

The Gospel Story

I led someone to Christ this past weekend. Before he would acknowledge Christ, he wanted to know the answer to a very common, but often ignored question: “What happens afterward?” He wasn’t asking if he would be saved forever. He didn’t want to know what the rules and regulations would be. He wanted to know what he was being called to do. What was he going to participate in? Would his life then have meaning and purpose? Who is on his team? Is Indiana Jones going to look boring by comparison? He wanted to know if there is more to life than three square meals and a floor to sweep. Would coming to Christ make a difference, and could he personally make a difference as well? The answers to these questions should be a basic part of every Gospel presentation. Yet, they aren’t addressed in the Four Spiritual Laws, and I never learned to answer them in Evangelism Explosion. Why is that?

Perhaps we don’t feel like the life of the Christian in America is anything to shout about. We’re more than willing to tell someone that apart from Christ they will die in their sins. But we have no idea what to tell someone about what it actually means to be alive in Christ – not just saved, but *prospering* and *purposeful*. We are born again. We’re an army on the march, taking possession of the land that rightfully belongs to Jesus Christ. Nice metaphors, but what do they mean? And have we even articulated such images to a seeker who wants to know “What next?”

If all that Christ is offering is heaven instead of hell, and we are going there at some indeterminate time in the future, there is nothing to capture the imagination of those who are called to the kingdom. Can we describe in any amount of detail what this fantastic realm called heaven is like? I can’t. And yet, the questions to which new believers want an answer are far more immediate than that: Where am I going *now*? What is my role while I’m still in the flesh? Is it a lifetime of sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning listening to a floor show, a book review, and an entertainer? If I want to be entertained, I’ve got books, CD’s, movies, sports, theater, and any number of activities to amuse me. If I want to meet new people, I’ve got bowling leagues, bingo, bridge clubs, the guys at work, and the guys who live in my neighborhood. What makes the Christian life any different than the monotony and emptiness I now live without Christ? You tell me I’ll have infinite resources that the world can’t provide. Well, that may sound good on a brochure, or in a thirty second radio spot, but I want some idea, some vision, some dream of my future, that I can lay hold of, wrap my mind around, and get excited about! What exactly is it that we’ve been called to by God Almighty, the Creator of the Universe?

We need to be able to describe the excitement and the challenge of the Christian life with conviction, excitement, and vibrancy. We need to be able to recite the actual events, people, and movements of the church that are *currently* shaping the world. We need to be story-tellers in the finest tradition of the craft. We are dream-weavers, world shakers, over-comers, and conquerors. We are Spirit-driven heirs to the kingdom who are totally committed to the cause of Christ! We’re calling home God’s children, his warriors-in-waiting, to join us in the greatest adventure mankind has ever known! Is that how we talk when we present the gospel? Can we make the bible come alive for folks, and describe it as if it were high drama and filled with excitement and humor? We need to learn how to do that. We need to become world class story-tellers. We need to be able to describe for them what they are getting into in a visual and compelling way. Now, before you misunderstand what I am advocating, let me lay down some biblical truths.

We cannot persuade anyone into the kingdom of God by words alone (1Cor. 2:4). Those who come to Christ are called and enabled by the Spirit of God (1Cor. 1:18-24; Jn. 6:44). Apart from Christ we can do *nothing* (Jn. 15:5). But we know this to be true: God's elect were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). They will recognize their master's voice when they hear it (Jn. 10:27). But how will they hear, and how will they respond, unless we clearly speak to them with his voice? (Rom. 10:14) And so we must be prepared in season and out to give a reason, a cause, for the hope that we have (1Pet. 3:15).

OK. So what's that got to do with telling a good story? Well, there's a reason the movie was named, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. When I say "story" I'm not talking about mythology or fiction. I'm talking about being able to explain the wonder of God's grace in a way that the simplest mind can grasp. And the best way to do that is by telling a memorable story. That's what Christ did when he used parables and allegories. He conveyed the deep truths of God to us through the vehicle of story. He brought alive those truths through characters, events, circumstances, and dialogue. He placed his listeners into the story as observers *and* participants. He embroidered the tale onto the fabric of their lives using places, personalities, and concepts that they dealt with every day. He turned abstract truth into a concrete experience for them, an experience that they could repeat to their family and friends by repeating the memorable stories. His teachings were therefore duplicatable. That is, they could be multiplied by anyone who repeated his stories. They were relevant, interesting, challenging, and profound. Moreover, his stories forced his listeners to participate by motivating each one to make a personal choice: "How should I respond to that?"

Here's another truth: you cannot motivate anyone to do anything. They have to motivate themselves. So what good is a motivational speaker? A motivational speaker is skilled at giving enough information, and enough incentive to his audience, that they willingly respond to the challenge presented by the speaker. The word "motivate" contains the root word "motion," meaning "movement." The job of the motivator is to get the audience to move in a desired direction. He "impels" the audience, meaning he *urges* them to move, through moral persuasion. He cannot move them directly – and so he must impel them indirectly. How does he do that? He convinces them that the direction he wants them to take is the direction that they desire. And how does he do that? He asks evocative questions, he supplies reasonable answers, and he sets up a clear choice for them, a choice between two alternative directions. That's exactly what an effective evangelist must do when presenting the gospel.

Now comes the tough part as well as the fun part for the evangelist. He gets out his palette of word-pictures, the canvas he just painted, and he begins to paint the seeker into the picture he just created. If the seeker doesn't feel that what has been said *personally* applies to him, then the evangelist cannot put the choice before him. The evangelist must purposefully and actively question the seeker, and attentively listen to what the seeker has been saying about his life, his dreams, and his needs. And then he uses the seeker's name, the seeker's circumstances, and the seeker's deepest needs, to describe who Jesus Christ is to him, and what Christ has done for him on the cross, personally and particularly. If he fails to do that, then the evangelist may be painting a pretty picture, but it will not move the seeker to make a choice today. Unless the seeker sees himself in the picture, it will have no meaning for him, no impetus for him to act.

The presentation could be interesting, articulate, and biblically accurate, and still not move the seeker unless he believes that it relates to *him*. No seeker will believe that Christ is the answer to a dilemma he doesn't believe he has. He must be led to conclude that he has questions which need answers, that Christ is the answer he has been seeking, and it is Christ who now calls him to choose, not the evangelist. The seeker must realize these things for himself. It isn't enough to tell him. He must buy into the drama as his very own, and be willing to commit to its resolution in his life. He must declare his faith that Christ is the Son of God, who was sent to the cross by God to redeem him from death, and who was raised from the dead to bring him life. Christ must be embraced as the sole object of his faith, acknowledged as his Lord and his God, the person to whom he will commit his life. Presenting this truth, and obtaining this commitment, is the duty, the craft, and the goal of the evangelist.

I hear time and again, "No one has ever presented it to me that way. I've heard it all before, but I've never heard it put in a way that I could grasp and respond to." This either means they weren't ready before (God's Spirit has his own timing), or else someone didn't tell the story in a dramatic fashion that presented this individual with a personal dilemma, and a choice to be made. They weren't "engaged" in the conversation. Perhaps they were preached at, and poked at, but not engaged in the telling of the tale. They never understood that they were a character in the story. The story, rightly told, *always* produces results – it *always* separates the sheep from the goats, Jacob from Esau, Abel from Cain. The one is drawn by it, and the other is repelled by it.

Every story told by the evangelist is uniquely crafted for his audience. It is custom tailored to the life of the seeker who sits before him, just as Christ's sacrifice on the cross was personally applied to each of his sheep. Their names were individually given into Christ's hand by God the Father for redemption (Jn. 6:39; 10:28). The evangelist is directly involved in the present application of God's grace, through Christ, by the Spirit. It is an honor and a privilege to be present at such an occasion. It should not be taken lightly. And so, as an evangelist, we each pre-construct the framework of the eternal story, using our own words, our own style, and our own unique subplot. We leave a role to be played by our expected but unknown seeker, an unwitting heir to the kingdom – whose lines will be spoken off-the-cuff – whose tale is yet to be learned. And when God determines that the moment has arrived, we will write him or her into the play. We will do so intentionally, lovingly, sincerely, and artfully. And then we will hand them their lines to read, to see what they will do with them. We explain to them that it is the role of a lifetime, that the great cloud of witnesses has been expecting them, and that there is a chorus of angels waiting to sing songs of celebration as they walk onto the stage. It is a glorious thing to behold, and there won't be a dry eye in the house!

What elements make the Gospel a good story?

Every good story has a number of essential elements:

A Plot. This is the story line. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is linear and progressive so that it's easy to follow. We lay it out like a map with a destination, and then we walk them down the road. However, a plot consisting only of a sequence of events is boring, and it is undramatic. It has to have a point, a moral to the tale. The events alone cannot provide insight.

And so we add a number of other things into the mix, as you'll see below. Here's the thing: we don't want to call a seeker to come to Christ out of pity for what happened on the cross, or out of guilt for their sin. These are part of the plot, but they are incidental to the more important issue of why Christ went to the cross in the first place. Yes, he paid for our sins there, but his purpose for coming, and for dying, was to reconcile us to the Father. *That* is where the focus must remain. Everything else in the story must point to that great truth. And so his resurrection is as big a part of the story as his death on the cross. Without the resurrection we would still be dead in our sins (1Cor. 15:17). So you can see that it's not the cross alone that yields salvation.

Any good writer has thought through the elements of his story and how they inter-relate. So has any good evangelist. Our theology will surely affect our storyline. We need to know what we believe, what actually happened, and what motivates every character in the story. First-year believers are better witnesses to their own story, than they are evangelists of Christ's story. It requires study and thoughtful meditation to embrace the import of what happened. And that takes time. We need to wrap our minds around it, and get passionate about it, until we are driven to tell the tale. It has a life of its own, and it demands to be told.

The Setting. There are three settings in the Gospel. There is the OT (our condition under the Law), the NT (our condition under grace), and the kingdom (what it means to be in Christ). We want to put the seeker into the biblical world visually, with Adam in the Garden, with Cain on the doorstep, with Noah at the Flood, with Abraham's children in Egypt, with Moses during the Exodus, with Peter warming himself at the fire during Christ's examination. We don't need nor do we want to use them all. We need to choose the appropriate visuals, a few carefully selected biblical passages that best tell our tale to this individual. Keep it simple. Don't lose them on the journey with a confused scattering of scenes and circumstances. They were lost in the desert, but now they're found in the arms of Christ. Simple.

Cast of Characters. There are hundreds of characters in the bible. Choose the best-known names, ones that are sure to ring a bell with the seeker: Adam, Cain and Abel, Noah, Job, Moses, David and Goliath, or perhaps Peter. Even so, in today's biblically illiterate world, we may need to describe who they were, and why they're important to the story. We may need to describe who God is, that he exists, and that he has invaded history. These are historical figures, but they're also archetypes. They each represent a personality type, or a typical human reaction. Even Jesus, though perfect, is on the Mount of Olives pleading with his Father to find another way if possible. We've all been there. We can identify with these people undergoing their trials.

Conflict to be Resolved. We've also got to hold out to the seeker what it was that enabled these historical figures to endure their trial and its consequences. *This* is the quest, the treasure, that has eluded the seeker his whole life. It isn't to be found in fame, fortune, pleasure, or human ability. It isn't to be found in serving another human being. This treasure is eternal in nature; no finite source can contain its beauty or measure its worth. It is a hole, a vacuum in his soul, that demands to be filled and sealed. Nothing in this world can satisfy that longing of his soul, that need to find its source and its fulfillment in God. It's the stuff of legends and mythology. But only in Christ do we discover and tangibly embrace its truth, and its reality.

Tension and Movement. What makes a story sweep us up and carry us along is called tension. It can take place between characters, or between a character and his circumstances, or between a character and his hubris, his fatal character flaw. The bible has all of these playing against each other throughout its pages. The task of the story-teller is to throw out “tasters” to the seeker, to find which one is the main one that captures his attention. Remember, this is interactive story-telling, not recitation. Canned approaches seldom work because we’re each different in how we perceive our world, and what we’ve experienced during our life. We’re trying to find out which personality quadrant this person belongs to (see Florence Littauer’s book, *The Personality Tree*) so that we can tailor our story to him. There’s no deviousness or insincerity in doing this. We all have our perspective on life. If we don’t take into account the personality of the seeker, it is rude and indifferent. We would be treating him like an object, like just another set of ears to tickle. God is specifically calling him. He knew him when he was conceived in his mother’s womb. He has plans for him, and purposes, and uses. The tension must be his tension; the obstacles must be his obstacles; the vantage point must be his vantage point, not our own.

Movement, just like it sounds, presses the story toward a conclusion. We know we’re headed for our destination, and it generates an expectation on the part of the seeker to know what that conclusion will be. How are all these issues to be resolved? Was Christ a victim or a victor? What happened to Peter after his betrayal? Who really crucified Christ? Were they our agents? How am I to be forgiven? Is Christ’s sacrifice sufficient for me? We create movement by establishing a mystery, and presenting evidence that is inconclusive for the moment. We are setting up the punch line to the story, and eliciting interest in the characters of the story.

The classic biblical example is the prophet Nathan coming to talk to David after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba, and his disposal of her husband. Nathan tells David a story. Here it is with the punch line in 2Sam. 12:1-7 (ESV – modified):

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his portion and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him.

Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.

Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

Nathan said to David, “**You** are the man!”

The Resolution. Imagine David’s reaction as the truth of what Nathan has said settles into his mind. Nathan didn’t have to explain what it meant. David understood exactly what he had done. Is he condemned to hell? Has he lost his relationship with God? No! In verse 13 we read, “David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.” Does this end it? No! Just like in real life, there are consequences to David’s sin – the child he has with Bathsheba dies. Confession, forgiveness, and

effect. This is the same resolution that each believer encounters in life and in experience. It is the epitome of truth and accuracy as to the human condition. There is no sugar-coating, no fantasy in which everyone lives happily ever after. It is life as we know it, people as we know them to be.

Epilogue. In the NT, we have a similar shocked audience when Peter explains to them what they have done to their Messiah, the Anointed One of God they have expected all their lives:

Acts 2:37-41 ³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off-- for all whom the Lord our God will call." ⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. NIV

This is the epilogue – a speech made directly to the audience following the conclusion of a story. We have told them what the bible says, and what it means, and now we present them with the choice: what does it mean to *you*? How will you respond to this? Peter answers, “Repent and be baptized.” There is something they can do right now to resolve this for themselves, just as the story had its own resolution. The two are intertwined. What was true for those in the story is true for us as well. As the people in the story responded, and found forgiveness and purpose, so must we confess, be forgiven, and submit to God’s intent for our lives. Only then can we put the past behind us, and begin the journey laid out for us (Heb. 12:1; Eph. 2:10).

Conclusion. Imagine that you’re on the side of a hill with a plateau above you and a plain below. There’s a new believer sitting by your side. You tell him there’s a battle being waged on the plateau above. It’s between the armies of darkness and light. On the plain below are thousands of people who are slaves of the army of darkness. You explain to the seeker that their freedom depends on a messenger who carries a package addressed to the prisoners from the leader of the Army of Light. The package contains the key that will free them from their chains. It must be separately delivered to each prisoner by the messenger. The prisoners have no idea that their deliverance is so near, nor that so many are involved in securing their freedom. This is a battle of liberation, not conquest. The war has already been won by the Army of Light; and the outcome of this battle is assured as well. But the lives of those on the plains below are absolutely dependent on the key that this messenger carries. Once freed, the messenger will enlist them in the battle, and rejoin the front lines of the Army of Light!

This new believer sitting next to you is that messenger. The key is the Gospel. This is high drama. This is something not only to die for, but to live for. We must be diligent to tell the story with conviction, passion, and faithfulness. It has been entrusted to us by God himself. It is his word of reconciliation and peace with him, and of separation and enmity with the world. It is the seed of life that we scatter without regard to the ground we’re on. When it lands on soil prepared by God’s Spirit, it takes root, and grows, and produces fruit 30, 60, or 100-fold what was sown. And all of this is to the glory of God. May his name be praised!