upon a time, there were three little pigs. Each one had had trouble with a wolf in the past, and had gained some great insight in both self-protection and building

codes. Each lived in a well-constructed and clean brick house. But there was trouble in their new paradise.

The first little pig came home one day and found his house filled from bottom to top with manure. What a horrible thing to do to his nice house. He began to wonder who would do such a thing? A neighbor who did not like pigs? A relative of the B.B. Wolf seeking some petty revenge? Perhaps it was a strange, previously undocumented, weather phenomenon that caused the accumulation of manure in his house. Despite common gossip, most pigs would rather live in a clean place. He thought on these things and thought on these things and thought on these things. He knew that if he thought long enough, he would solve the mystery. All the while the manure continued to fill the house and make his house unlivable.

The second little pig came home on the same day to his house and also found it filled from bottom to top with manure. He also thought about who or what caused this to happen... only natural. But then he set to clean his place out. He worked all day, digging and moving, and scrubbing. Eventually, the manure had all been removed from the house, and the house was again clean... although the surrounding yard was a now an unsightly and smelly mess.

The third little pig came home after work and found his house in the same condition as the others. After a reasonable time considering the whats and whys of the situation, he resolved to correct it. So he worked all day to clean out his house. He took out all of the manure and made his house clean like new. The manure he put on his plants in the garden and now he has the nicest flowers and vegetables in the village.

If one wants a nice little moral to this story, perhaps one might say:

RE **solve** to
flect on the problem to
store what was damaged, and
deem what is bad, creating good.

Reflection is thinking about the hows and whys of things--- seeking to determine meaning and causation. This is a worthwhile thing to do... we were designed by God to seek patterns and meaning... but if we stop there, we haven't done enough.

Restoration is undoing what was wrong and returning things back to their original state. This is important. But it is a shame if one stops there.

Redemption is creating good from the bad. Restoration seeks to negate the bad. Redemption seeks to transform the bad into better (better than it was before).

God is a redemptive god. We can and should reflect on the evil around us. We should seek to restore what has been damaged by evil. But we should also work to redeem evil... finding a way to create good in it... like beautiful vegetables and flowers from manure.

CHAPTER 18

Ethics and Aesthetics

Ethics in Stories

Ethics is a major area of theology and of training. A couple ways that ethics is taught is through stories and metaphors. In other words right versus wrong is commonly taught by creative plotting and imagery. The Hebrew Bible has law statements “Thou shalt not kill” and wisdom statements “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” but commonly these statements are supported by commentary in the form of stories. But in many places in the Torah, ethical principles are given through story. For example, starting in Numbers 15, principles of the right way to offer sacrifices is given in terms of story. In that passage the situation is set up with a person in a situation--- the person has entered the promised land and has a home and established crops. The rest is guidance based on “finishing the story”--- the list of things that needs to be done. In the Wisdom literature, stories are also used. Job is wisdom built into a single story arc. Ecclesiastes is a collection of reflections, but with many small stories in it to make a point. Proverbs also has places where stories are used. In the New Testament, Jesus commonly used stories not only to teach principles (such as the character of the Kingdom of God) but also ethical principles (such as how to properly treat one's neighbor).

Other cultures and settings, stories may have even a greater role in ethical training. In the Kankana-ey culture here in the Philippines is a principle known as “lawa at inayan.” The term could loosely be translated to “taboos and duties.” It is a system of ethics that is built on a foundation of apologues, or moral stories. For example, one story tells of the practice of watwat (community sharing of food) and how it should be done. In the story, it is discovered that people in the community were giving the worst shares to people in the

community who were seen as less important--- widows and orphans. The story ends with the resolution that it is wrong to give unequal shares. All people in the community should be treated equally in the watwat.¹

Apologues often are ethical stories. Sometimes it addresses issues of right and wrong, but other times they can be more in terms of supporting cultural fears and values. For example, "Little Red Riding Hood" is an apologue that teaches "beware of strangers." But this is not so much an ethical statement (it is not "wrong" to be trusting of strangers) but a principle of community self-protection. Some stories can be seen as ethical or not. The story of the "Tortoise and the Hare" can be interpreted as a non-ethical story that supports the principle that hard work and endurance beats out those who are talented and lazy. On the other hand it could be an illustration that laziness is wrong and the hard work is right and likely to be rewarded.

Ethics and Imagery

Ethics is abstract. One cannot see ethics. One cannot see good. One cannot see evil. Therefore, imagery is often used. "White versus Black," "Narrow Path versus Wide Path" and others can be used to seek to put the abstract in a more concrete form. Consider Ephesians 5:25-27.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

This passage expresses the idealized church as holy or perhaps ethically pure, but expresses this ethical ideal in terms of aesthetic ideal. The church is being expressed as a bride who is clean, radiant, and without stain, wrinkle, and blemish. This is aesthetic language. However, ethical language is also used, as the church is described as holy and blameless. Additionally, the aesthetic and ethical are mixed in the expression of "washing with water through the word." The expression points both to cleanliness (aesthetic) and abiding by God's word (ethical).

Flawless beauty is not the only form of aesthetic valuation that is used in the Bible to metaphorically describe ethical or sinless perfection. The Hebrew Bible also uses an aesthetics of abundance as well to point to rightness before God. We see this in Psalm 1 and Isaiah 58.

Metaphors can enlighten, but as noted earlier, metaphors can confuse if they are not made clear. Some can see the aesthetics of abundance as supporting the idea that prosperity points to godliness. This would be a mistaken understanding of the metaphor and can push people to hide struggles and seek to be ostentatious with tangible blessings. With the aesthetics of flawlessness, there can be a temptation to cover up and keep secrets.

Flawlessness and Abundance are not the only aesthetic paradigms. Exploring other paradigms can create new metaphors and provide a new basis for stories.

Consider below the aesthetic of Wabi Sabi. This is a Japanese aesthetic of beauty in flaws and decay. It is not only the Japanese who have viewed beauty in this way. *Consider the quote of John Ruskin, a British 19th century art critic:*

“...imperfection is in some sort essential to all that we know of life. It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a state of progress and change. ... And in all things that live there are certain, irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty. No human face is exactly the same in its lines on each side, no leaf perfect in its lobes, no branch in its symmetry. All admit irregularity as they imply change; and to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality. All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections which have been divinely appointed, Accept this then for a universal law, that neither architecture nor any other noble work of man can be good unless it be imperfect...”²

The following is a suggested aesthetic model based on Wabi Sabi that may help express something theologically significant. You be the judge.

Reflections on Pottery

One of the oldest models for the human condition, within the Judeo-Christian tradition at least, is pottery. Pottery has a long history in human civilization. It also has a long history as a metaphor for human life. II Corinthians 4 speaks of people, especially their bodies, as being “jars of clay.” This may be a metaphor... but it is also true. Genesis describes us, as being formed of the dust of the earth, not very different than jars. A jar is fragile and so are we. One mistake and we can easily be broken.

The jar's normal purpose is to store something more valuable than itself. Our bodies protect our spirit and although our bodies can break easily, properly cared for, they can protect its contents for many many years. A jar and a person, however, are not simply work objects. They are also objects of beauty and honor, showing the skill of its creator. Each jar and each person are specially designed for the purpose for which its creator has made them. Paul describes people in II Timothy 2:20 like pots or jars in which some are designed for special purposes, while others ordinary purposes.

A jar is a useful metaphor for people. But what do you do with a flawed or broken pot?

Deceptive Repair. In ancient times, broken pottery can be repaired with wax. The wax can be blended in so that it is hard to see that it is repaired. If a person bought it and put hot water in it, the wax could melt and the pottery fail. One could sometimes look into the interior of the vessel and see if light comes in along the waxy seams exposing the deception. Vessels that were not deceptively repaired were described as “*sine cera*”– *without wax*. We get the English term “sincere” from this. The expression “without wax” is used in the Bible in this figurative sense. One of these is Philippians 1:9-10 where we are told to be “without wax.” We are not to have our flaws deceptively (insincerely) covered.

Functional Repair. In more recent times, there have been improvements in technology... in glues. and it is possible to have functional repairs. Some epoxies can restore the jar to where it can be used for its original function. If the pot is decorative, of course, “super glue” can be enough. However, in these forms of repair, the goal is to still hide the flaws. The goal is still to make it look as much as possible like it did originally.

Beautiful Repair. In Eastern Asia, there is “golden repair”. In the United States it is sometimes known by its Japanese name...“Kintsukuroi” (or “golden repair”). It seeks a functional repair... but instead of hiding the flaws, it seeks to accentuate the flaws. The idea is that the “flaws” repaired serve as a form of beauty that the unflawed pottery lacked. This is in line with the aesthetic view of wabi sabi where wear, tear, and repair of an object are seen as things that beautify an object rather than detract from it. The cracks demonstrate the artistic skill of the repairer. Golden repair is a lacquer repair. Lacquer, commonly, uses tree resin. If the pottery is broken... the cracks would be expanded and filled with this resin. But gold, or silver or platinum, dust is added to the resin. By doing this the damage and repair are not minimized. Rather they are accentuated... made more visible. The result is often deemed to be quite beautiful. It is said that some potters would intentionally break pots so that they could then repair them in this manner.

I would like to suggest that Golden repair is a useful metaphor for our lives as people. While moldable clay shows God’s role in creating us... making us beautiful in His eyes... Golden repair describes how God transforms our broken lives. The transformation does not restore us to our original condition, but to something better. The repairs are not to be hidden, deceptively covered up, but visibly to demonstrate the power and the skill of God who restores and transforms things to a more beautiful, glorious state.

Golden repair glorifies the one who does the repair. If a person is repaired... restored by God... that restoration should glorify God. A good example of this is Jesus. In the story of St. Thomas we learn that Jesus in His repaired, restored, resurrected state still had the scars of His crucifixion... giving testimony to the power of the one who raised Him from the dead. It is entirely possible that we glorify God most NOT when we appear to have no flaws, but when those flaws point to God’s power and glory in their evident repair. A lot of people like to appear to be unbroken... but they fool no one. The breaks are there... hidden. They know people have waxy seams. And when things get hot, the wax melts and the flaws are exposed for the whole world to see. A wise person does not attempt to appear flawless.



Figure 14. Golden Repair³

Final Thought

I believe that “golden repair” provides an metaphor for God's relationship with man that was previously missing in “jar” as a model. If this metaphor is true, can we take it further? What will we be like? Imagine the following vignette:

Imagine for a moment, walking through the streets of heaven. Now further imagine that a person is walking in your direction. You notice he walks with a limp, passing by to some unknown destination. As you look around, you see others nearby enjoying the day. One smiles at you, showing a missing tooth. Another has pattern baldness, sitting on the bank of the river, watching leaves float by. A woman greets you with a noticeable stutter, while another with gray hair and a scar on her left cheek waves as she passes by.

Is such a scenario possible? Who knows? But if a reader thinks this is impossible, why?

Chapter 19

Theological Reflection

Theology is not the accumulation of dogma. It is a dynamic, contemporary, contextual process. If theology was a tangible object, it would have no dust on it. There are, of course, different categories of theology, based primarily on what it seeks to analyze. For this chapter, the focus is on Story-Reflection-Group Reflection. As such it is most in line with Practical Theology, which involves an iterative process of experience that undergoes theological reflection, and that reflection in turn guide action, and the action brings forth experience that can then be reflected upon. The story serves as a creative activity, or experience. Then either the creator of the story interprets it to a group, or perhaps the group takes an already existing story and reflects on it. Emphasis would be on theological reflection-- how the story interacts with one's faith tradition and personal beliefs. Utilizing a group is especially useful since it provides multiple perspectives. There is a process, or a class of processes, that can be used to support this reflective process. There are sources of information on how to do this. However, instead of addressing that, I will recommend that you try this endnote.¹ In this chapter, I would like to look at two specific forms of this. These two are only two of many,.

Midrash Aggadah

The two words, “midrash” and “aggadah” are often used interchangeably to refer to rabbinical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. I am using the two terms together to separate

from non-narrative exegesis of drawing out principles or propositions from the text. In some cases it involves a running commentary of the Biblical story with interpretation built into the narrative. It can be thought of as a somewhat speculative story based on a Biblical story. Doing this may allow hearers to connect to the Biblical story from a new perspective, and to consider new theological ideas.

Story #5. Reflections on the Waters of Bethesda

One day, Jesus walked to the pool of Bethesda. At certain times the place could be quite busy for ritual cleansing. Today, the only ones there were the sick and the lame. They were all staring at the water of the two pools. They believed that at times an angel would stir the water and the first to enter the water in its stirring would be healed.

One man, however, perhaps 60 years old and obviously lame, alone was not staring at the water--- but at the main entryway. When Jesus came in, He saw the man. A man standing at the entryway informed Jesus that the lame man has been coming to the pool for almost four decades. Jesus went up to him and asked,

“Do you want to be made well?”

“Sir,” responded the lame man, “I have no one to put me in the pool. When the water is stirred up and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” The man said this with a touch of bitterness in his voice.

Jesus queried further. “But if you were waiting for an angel to stir the water, why were you looking the other way?”

“A Devil!” the man responded with a force that belied his appearance. “That could be no angel... but a devil! No angel of God would give the gift of healing only to the strongest and fastest. If I want God's healing, I must look elsewhere, but not in the water.”

“Then why come to the pool at all? Why not go elsewhere?”

The lame man looked Jesus in the face and said in a resolute voice, "I know that if I wait where there is so much injustice, God will come eventually... and, perhaps, He will have mercy on me."

Jesus said, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Let's consider this story for the moment. First, it comes directly from John 5:1-9. If you read that passage, the story shown here has some very speculative elements to it. In this story, the man who is lame rejects the idea that the healing pool comes from God, but instead believes it comes from an evil spirit. The man sees the pool as the epitome of injustice. As such, he waits there for God to act against it.

Those speculative elements are not in the story, so does that mean that they are false? Not necessarily. If one reflects on the story a bit, one should wonder why God would only heal the fastest and the strongest? Is this how God does works? Does God, rephrasing Benjamin Franklin's aphorism, "... help those who are best able to help themselves." Does waiting 38 years show the man's faith, his gullibility, or something else? Why did Jesus go to heal someone if God has already set up Bethesda as a miraculous place of healing by other means? The story in this chapter tentatively suggests a possible interpretation that clarifies those questions.

Now, you might be saying that it is wrong to do this--- that one is being eisegetic... or changing the story to fit a certain perspective, imposing one's interpretation on the text. And yes, that is a risk. However, the risk is not in creating a story like this, but in acting as if it is the "real story" or the "real interpretation." If, however, it is used tentatively to deal with certain questions, and try to think about the story in new ways, it can be helpful.

Creative stories are NOT more prone to this than other forms of interpretation. I went onto the website “Sermon Central” to read a random sermon on this passage in John. The sermon was done in a non-narrative exegetic fashion. Some of the interpretive points that the sermon writer came up with in this story are:

- Jesus's travel to Jerusalem for religious festivals shows that we should always attend church.
- The five collonades mentioned as being at the pool is important because the number five is the number that symbolizes “grace. Later the writer says that the years that the lame man was at the pool, 38, breaks down to $5 \times 7 + 3$, meaning grace x perfection + the number of God. (My own theory is that five represents the number of collonades and 38 represents the number of years the man was at the pool. But that is just me.)
- The pool surrounded by the sick and lame symbolizes our state of spiritual paralysis. (Curiously, he believes the pool represents the object of our false hope. On this second point, the sermon writer agrees with my story and goes against a common interpretation that the story of the alleged angel stirring the waters was an actual working of God.)
- Jesus' seeking out the man was an act of His own sovereign choice. This is a bit of a truism. No one forced Jesus to choose him, although the Biblical record implies at least that someone outside of Himself tried to influence Him to take notice of this man. He chose to heal one, and perhaps equally chose to not heal others. However, that is a major assumption. The passage does not say that Jesus did not heal others.

My point here is not to address the merit or lack of merit of the interpretation in the sermon. Rather, I am noting that any interpretation of a story does involve a certain amount of

speculation. If a speculative story is created and is presented for discussion, I believe that the ensuing conversation could be quite beneficial. On the other hand, a sermon is normally one-way communication, and commonly presents interpretations without doubt or even opportunity for discussion. I often hear people quote well-known preachers, seemingly unaware at how uncertain their interpretations of Biblical text often are.

Keeping this in mind, a story, a midrash aggadah, is not simply valuable as a creative theological exercise--- not simply in its form, but also its forum. It should give opportunity for group interaction and reflection.

Story #6. Solomon's Second Dream

In Gibeon Solomon had his first dream. As he slept, God appeared to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon replied, "... Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"

God was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. He replied, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, not have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart." God also promised him riches and honor. Then God added, "And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life."

Solomon rapidly grew in wisdom, not only gaining understanding of governance, but also the ability to discern the true nature of matters that he had to deal with. And he was successful. But in his reflections, he was confused. God granted wisdom, and he promised future wealth and honor. However, he did not promise a long life, but only said that Solomon would have this if he was obedient to God. But if he had the wisdom of God, surely he would

be obedient. To disobey God is to be the fool. He found himself being foolish all too often. Could one be wise and a fool at the same time?

And Solomon dwelled on this matter a long time. One day, many years into his reign he was sitting in his palace, the only building in all the land more opulent than the Great Temple of Yahweh, he felt that he now understood the matter. He called out to God... but God did not answer. Many days he called out to God, but with no response. One night, however, close to giving up God returned to him in a dream.

God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

Solomon responded, "O Lord my God. Your humble servant has served as king over Your people. You granted me wisdom, and I have sought to lead with wisdom and discernment. Yet I find failings in me. I believe I know what I should do for the good of the people, but far too often I find that what I do is guided more by what will give me pleasure, wealth, and honor. I realize that obedience to your commands is not an automatic result of wisdom. A wise man can still disobey you, and thus makes himself the fool. So as Your humble servant, I ask for strength of character, a disciplined heart and mind, to live and act wisely, not just be wise."

The Lord was pleased that Solomon asked for this. He replied, "You have asked for something great... much greater than wisdom. It is also a much more difficult thing. A man's character is like a boat—it moves easily as the current and the wind drive it. But to move against the wind and the water takes great labor"

God continued. "I do not gift character any more than do I make a waterfall flow upward. But if you truly desire good character, this is what I will do. I will give you suffering. I will take away what gives you pleasure, and what I leave you will not bring you satisfaction. I will give you dishonor, and grant your honor to fools. I will scatter your wealth to those who did not earn it. It is a difficult path, and very few choose it voluntarily, but it is out of the seeds of suffering that discipline can slowly grow, and out of this growth, character may bear fruit. Think on this."

Solomon awoke, and meditated on his dream for many days, each day becoming more disconsolate. Finally, he called his scribe and began to speak,

“With much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”

This story is a bit different from the previous one. It does not fill in the gaps of a story. Rather it expands the story. The original story in I Kings 3 is when Solomon asked wisdom from God. The story here does not modify it. However, it adds a second part that tentatively seeks to explain the broader narrative of the reign of Solomon. Consider Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. If one accepts that both are written by the same person and that person is Solomon (not a certain thing of course), what brings about the difference of tone of the two books? How can the “wisest man in the world, also appear to rule in an authoritarian and narcissistic manner, and ultimately become an idolater?

Vignettes

A vignette could be thought of a short story. However, it is more commonly a description of a scene. There is normally little to no action, or the action noted does not really amount to a fully developed plot. Consider two vignettes that are connected in one manner or another to Bible characters.

Jacob

In the middle of a mighty ocean was an island, with strong tall cliffs that have long held firm against the relentless waves crashing against its shore. Other islands nearby had long succumbed to the waters surrounding them, slowly pulled under the surface, to be seen no more. This one island remained in defiance to her beauty and power.

You might imagine that this great sea could destroy the island at any time. If she drew together all of her might--- all of her great ocean currents, all of her storms--- she could conquer this lone opponent as a sandcastle in a typhoon.

The ocean, for whatever reason however, contents herself to challenge the island one wave and one tidal cycle at a time. You further might imagine this to involve a stalemate with neither

making headway, but you would be mistaken. Occasionally a bit of the cliff would collapse into the ocean. The pile of rubble might even increase the area of the island momentarily and lengthen its shoreline. It seems, briefly, that the island is winning. But the ocean patiently picks up each bit within her reach and slowly draws each into her depths. Time will come when the last bit of stone peaking above the surface will be worn down, invisible to any nearby onlooker.

The slow battle rages on and on. Day after day, Year after year. Century after century. If you were able to observe this contest for millennia, you might assume that the ocean hates that island... that this battle is driven by anger. But, again, you would be gravely mistaken..

The ocean cares for that island like no other. Her patience, her perseverance, with this defiant pebble in the midst of her infinite domain is her testimony to patient love.

This story, or vignette imagines a small island with strong rocky cliffs and waves of the great ocean striking. That imagine can be seen as describing a struggle between a personified ocean and personified island. It however pushes a new perspective. Rather than seeing it as a battle driven by anger, it is seen as an act of love.

It could end there, but the title suggests yet another perspective. The title, Jacob, suggests tying the story of the Biblical character Jacob. This person was a headstrong young man, known for “wrestling with God” who over time was transformed, and even given a new name, Israel, the namesake of the Israelites.

Bringing this vignette together with the story, might lead one into a new reflection. Perhaps the struggles we have in life are not the cruel acts of an angry God, or a evidence of lack of concern of an indifferent God. Rather it is the loving molding of a compassionate God. At least that is one possible reflection. Certainly, there could be many other possible reflections. That is part of the value of a story.

A Mother's Love

She stayed when others ran away. She stayed while others mocked and derided. She stayed while others (filled with shame perhaps?) stayed on the periphery and then snuck off. A man hung above her... and he was not alone. Her son did no wrong. He died because of the sins of others. He died because of political expediency. He died because of what he represented, not for what he did.

And the man was not alone. There were others with the condemned man. Were they innocent or were they guilty? It is not really for us to say. But even if they were guilty of wrongdoing, that hardly allows those directly or indirectly involved with their executions to walk away hands washed of all responsibility.

She stays there... the mother. She will be faithful when no one else is. She will honor as others heap dishonor. One day she, whose own past behavior was questioned, will be vindicated. This woman of low estate will bring even the mighty to self-doubt.

And one day, she will be honored in a manner that few have. But she did not do it because of that. Her actions came from a mother's love— and because it was right.

-II Samuel 21:1-14

This vignette suggests a scene. For many Christians the likely scene would be of Mary the mother of Jesus, at the base of the Cross with her Son overhead. It is a melancholy image. However, the image changes with the Bible reference at the bottom. The passage is the story of Rizpah who stayed by her dead sons and stepsons for months in mourning and in protecting their corpses from further dishonor. The story ends with King David, who had ordered the killings, being shamed into recovering the bodies and having them honorably buried.

While the vignette "Jacob" pushes towards one primary interpretation, this one is much more open to different

interpretations. Certainly, one could see Rizpah compared to Mary, her sons and stepsons compared to Jesus and the thieves, and King David compared to Pontius Pilate. No problem there. However, from there, one has choices. One could see the evils of political expediency (both King Saul and King David look pretty bad in this story). Another may focus on Rizpah as one who sides with the helpless and innocent. Or there are many other ways it could go.

Conclusions

A story can inspire theological reflection. However, the open-endedness of the possible reflection has its good and bad points. For example, in the previous vignette, someone might take an extreme position and see the story of Rizpah as “all is well that ends well” and use that to justify genocide, and execution of innocent sons of a guilty father. As flawed as this may be, it can happen. It has been noted that the movie *American History X*, a scathing rebuke of the neo-Nazi movement, has also been embraced by some neo-Nazis as providing a portrayal of their movement in line with their self-identity.

This is part of the reason why group reflection is often better than individual reflection. A group with diverse perspectives are helpful at providing challenges to one's own way of thinking.

Conclusions

In 1976, Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven wrote the story, "Inferno."¹ It draws heavily from Dante Alighieri's poem "Inferno." Dante utilized a creative interpretation of a Catholic understanding of hell (along with limbo, purgatory, and paradise) to develop his "Divine Comedy." Dante's work was not a theological treatise, but a story in poetic form. The story functioned as social commentary. By placing certain people in certain rings of hell, Dante challenged (and in some cases supported) people's understanding of some behavior of the famous, and in so doing suggested God's view of such behavior. Sections in the story involving, for example, the hoarders and wasters, or the simoniacs, have a strong relevance to the time and place Dante lived (although these groups are still with us today, but in different forms).

Pournelle and Niven reworked the story, bringing it into a modern viewpoint. They did this by changing the main character to a science fiction writer who tries, and ultimately fails, to connect his experiences in hell to his own rationalistic/naturalistic worldview. The social commentaries were kept, but with new people and situations added to show the continuity, and innovation, of hell and human evil. The writers also changed the companion of the main character from Virgil, a "good pagan," to Benito Mussolini (someone few today would consider good on any level). The change of the companion introduces a theme to the story that is less present in Dante's work... the idea of redemption. In the hell of Pournelle and Niven, punishment is severe, but there is still just a bit of the tantalizing hope of redemption.

I am not looking to discuss the merits of the theology of Dante, Pournelle, or Niven. Rather, I see in these two stories the ability to express complex theology in a form that entertains and provokes the imagination. I have three systematic theology works next to me as I am typing this (Chafer, Tillich, and Grenz). While each of these

three have their points, none of them are particularly entertaining, and few would argue that they provoke the imagination. Also none are likely to appeal to the masses, or be idly purchased (on-line or in a bookstore) to be read by the average person “for fun.”

This is the subversive quality of good “theo-stories.” They draw you innocently into a harmless world of vicarious entertainment, but then give voice, image, and perspective to truth that is obscured in real life.

Theo-storying is part of my personal journey. I haven't come to the end of that journey. But every story needs to have an ending. The expression “...and they lived happily ever after” is simply a device recognizing that every story needs an artificial ending. Much of the art of telling a story is to know when and how to end a story.

So until things change and I grow in my personal journey, this story ends here.

Endnotes

Introduction

- ¹ Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 5.
- ² A wonderful little conversation can be found on pages 388-389 in *Good Omens* by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett (Harperbooks paperback edition, 2006). In it, there is a conversation between an angel and a demon trying to make sense of God who is beyond understanding, and eschatological history that is "ineffable." In it, Crowley makes the tentative suggestion that the history of the world should not be seen as like a game of chess (good versus evil) but a game of solitaire (played by God).
- ³ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 4.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

- ¹ First coined in the book by Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Published originally in 1964.
- ² Book of Daniel, Holy Bible, Chapter 6.
- ³ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols; (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1888).

Chapter 3

- ¹ Much of the ideas in this chapter come from Narrative Counseling/Therapy. Particularly referenced is work by Alice Morgan, *What is Narrative Therapy? An Easy to Read Introduction*. (Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000)
- ² John Donne, "No Man is an Island." <http://www.Poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/>

³ Rebekah Munson, *Unfinished Tapestry*. Drawing. 2012.

Chapter 4

¹ Mike Arauz. "Difference Between Relevance and Resonance." Internet Address: <http://www.mikearauz.com/2009/02/difference-between-relevance-and.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Many books, movies, and TV specials on the Titanic. The first book I read on this event was by Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember*. 1955.

⁴ David W. McCurdy, James P. Spradley, and Dianne J. Shandy. *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004).

⁵ "Dialectic" or "Dialectical" seems to be a used and abused term. However, generally what is meant here is a Hegelian dialectic model. An example of this is at <http://www.al-ruh.org/hegelian.html>.

Chapter 5

¹ Much of this chapter is drawn from an article of mine entitled: *Fear, Film, and Faith: Insights into the Perspective of High School Youth in Baguio City, Philippines Regarding Horror Movies and the Supernatural*. Written in 2007. Found at <http://www.bukallife.org/articles/ethnography-horror-movies-and-baguio-youth.pdf>.

² Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1996), 42.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius, "Life of Epimenides", translated by C.D. Yonge [on-line article] at <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes/dlepimenides.htm>.

⁵ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Manila: Christian Growth Ministry, 1997), 86.

⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1994), 203.

⁷ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984).

⁸ Belden C. Lane, "The Power of Myth: Lessons from Joseph Campbell", *The Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1989, 653.

⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ:

Princeton University Press, 1973).

¹⁰ Zach Smith, "Epimenides' Paradox: A Logical Discrepancy In Titus 1:12?" [on-line article] <http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/620>; Internet; accessed on 20 July 2007.

¹¹ Richardson.

Chapter 6

¹ A nice overview of various aspects of Narrative Theology is given in Chapter 1 of the dissertation by Gregory D. Loving, *Narrative and Power Toward a Theology for the Overdog*. Graduate Theological Union, 2000.

² John Goldengay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 40.

³ Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson. *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993).

Chapter 7

¹ Originally, I was following the class notes of a class I took at Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary in 2011, "Faith and Doubt," with instructor Dr. Graham Walker. The functionalist view of myth and parable is described elsewhere as well, including the work of Malinowski <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/defmyth.htm>. Crossman defines several literary terms functionally, "Myth establishes world. Apologue defends world. Action investigates world. Satire attacks world. Parable subverts world." John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*. 1988, 59. Note that Crossan speaks of five types of narrative, while I speak of 4 types, with only overlap of two-- myth and parable.

Chapter 8

¹ David and Goliath. I Samuel 17

² There are a lot of different sources for the account of the battle between Magellan and Lapu-lapu (Battle of Mactan). These rely much on the eyewitness account of Antonio Pigafetta. One nice description is in the presentation at <http://www.slideshare.net/servant1224/lapu-lapu>.

³ Don Richardson, *Peace Child: An Unforgettable Story of Primitive Jungle Treachery in the 20th Century*, 4th ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005).

⁴ Campbell.

Chapter 9

- ¹ John Dominic Crossan especially in *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, and Sheldon Sacks in *Fiction and the Shape of Belief*.
- ² David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity.: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987)
- ³ Terrence W. Tilly, *Story Theology*, (Michael Glazier Books, 1990), 53

Chapter 10

- ¹ George Orwell, *1984* (Signet Books, 1977). Note: First published in 1948.
- ² Not sure who first came up with this story. This is my version of the story as I heard it from Clarke Graham, VP of Engineering at Sperry Marine during new employee orientation in March 1996.
- ³ Stan Lee, *Amazing Fantasy* Volume 1, #15 (August 1962). Marvel Comics.
- ⁴ A nice and concise overview of mnemonics is in in *The Mnemonic Aspects of the New Testament Parables and their Relevance to the Development of Transferable Concepts for Use in Philippine Campus Ministry*. Dissertation by J. Raymond Albrektson. Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, 1987.
- ⁵ This list includes some elements from Lorayne and Lucas, (*The Memory Book*), Bailey (*Poet and Peasant*), Hunter ("The New Look at the Parables"), and Dody ("Parables of Jesus, Kafka, Borges, and Others, With Structural Observations,")
- ⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 413

Chapter 11

- ¹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987), 33
- ² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach To Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 80
- ³ Dennis Nineham, "Epilogue" in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, John Hick ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977).
- ⁴ Gordon Kaufmann, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 82-.
- ⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," In *New Literary History* 6 (1974):5-73, 42

⁷ Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parable* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 136. Also see Paul Ricoeur *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

⁸ Jacques Derrida and F.C.T. Moore, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," 21. The passage is quoting Pierre Louis.

⁹ McFague, 34.

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

¹ I got these primarily from class notes. Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary. "Cross-cultural Communication" taught by Dr. Bob Betia. May 2004.

² Rebekah Munson, "Mending the Hurts," 2012. Drawing.

³ Dore produced many images inspired by Brother Angel. The version that inspired me in this book was the painting in the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, VA. <http://collection.chrysler.org/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/220/385/title-asc>. Spiridion, by George Sand, is available in the Project Gutenberg (in French) at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15239>.

Chapter 14

¹ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Heart*.

² Frank Stockton, "The Lady or the Tiger?" Short story. <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/LadyTige.shtml>.

³ Bruce Olson, *Bruchko: The Astonishing True Story of a 19-Year-Old American, His Capture by the Motilone Indians and His Adventures in Christianizing the Stone Age Tribe* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2006).

⁴ Dick Staub, "Why Don Richardson Says There's No 'Peace Child' for Islam." *Christianity Today*. February 2003. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/februaryweb-only/2-10-22.0.html>

Chapter 15

¹ Movie "Harvey." (1950). Based on play by Mary Chase.

² The concept of the three aspects of being human comes from David W. Augsberger in *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986).

³ Robert Johnson, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue (Engaging Culture)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

⁴ Autobiographies. *Orthodoxy*. By G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) (Popular Classics Publication, 2012). *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* by C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) (Harcourt Books, 1966).

⁵ Joseph Bayly. *The Gospel Blimp and Other Modern Parables* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2002).

Chapter 16

¹ *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*. Chapter 5. This is the 1891 Lightfoot & Harmer, translation.

² Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, "Accommodation: True or False" *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 8 #3, January 1967, 5-18.

³ Lamin Sanneh. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009)

⁴ Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 21-.

⁵ Stephen Bevans. *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 117-.

⁶ Vernacular Video Ministries International produces movies utilizing actors within a language group with stories (such as the Prodigal Son) contextualized to people in that culture. [Http://www.vvmi.org](http://www.vvmi.org)

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

¹ This chapter was mostly drawn from a presentation given by the author at Yaeil Seminary in October 2014.

² Much of this chapter, including this quote, is in the article by Robert H. Munson "Better than New: Christian Perfection as Informed by Wabi Sabi." 2018. Accessible on https://www.academia.edu/35956737/Better_than_New_Christian_Perfection_as_Informed_by_Wabi_Sabi

³ Rebekah D. Munson, "Kintsukuroi," 2014. Drawing.

Chapter 19

¹ A couple of resources in Theological Reflection. One is a book by Judith Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection*. (London: SCM Press, 2016.). Another is by Robert and Celia Munson, *Dynamics in Pastoral Counseling and Training* (Baguio City, Philippines, Bukal Life Care, 2019).

Conclusions

¹ *Inferno* is by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, most recently published by Orb Books in 2008. *Inferno* (Italian for "Hell") is the first part of Dante Alighieri's 14th-century epic poem *Divine Comedy*. Niven and Pournelle have also written *Escape from Hell*, meant as a sequel to *Inferno*. However, I have not, yet, read it.

References

BOOKS

- Alighieri, Dante. *Divine Comedy*. Lakewood, WA: Simon & Brown, 2012.
- Augsburger, David W. *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986.
- Bayly, Joseph. *The Gospel Blimp and Other Modern Parables*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2002.
- Bailey, Kenneth E. *Poet and Peasant*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Bevans, Stephen. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* Popular Classics Publication, 2012.
- Crossan, John Dominic. *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*. Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1984.
- Erickson, Millard. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986.
- Fackre, Gabriel. *The Christian Story*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984.
- Gaiman, Neill and Pratchett, Terry. *Good Omens*. New York, HarperCollins, 2006.
- Goldengay, John. *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Grenz, Stanley J. and Roger E. Olson. *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993.
- Hick, John (ed.) *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977.
- Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1994.

- Hiebert, Paul. *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Holy Bible, The.
- Johnson, Robert. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue (Engaging Culture)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Jülicher, Adolf. *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu ("The Parable Discourses of Jesus")*, 2 vols. Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1888,
- Kaufmann, Gordon. *God the Problem*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Books, 1966.
- Lorayne, Harry and Jerry Lucas. *The Memory Book*. New York: Stein and Day, 1974.
- Lord, Walter. *A Night to Remember*. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2004.
- McCurdy, David W., James P. Spradley, and Dianne J. Shandy. *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*, 2nd ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004.
- McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2001.
- Morgan, Alice. *What is Narrative Therapy? An Easy to Read Introduction..* Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000.
- Niven, Larry and Jerry Pournelle. *Inferno*. New York: Orb Books, 2008.
- Olson, Bruce. *Bruchko: The Astonishing True Story of a 19-Year-Old American, His Capture by the Motilone Indians and His Adventures in Christianizing the Stone Age Tribe*. Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2006.
- Orwell, George. 1984 New York: Signet Books, 1977.
- Richardson, Donald. *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984.
- Richardson, Don. *Peace Child: An Unforgettable Story of Primitive Jungle Treachery in the 20th Century*, 4th ed. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005.
- Sand, George. *Spiridion*. (French) Gloucester, UK: Dodo Press, 2009.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture..* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.
- Scholes, Robert, and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: Oxford

University Press, 1966.

Van Rheenen, Gailyn. *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1996.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama Of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach To Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

OTHERS

Albrektson, J. Raymond. *The Mnemonic Aspects of the New Testament Parables and their Relevance to the Development of Transferable Concepts for Use in Philippine Campus Ministry*. Dissertation [Dissertation] Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, 1987.
[http://albrektson.dyndns.org/articles/ STD_Dissertation.pdf](http://albrektson.dyndns.org/articles/STD_Dissertation.pdf)

Arauz, Mike. "Difference Between Relevance and Resonance." [On-Line Article] <http://www.mikearauz.com/2009/02/difference-between-relevance-and.html>.

Chase, Mary (Screenwriter). "Harvey," [Movie] Universal Studios, 1950.

Derrida, Jacques, and Moore, F. C. T. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," In *New Literary History* 6 (1974):5-73.

Dody, William G. "Parables of Jesus, Kafka, Borges, and Others, With Structural Observations," *Semia* 2 (1974).

Donne, John "No Man is an Island." [Poem] [http://www. poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/)

Dore, Gustave. "The Neophyte (First Experience of the Monastery)" [Painting] Chrysler Museum. Norfolk, VA. [http://collection.chrysler.org/emuseum/view/objects/ asitem/220/385/title-asc](http://collection.chrysler.org/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/220/385/title-asc)

Echivarre, Renato. "Lapu-Lapu: Truly, The First Philippine Hero" [Slideshare Presentation] <http://www.slideshare.net/servant1224/lapu-lapu>.

"Hegelian Dialectic," [On-line Article] <http://www.alruh.org/hegelian.html>.

Hunter, A. M. "The New Look at the Parables," *From Faith to Faith* (1979).

Laertius, Diogenes. "Life of Epimenides", translated by C.D. Yonge [On-line Article] at <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes/dlepimenides.htm>.

Lane, Belden C. "The Power of Myth: Lessons from Joseph Campbell", *The Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1989.

Lee, Stan. *Amazing Fantasy* [Comic Book] Volume 1, #15 (August 1962). Marvel Comics.

Loving, Gregory D. *Narrative and Power Toward a Theology for the Overdog*. [Dissertation] Graduate Theological Union, 2000.

- Magoulick, Mary. "What is Myth?" [On-line Article] <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/defmyth.htm>.
- Mathetes, Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus. 1891 Lightfoot and Harmer translation <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.iii.i.html>.
- Munson, Rebekah, "An *Unfinished Tapestry*." [Drawing] 2012.
 _____ . "Mending the Hurts," [Drawing] 2012.
- Munson, Robert H. "*Fear, Film, and Faith: Insights into the Perspective of High School Youth in Baguio City, Philippines Regarding Horror Movies and the Supernatural*." 2007. [On-line Article] <http://www.bukallife.org/articles/ethnography-horror-movies-and-baguio-youth.pdf>.
- Sacks, Sheldon *Fiction and the Shape of Belief: A Study of Henry Fielding*. University of California Press, 1964.. .
- Smith, Zach. "Epimenides' Paradox: A Logical Discrepancy In Titus 1:12?" [On-line Article] <http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/620>; Internet; accessed on 20 July 2007.
- Staub, Dick. "Why Don Richardson Says There's No 'Peace Child' for Islam." *Christianity Today*. February 2003. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/februaryweb-only/2-10-22.0.html>
- Stockton, Frank. "The Lady or the Tiger?" [Short story] <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/shortstories/UBooks/LadyTige.shtml>.
- 't 'Hooft, Willem A. Visser "Accommodation: True or False" *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 8 #3, January 1967, 5-18.
- Tilley, Terrence W. *Story Theology*,. Michael Glazier Books, 1990.
- Tracy, David. *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987

Story/Illustration Index

<Major references are in **bold**. Minor references are regular font>

1984 (George Orwell)	33, 66-67
9-11, Attack of	29
Alamo, Battle of the	29, 56
American Dream	103
American History X	127
American Myth	63
Aryan Myth, German	35
Barlaam and Josaphat	40
Benigno Aquino, Assassination of	30, 103
Boy Who Cried Wolf, The	38-39
Brave New World (Aldous Huxley)	66
Bridge Illustration, The (Metaphor)	87
Bruchko (Bruce Olson)	88
Buggy Whips. (Bob Munson (adapted))	67-68
Cain and Abel	79
Christmas Carol. (Charles Dickens)	104
Citizen Kane	104
Cretica, Epimenides	39
Daniel & the Lion's Den,	17-20
David and Goliath	55-56, 63, 103
Divine Comedy (Dante Alighieri)	128
Dudley Doright. (Jay Ward)	54
Dracula. (Bram Stoker)	38
Epimenides and the Unknown God	36-39
Esther, Book of	94

Exodus	43, 94
Genesis	5-6, 90, 115
Gift of the Magi (O Henry)	104
Golem	30
Good Omens (Gaiman and Pratchett)	130
Gospel Blimp, The. (Joseph Bayly)	97
Grand Narrative, Bible	5, 61, 90, 94
Grapes of Wrath, The. (John Steinbeck)	33
Harvey	92
Hero's Journey, The. (Joseph Campbell)	57, 94
Hosea, Book of	94
Iliad (Homer)	49
Inferno (Pournelle and Niven)	128-129
It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World	104
Jacob	124-125
Jacob and Esau	79-80, 88
Jephthah and His Daughter	16
Jars of Clay (Metaphor)	115-116
Jeremiah and Zedekiah	17
Job, Book of	17, 44, 112
Jonah and the Whale	16, 44, 53-54
Jose Rizal, Execution of	30, 103
Joseph	94
Judas and the Betrayal of Christ	17, 48, 57
Judas Maccabeus	52
Justified (Metaphor)	86
King Kong	34
Kintsukuroi (Metaphor)	116
Kite and the Clouds (Bob Munson)	106-108
Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, The (C. S. Lewis)	87

Little Red Riding Hood	34, 113
Lord of the Flies. (William Golding)	33
Lusitania, Sinking of the	29
Maine, Sinking of the	29
Magellan and Lapu-Lapu	55-57
Master Clockmaker (Bob Munson)	77-80
Mending the Hurts (Becky Munson)	83-84
Metropolis	66
Mormon, Book of	44
Moses	17, 53, 94
Mother's Love, A (Bob Munson)	125
Neophyte, The, (Gustave Dore)	83-84
No Man is an Island (John Donne)	25
Oedipus (Sophocles)	38
Pachacuti and Viracocha	88
Parable of the Ewe Lamb.	16, 53
Parable of the Good Samaritan	17, 52-54, 70, 97
Parable of the Lost Coin	94
Parable of the Lost Sheep	94
Parable of the Prodigal Son	16, 52, 57-61, 94, 104
Parable of the Sower	51
Parable of the Talents	79-80
Parable of the Two Ways	86-87
Parable of the Wise and Foolish Men	88
Parables of the Kingdom	52
Paul at Athens	35-40
Pearl Harbor, Attack on	29
Peace Child. (Don Richardson)	57, 86-90
Pyrrhus and the Romans	70
People Power Revolution	30

Philippine Dream	103
Portrait of Dorian Gray. (Oscar Wilde)	67
Princess and the Pea, The	103
Quran	44, 62-63, 89
Rags to Riches Stories (Horiatio Alger)	103
Ransomed (Metaphor)	86-87
Redemption (Metaphor)	86-87
Redemption and Three Little Pigs	109-111
Resurrection of Jesus Christ	7, 39, 44, 62
Rizpah	126-127
Rosa Parks	30
Ruth, Book of	54
Saved (Metaphor)	86
Simon Bolivar	37
Soylent Green	66
Space Merchants. (Kornbluth and Pohl)	66
Spartans and the Persians, The	56
Spiderman	57, 60, 69
Spiridion. (George Sand)	83
Thirty-Year War	32, 33
Three Little Pigs	109-110
Titanic, Sinking of the	27-28, 33
Tortoise and the Hare, The	113
Treasure of Sierra Madre	104
Trojan Horse, The. (The Iliad, Homer)	70
Useful Bowl, The. (Bob Munson)	9-14, 19, 52-53, 98
Unfinished Tapestry. (Becky Munson)	21-26, 73
Wizard of Oz	37-38
World War I	32
World War II	32

About the Author

Robert (Bob) Munson is a missionary with the Baptist General Assembly of Virginia, serving in Baguio City Philippines. He and his wife, Celia helped found Bukal Life Care, and Bob presently serves as the Administrator while Celia serves as CPE Supervisor and Pastoral Counselor. He also serves as Missions Faculty at Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary and Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary.

Bob received his Doctor of Theology degree from Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary in 2012. Bob and Celia have three children, Joel, Rebekah, and Esther. Bob's main website is www.munsonmissions.org.