

CHAPTER 16

The Personal Testimony and Power of Story

Introduction: One challenge to the Gospel is moving from objective propositional truth to subjective existentialism (story). One of the ways this change can be seen is with the current fascination with the Story of the Gospel over the Message of the Gospel. For this reason, I begin with a timeline on the contemporary use of story.

Timeline of the Use of Story in Contemporary Evangelism

1973:

“The Decade [1970s] is full of new challenges. One of them is to learn a new love—to love to *do and tell* the story.”¹¹³³

“If we do, it will be a great time to be alive and in mission. For it will mean that the church-centered and the world-centered will have moved beyond their present impasse to find each other at the rendezvous point out ahead—a place where they have learned together to *tell* and *celebrate* the Tale, and to *do* and *be* it.”¹¹³⁴

Fackre then explains God’s Story in a chapter entitled “Catechism for Skye [his teen-age daughter]: Telling the Tale.”¹¹³⁵

1977:

In his chapter 11, “Tell Me the Old, New Story,” Ford explained how to share the Gospel and how to share your own story.¹¹³⁶

Ford quoted David Hubbard (unpublished paper), “God knew what He was doing when He told the most significant things about Himself, not in proverbs, nor in sonnets, nor in chronological lists, nor in theological propositions, but in a story.”¹¹³⁷

1994:

“Our goal is to uncover the crystalline simplicity of God’s Story (with a capital *S*). Once we see how we have become a part of that Story, we can better understand how to tell and model our own story (with a small *s*) to others.”¹¹³⁸

“We have our traditional ways of doing evangelism, but many of us are beginning to realize that the old paradigm of evangelism isn’t working like it used to.... We must find a *new* paradigm.”¹¹³⁹

“After considerable study, prayer, and contemplation, I have come to the conclusion that narrative evangelism is the new paradigm for evangelism in the postmodern age. It is simple. It is biblical. It is practical. And it is endlessly adaptable.”¹¹⁴⁰

2000:

Jimmy Long, for example, proposes the following main points in his chapter on evangelizing Postmoderns, the following outline are headers in his text:¹¹⁴¹

1. Trends in the Shift to Postmodernism
2. The Message of Hope
3. The Method: Loving Community
4. The Mode of Transmission: Story

¹¹³³Gabriel Fackre, *Do and Tell: Engagement Evangelism in the '70s* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 15.

¹¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 30-45.

¹¹³⁶Leighton Ford, *Good News Is for Sharing: A Guide to Making Friends for God* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, 1977).

¹¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹³⁸Leighton Ford, *The Power of Story: Recovering the Oldest, Most Natural Way to Reach People for Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 14.

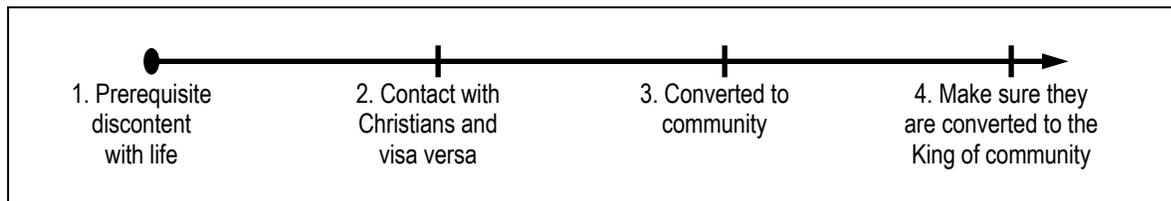
¹¹³⁹*Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹⁴¹Jimmy Long, “Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

5. The Mandate: The Great Commandment, “I can assure you that for people who are postmodern, the Great Commandment can initially be a more compelling mandate than the Great Commission.”¹¹⁴²
6. The Postmodern Conversion Process:¹¹⁴³
 - a) “First of all people start out with a discontentment of life.”
 - b) “Next they have contact with Christians. We enter into their community, and they enter into our community.”
 - c) “Then they become converted to the community. They start coming ... They may even start experiencing God in worship as part of a worshipping community.”
 - d) “However, we need to make sure that they are converted not only to the community but to the King of the community, Jesus Christ.”
 - e) Here is a chart of Long’s *ordo salutis* as explained above:

Jimmy Long’s *Ordo Salutis*



Food for Contemplation: Is something wrong with Jimmy Long’s order of salvation/theology of conversion? Does this follow the teaching of the epistles or the examples in the book of Acts?

Some thoughts:¹¹⁴⁴

- 1) What if the person is satisfied with their life, not being convicted by God’s Law [due to a seared conscience, 1 Tim 4:2?]
- 2) What if the unsaved person has had “negative experiences” in his interaction with Christians, as is noted to be the main theme of John Shore’s book, *I’m O.K. and You’re Not: The Message We’re Sending to Unbelievers and Why We Should Stop?*¹¹⁴⁵ [Perhaps, if anything, pitting Shore against Long shows the fallacies in both of their points.] [Noticing these approaches also shows the need to keep the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God as essential in the process of salvation]

Exploring Storying: Story from an Academic Approach—The following exemplifies the use of story in contemporary academia (as opposed to the objectivity of linear propositional truth, i.e. the Ten Commandments, the Gospel, etc.):

- a. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Oral History* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 386 pp.

“Samuel Byrskog employs models from the interdisciplinary field of oral history as presented by Paul Thompson, coupled with insights from cultural anthropology, in order to examine the interaction between the present and past as the gospel tradition evolved. The ancient Greek and Roman historians, with their use of eyewitness testimonies as sources to the past and as central elements in interpretive and narrativizing processes of the present, serve as the basis for unraveling culture-specific patterns of oral history, and thus for conceptualizing similar patterns during the development of the gospel tradition” (Brille Academic Publishers, unnamed catalogue, Autumn/Winter 2003, 11).

¹¹⁴²Ibid., 331.

¹¹⁴³Ibid., 334.

¹¹⁴⁴I am indebted to the comments of my student Benjamin Clay for the first two points listed here.

¹¹⁴⁵Shore, John. *I’m OK—You’re Not: The Message We’re Sending to Unbelievers and Why We Should Stop* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007).

- b. Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Westminster John Knox, 2005); the author explained his book in an interview with *Trinity Magazine*. By the way, “Kevin Vanhoozer has been described by Oxford University’s Alister McGrath as ‘one of the most significant younger theological voices of our generation.’”¹¹⁴⁶

“TM [*Trinity Magazine*]: How does the church participate in the drama [referring to his book]?”

“KV: The church is a company of players who have become, in the words of the apostle Paul, a ‘spectacle to the world’ (1 Cor 4:9). Christians are ‘costumed interpreters,’ clothed in the righteousness of Christ and charged with being the ‘theater of the gospel.’ To be precise, the church is to perform the Scriptures in the power of the Spirit. The most important form that our biblical interpretation takes is not the commentary but the community: the church is to show the world what the Gospel *means* through the way it shapes its life together. When the church performs the gospel, it becomes an enacted parable that exhibits the kingdom of God before the watching world.

“For example, the church performs the atonement by exercising its ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). The church does not bring reconciliation about—only the cross can do that—but witnesses in word and deed to the reconciliation already achieved in Christ. The church participates in the cross, when it becomes a theater of reconciliation. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the church demonstrates her understanding of—performs—the doctrine of the atonement by living as though the dividing walls (Eph 2:14) of racial and ethnic hostility really were broken down.”¹¹⁴⁷

Vanhoozer ended his interview with the following paragraph:

“The most important this the church should be doing is cultivating and embodying Christian wisdom in its corporate life and in the everyday lives of individual believers. Evangelicals neglect doctrine to their own peril and to the peril of their Christian witness. My prayer is that Christians today will rediscover the vitality of theology to the point where they are willing not only to die for the truth of Jesus Christ but to *live* for it.”¹¹⁴⁸

The Limitation of Story (reconsidering: “Jesus, the best story teller there ever was!”):¹¹⁴⁹

1. Were not the parables of Jesus meant to hide the truth from the masses of people?

Matt 13:10-17, “And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ And He answered and said to them, ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall *more* be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; For the heart of this people has become dull, And with their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes Lest they should see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return, And I should heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*.”

Luke 8:9-10, “And His disciples *began* questioning Him as to what this parable might be. And He said, ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest *it is* in parables, in order that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.”

John 10:6, “This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.”

John 14:21-22, “and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him. Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, ‘Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?’”

¹¹⁴⁶*Trinity Magazine* (Spring 2006): 19.

¹¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹⁴⁹“Jesus told stories that seemed very simple and clear, but his stories are rarely as simple or as straightforward as they seem. Some (though not all) of them work on four levels. First, they are marvelous stories that capture the imagination of the reader or hearer. Second, they teach moral behavior, what it is to be a truly good person, the way of life that is pleasing to the Lord. Third, they teach about the kingdom of God, how God’s kingdom is different from earthly kingdoms. Fourth, they teach us about Jesus Himself” (Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001], 223). Notice that Barrs seems overlook Jesus’ own explanation that He primarily spoke in parables to hide the truth from the masses of people.

2. Likewise, explanations of the parables were given only to His disciples and His followers (and even with these explanations they still did not understand, cf. Matt 15:16; 16:9; Luke 24:25-26):

Matt 13:34-35, “All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: ‘I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.’” (citing Psa 78:2)

Mark 4:10-12, “And as soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, *began* asking Him *about* the parables. And He was saying to them, ‘To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables, in order that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; and while hearing, they may hear and not understand lest they return and be forgiven.’”

Mark 4:33-34, “And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.”

Mark 7:17-18, “When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. So He said to them, ‘Are you thus without understanding also?’”

John 16:25, 29, “‘These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father.’ ... His disciples said, ‘Lo, now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech.’”

Introducing Story—Four Approaches to “Storying the Gospel”:

1. **Narrative Evangelism:**
 - a. Parallel is the parables of Jesus
 - b. Using real life situations to teach spiritual truths
 - c. This is encouraged especially in the context of postmodern or relational evangelism:
 - 1) Which tends to be negative to propositional truth
 - 2)-Which tends to emphasize a long duration of relationship for effective witness
 - d. Alvin Reid’s caution: “Some have gone too far with narrative evangelism, elevating stories of people above *the* story of the gospel. We can, however, integrate the narrative to illustrate and explain the Gospel.”¹¹⁵⁰
2. **Telling Our Story—the Personal Testimony:**
 - a. Sharing a personal testimony as a witness to the life change that Jesus Christ can bring, Mark 5:19-20, and Luke 8:38-39
 - b. Sharing what we have learned from Jesus, John 4:39
 - c. Sharing about receiving eternal life, 1 Tim 6:12
 - d. **STRENGTHS OF THE PERSONAL TESTIMONY:**
 - 1) A personal testimony is *experiential/existential*—it is real life, God at work in your life; God at work in the world!
 - 2) A personal testimony *adds credibility* to the sharing situation—showing the honesty and openness of the testifier.
 - 3) A personal testimony makes the Gospel presentation *interesting*.
 - 4) A personal testimony *cannot be refuted*—no one can rightfully say, ‘This didn’t happen to you!’
 - 5) A personal testimony *allows the Gospel to be shared* in a first-person way, minimizing the threat, while possibly maximizing the application (although the powerful weapon is the Word of God, not the story).
 - 6) A personal testimony may be more *non-threatening* for the listener (while perhaps being more threatening to the testifier).
 - e. **POSSIBLE WEAKNESSES OF THE PERSONAL TESTIMONY:**
 - 1) May move away from the need for the presentation of the Gospel message
 - 2) May be a move away from the propositional truths of the Gospel

¹¹⁵⁰Alvin Reid, *Radically Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 138.

- 3) May be a move away from the actual power in evangelizing being the Gospel (Rom 1:16) and the sword of the Spirit (Heb 4:12-13)

3. Telling His Story—Parable Form or Directly:

a. Telling the Story of Jesus in Narrative Form:

- 1) Directly, e.g. Jesus Video
- 2) In parable form, e.g. C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*:

“The hidden presentation of the Gospel is one of the beauties of storytelling. It is possible to teach people about Jesus through stories, even when those people are not yet eager to know about Him. Again, C. S. Lewis is a wonderful example of this. His Narnia stories about the lion, Aslan, have introduced many people to Jesus, people who would normally not go to church or read the Bible or attend an evangelistic meeting. People are entranced with Aslan and through loving him come to worship the Lion of Judah, Christ Himself.”¹¹⁵¹

Notice, however, that Barrs own experience with Lewis (and Tolkien) came not from a secular point-of-view, but from one of growing up in a Christian home. Barrs also confessed that even from a Christian point-of-view, he did not understand the Gospel story through those books:

“My parents, along with so much else that was good, for which I owe them eternal thanks, introduced me to the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. My father read the Narnia stories by C. S. Lewis and Tolkien’s *the Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* to us when we were children. Though I did not understand the Christian story that lies so closely beneath the surface of those books, they did create a longing for the world they represented.”¹¹⁵²

- b. May or may not quote from Scripture
- c. May or may not deal directly with the Gospel or with “propositional truths” of the Gospel, e.g. 1 Cor 15:3-6

4. Chronologically Storying the Gospel:

a. Sharing the message of the Gospel story beginning chronologically in one of several fashions (depending on one’s view of the atonement):

- 1) Beginning with the creation of man (Genesis 1 and 2), the fall (Genesis 3), the substitutionary lamb (Leviticus 4) and/or the Passover (Exodus 12, etc.), and other pertinent Old Testament portions before speaking about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ
- 2) Beginning with God, His creation of man, and His rulership over creation, to the kingdom of God through the rulership of Christ (perhaps leaning toward a *Christus Victor*—kingdom theology approach to evangelism)

b. Method One was popularized by New Tribes Mission in their work with unreached tribal peoples; Method Two was popularized by Philip Jensen of Matthias Media (Australia) in Carson’s book on Evangelizing Postmoderns

c. Interesting approaches to the Gospel message

d. May or may not fit into the normal understanding of the εὐαγγέλιον from a New Testament perspective:

- 1) Compare Paul’s Acts 17 sermon on Isa 42:5-8 with his description of the Gospel in 1 Cor 15:1-8;
 - a) Does it not appear that Paul was seeking to get to Isa 45:22 in his Mars Hill sermon, but was prevented from doing so by hecklers?
Isa 45:22, “Look to Me and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I *am* God, and *there is* no other.”
 - b) Talking about God and General Revelation is usually fine for most people, but when you bring up Christ, that’s when there’s an issue!

¹¹⁵¹Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism*, 227.

¹¹⁵²*Ibid.*, 118.

- 2) See my chart on the five audiences in the book of Acts and the respective approach to sharing the Gospel to each.¹¹⁵³

A Biblical Look at the Place of Personal Testimony:

A. Some Testimonies in the Bible:

1. Job 33:13-28, especially vv. 27-28
2. Deut 6:20-25 (compare this passage with 1 Peter 3:15)
3. Deut 26:3, 5-10, two stage testimony:
 - a. Testimony of the accomplishment of God's promise allowing the giver to acknowledge God's provision of the promised land;
 - b. Testimony of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt to be individually repeated yearly with the gift of firstfruits.
4. Psa 66:16-20
5. Mark 5:19-20; Luke 8:39:
 - a. By the way, was not this command of Christ already found in Psa 73:28 or 118:17?
6. John 4:28-30, 39-42:
 - a. John 4:29, "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I *have* done; this is not the Christ, is it?"
 - b. John 4:39, "And from that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all the things that I *have* done.'"
7. Acts 19:18, "Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing [forth] and disclosing their practices" (ἐξομολογούμενοι καὶ ἀναγγέλλοντες τὰς πράξεις αὐτῶν).
8. 1 Tim 6:12, making a confession of eternal life in the presence of many witnesses.

B. When to Give Testimony:

1. When Jesus has saved you, John 4:39; Mark 5:19
2. When on trial for your faith, Luke 21:13
3. Always ready, 1 Pet 3:15
4. At all times, Psa 34:1

C. Types of Testimonies:

1. In the recorded ministry of the Apostle Paul:
 - a. Paul's conversion testimony:
 - 1) As recorded by Luke, Acts 9:1-19
 - 2) As recounted by Paul to the hostile crowd in Jerusalem, Acts 22:1-21
 - 3) As recounted by Paul as a defense of King Agrippa, Acts 26:1-23
 - b. Paul recounts his conversion and theological development, Galatians 1:13-2:21
 - c. Paul recounts his Jewish credentials, which he counts as rubbish, Philippians 3:1-7
 - d. Paul explains his ministry as a church planting evangelist, 1 Thess 2:1-12
2. Some classifications of testimonies:
 - a. Testimony of conversion—Believing audience
 - b. Testimony of Christ's work in a specific instance—Believing audience
 - 1) "This is my story"
 - c. Testimony of conversion, background and ministry call—Believing audience
 - 1) For admission into seminary
 - 2) For a pastoral search committee or congregation
 - d. Testimony (a) or (b) as an evangelistic tool—Unsaved audience

D. The Three-Minute Testimony:

1. The sharing of a testimony is an excellent way to bring the Gospel alive to people. It lets others know that Jesus is actually alive, and that He does work in our lives.
2. The preparation and memorization of a short concise testimony is important. However, care should be taken to relating to the person when sharing the testimony. It is easy to sound like a tape-recorder if the testimony is a memorized to rigidly:
 - a. Your testimony will be different to people of different ages and cultural or social groupings.

¹¹⁵³Johnston, *Charts for a Theology of Evangelism*, Chart 35, "Context of the Gospel in Acts," 63.

3. What are some principles in preparing a three-minute testimony?
- E. The Ten-Second Testimony:
1. For use in door-to-door, street evangelism, or spontaneous evangelism situations
 2. Basically, a short version of the three minute testimony, à la Deut 6:20-25; Job 33:27-28

Preparing an Evangelistic Testimony:

Introduction: The reason for a three-minute testimony is to have a brief concise knowledge of how we came to Christ, and what He has done and is doing in our lives. In Acts 4:20, “Peter and John said, ‘For we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.’” The Apostle Paul shares his testimony on several occasions in the Acts (Acts 22:1-21, 26:1-23, cf. Job 33:26-28). These both give an idea of what should be a part of a brief testimony. This outline is based on the Navigator 2:7 training:¹¹⁵⁴

1. Lead-In, Acts 26:2-3
 2. **Before**, Acts 26:4-11
 3. **How**, Acts 26:12-20
 4. **After**, Verses 21-23
 5. Close, Acts 26:24-29
- A. Method:
1. The salvation testimony may be divided into three segments:
 - a. **Before** I came to Christ
 - b. **How** and **why** I came to Christ
 - c. **Since (after)** I have come to Christ
 2. If Christ was accepted as a youth, a significant adult experience showing you the need for spiritual growth may be highlighted.
 3. Write your testimony on two sheets of paper (one side only); this limits the testimony to three minutes, preparing you to be succinct.
- B. Requirements in Preparing a Testimony for This Class:
1. The expected audience should be:
 - a. Someone your age
 - b. Someone your gender
 - c. Someone unsaved
 2. Other requirements:
 - a. Please emphasize conversion or spiritual recommitment, as appropriate to best communicate your commitment to Christ to someone your age and gender.
 - b. Please use only one verse, or no more than two, without the reference
 - c. Length should be two pages, double-spaced (approximately 3 minutes when read aloud).
 - d. Please do not:
 - 1) Mention that you grew up in the church unless it directly relates to your conversion or spiritual recommitment
 - 2) Discuss meeting your spouse, unless it directly relates to your conversion or spiritual recommitment
 - 3) Mention your call to the ministry, unless it directly relates to your conversion or spiritual recommitment
 - 4) Turn your testimony into a “preachimony”, injecting a Bible verse that was not a part of what brought you to Christ; just share what God did for you or how He reached you.

¹¹⁵⁴The 2:7 Series: Leader Training Clinic, Part I (Colorado Springs: Navigators, 1988), 21.

C. Share Your Testimony:

Share your Testimony in a natural way as you share the Gospel. You can share your testimony in other situations also. Be open to appropriate times to tell others what Jesus has done for you!