

The Biblical Narrative as Agent for Worldview Change

Don Pederson

The Problem

The essence of missionary work is communication. God has given us a message and commanded us to take it to every "tongue and tribe and people and nation." However, even under the best of conditions we experience communication difficulties and failure. When we consider the task of communicating the Gospel across language and cultural boundaries, we confront a less than optimum communication situation. Missionaries face the formidable task of attempting to communicate an alien message in a language that they speak imperfectly to a people whose worldview differs in significant ways from their own and from the biblical worldview presented in scripture.

The foreignness of the message is an obstacle for anyone who shares the Gospel whether the target is an educated urban westerner or a tribal person, because the Gospel message is alien to the human heart and in fact goes counter to its natural bent. No one naturally believes that they are helpless to save themselves. The response of the Israelites to God's demands are typical of all mankind: "Everything the LORD has said we will do." (Ex. 24:3) All religious systems other than biblical Christianity are based on a system of performance: Do the right things and you will attain salvation. The idea that salvation is unattainable through human effort but rather is dependent on God is abhorrent to the unbelieving heart.

Communication is based on shared language, culture, and experience. Individuals who speak the same language, but do not have the same culture or experiences, can communicate to a degree, but will experience a significant amount of miscommunication. The lack of common cultural background will be a constant source of misunderstanding. This often happens when English speakers from different countries try to communicate. When communication takes place between people who have the same language and culture there is a higher degree of communication. Because they share the same culture, they are more likely to share the same denotative and connotative meanings of words resulting in fewer problems. In cases where the individuals share the same language, culture, and experiences, the probability of successful communication is highest because the shared experiences increase the likelihood that their assumptions and presuppositions are the same.

The inadequacy of traditional methods

It has been quite common in the history of missionary endeavor to begin teaching with the life of Christ present the Gospel message and solicit a response as quickly as possible. This method is attractive because it allows the missionary to get to the "point" as quickly as possible. This approach has born fruit but has often resulted in nominalism and syncretism, which are two sides of the same coin. A major reason for using this methodology is its familiarity. That is how evangelism has been done in the home countries of Europe and North America and it has been quite successful. However, the audience in the home countries and the audience in a tribal setting are very different. Historically, the missionary sending countries were Christian in their outlook and worldview. Because of this, the preacher or evangelist could assume that he and the audience shared a great many presuppositions regarding the nature and character of God, sin, salvation, Satan, and Jesus Christ. In ministering among tribal people, and indeed people who come from any other religious tradition, operating with this assumption is a recipe for syncretism. Even those ministering in countries with a European history and tradition are finding that they can no longer assume common definitions of theological terms in our post modern societies.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* the following exchange occurs between Humpty Dumpty and Alice:

I don't know what you mean by "glory," Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. `Of course you don't -- till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"
`But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument," Alice objected.
`When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, `it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.'
`The question is,' said Alice, `whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
`The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, `which is to be master - - that's all.'

In evangelizing cross-culturally, it is quite possible to unconsciously operate with Humpty Dumpty's view of words. Because we know the definitions of the biblical terms we use, we project those definitions on to the words we have chosen to express them in the tribal language and assume the tribal people will understand what we are talking about. In effect, we think we can make the words mean what we want them to mean.

In reality there are a number of concepts that are essential for accurate understanding of the Gospel and it is unrealistic to think that they can be understood and internalized through relatively superficial exposure.

This is recognized as true even in the current American context as reflected in the following comment by William Willimon (1997):

"There is no way I can crank the gospel down to the level where any American can walk in off the street and know what it is all about within 15 minutes. One can't do that even with baseball! You have to learn the vocabulary, the rules, and the culture in order to understand it. Being in church is at least as different as being in a baseball stadium."¹

How can we effectively transmit a biblical understanding of the key concepts needed to understand the Gospel? Let's take the main concept: God. How can we clearly communicate who God is in his nature and attributes? As products of western educational institutions, most of us would immediately develop a list of attributes and teach them to the target audience. After teaching them that God is holy, just, merciful, gracious, omnipotent, etc. we would assume that they now understand who God is and what He is like.

Unfortunately, most tribal people have never learned from systematized curriculum; they learn from stories. Additionally, the problem of definitions comes up again. How can we be sure that the tribal words we use for such concepts as holiness, righteousness, grace, etc. are communicating correctly? We have only moved the original problem one step further away.

Using the Bible story

Over the past 20 years the use of Old Testament stories to provide the necessary background and conceptual understanding needed to understand the Gospel has been gaining acceptance in the missions community. Much of the early work was done by Trevor McIlwain and other New Tribes Mission missionaries in the Philippines. The use of stories as preparation for the Gospel derived from the following observations:

1. Much of the Bible is historical narrative - God must have had a reason for choosing this literary motif.
2. God revealed Himself in the historical context of His interaction with mankind - through His acts, not just His words.
3. Tribal people learn best from stories.
4. Starting at the beginning of a story makes more sense than starting in the middle.

¹ William H. Willimon (Duke University) in "This Culture is Overrated" Leadership Winter 1997

As more and more church planters began to use foundational Old Testament teaching to provide the conceptual framework for understanding the Gospel, there were positive reports of people coming to faith in Christ. Additionally, missionaries reported the sense of security they experienced in allowing the scriptural narrative to invest the terms they were using with meaning. Rather than discovering and listing the tribal terms that would identify the attributes of God, the tribal people were learning of His nature and character as revealed in His dealings with Adam and Eve, Abraham, the Israelites, and others. As Christians who have studied the Bible and systematic theology, it is difficult for us to appreciate the difference between the living person of God as revealed in scripture and a list of His attributes.

Perhaps this example will help to illustrate it. Here is a partial list of characteristics of a well known figure in American culture:

- ♦ Lived in the Midwest
- ♦ Rationalized dishonesty
- ♦ Shrewd
- ♦ Associated with disreputable people
- ♦ Keen judge of character
- ♦ Lived with an aunt

Do you feel like you know this person after reading this listing of facts about him? Probably not. Now let me identify him by name: Tom Sawyer. For those of us who have read the book (or seen the film) an immediate sense of this character floods through our minds; we “know” him because we know the story.

The Chronological Teaching Program

During the past fifteen years a significant amount of development of an evangelism and church planting program has been carried out by Trevor McIlwain based on using the Old and New Testament narratives. It has become the church planting modus operandi for NTM and is being used to varying degrees by most evangelical mission agencies.

The program as developed by McIlwain is composed of seven phases

and is available for phases 1-4 in the nine volume series ***Building on Firm Foundations***. The following table provides the salient features of each phase:

Phase 1 - Evangelism

Scripture covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ

Target audience:

vUnsaved

vThose not clear concerning their salvation

vBelievers untaught in the Old Testament

vBelievers wishing to reach others with the Gospel.

Emphasis in Phase 1 Salvation - Man's need of salvation and God's provision through Christ.

Phase 2

Scripture covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ

Target audience:

Believers - particularly new believers

Emphasis in Phase 2

vThe security of the believer in Christ.

vConstantly remind them that all God demanded from them as sinners has been provided for them by Christ.

Phase 3

Scripture covered: Acts (Overview)

Target audience: Believers, particularly new believers

Purpose in Phase 3

vTo continue the story following the Ascension of Christ

vTo provide historical and geographical background for the remainder for the New Testament.

vTo use the infant church in Acts as a model for the developing infant church in the tribe

Phase 4

Scripture covered: Overview of the rest of the New Testament (the epistles)

Target audience: Believers - primarily new believers

Purpose in Phase 4

vComplete the teaching of the overview of God's revelation which began in Genesis.

vMake believers aware of their position in Christ and to teach them how to appropriate Christ's life through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

vEmphasize God's holy standard for every part of the believer's life.

vTeach new believers their God given position, gifts, and responsibilities as members of a New Testament church.

vTeach the scriptural requirements and ministries of pastors and elders

vTeach God's future program for His Church, Israel, and the world

Phase 5

Scripture covered:

Genesis through the Ascension of Christ

Target audience:

Maturing Believers

Emphasis in Phase 5

vSanctification in the life of the believer

vIn the Gospels emphasizes the spiritual training received by the disciples

Phase 6

Scripture covered:

Detailed study of Acts - Expository teaching

Target audience: Maturing Believers

Emphasis in Phase 6

vHoly Spirit's guidance, training, and sanctifying work in the early church and the life

Phase 7

Scripture covered: Detailed study of the Epistles - Expository teaching

Target audience: Maturing Believers

Emphasis in Phase 7

vThe church and the walk of the believer

It should be emphasized that the point of this program is not simply to teach or tell Bible stories, but in telling them to highlight the themes that are significant to understanding the concepts that are foundational to the gospel. As such, God is to remain the primary focus, not the human characters.

Phase one is the most crucial in that it deals with salvation and forms the foundation for the teaching phases to follow. In teaching through the stories in phase one, the following doctrinal themes are emphasized repeatedly in the context of the narrative:

The person and character of God

1. God is supreme and sovereign.

God was the only One who lived "...in the beginning." Therefore, He is totally independent of everything and everyone.

The angels were created to serve God. He made them, so they rightfully belonged to Him.

God had the authority to place man as manager over the earth because He created man.

2. God communicates with man.

When God placed Adam in the garden, He told him he could eat of the fruit of any tree except the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

God called out to Adam in the garden.

God reasoned with Cain.

3. God is omnipresent and omniscient.

God did not need anyone to teach Him how to create everything.

God was able to put the sun, moon, and stars high in the sky because He is everywhere.

Adam and Eve could not hide from God because He is everywhere and knew where they were.

4. God is omnipotent.

God created everything out of nothing, for nothing is impossible to God.

God's power holds the sun, moon, and stars in the sky.

God was able to create everything in only 6 days because He is almighty.

5. God is holy and righteous. He demands death as the payment for sin.

God prepared the Lake of Fire for Lucifer and his spirit followers.

God told Adam that he would die if he disobeyed and ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

God killed animals in order to make clothing for Adam and Eve.

IJFM Article - 6

Adam died.

6. God is loving, merciful, and gracious.

God created everything good and beautiful in this world for man to enjoy because He is loving.

Although Adam and Eve deserved to die and go into everlasting punishment, God promised a Savior who would deliver them and all mankind from Satan's control and bring them back to God.

God provided clothing for Adam and Eve.

7. God is faithful and immutable.

God finished all that He planned to create. When He begins a work, He always finishes it.

The immediate result of Adam and Eve's sin was death. Their bodies began to die, and they died spiritually.

God gave Seth to replace Abel because He had promised a Deliverer and the Deliverer would come through the line of Seth.

Man

8. Man is a sinner. He needs God and is helpless to save himself.

Adam disobeyed God when he ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

God refused the clothing which Adam and Eve had made.

9. Cain and Abel were born sinners because their father Adam was a sinner.

10. Man can come to God only according to God's will and plan.

God refused the clothing which Adam and Eve had made.

Cain's offering was rejected because he did not come to God according to God's will and plan.

The ark had to be built just as God instructed.

11. Man must have faith in order to please God and be saved.

Abel's offering was accepted by God because he came in faith.

Noah built the ark as God instructed because he believed in God to save him from the flood.

Abraham believed God when he offered up his son Isaac.

Satan

12. Satan fights against God and His will. He is a liar and a deceiver.

He hates man.

Satan disguised himself and deceived Eve.

Satan lead the descendants of Noah to worship false gods.

- Satan guided King Herod to kill the babies in an attempt to kill Jesus.

Jesus Christ (New Testament only)

13. Jesus Christ is God.

- The angel told Mary that her son would be called "...the Son of the Highest....."
- It was right for the wise man to worship Jesus because He is God.
- John recognized Jesus as the Deliverer.

14. Jesus Christ is man.

- Jesus was born as Mary's son.

IJFM Article - 7

- Jesus was tempted by Satan.
- Jesus' human body was transfigured.

15. Jesus Christ is holy and righteous.

- Jesus is without a human father, so He is sinless.
- When Jesus was baptized, God said that He was fully satisfied with Him.
- Jesus did not give in to Satan's temptations.

16. Jesus Christ is the only Savior.

- Jesus explained to Nicodemus that He would be lifted up like the snake in the wilderness.
- Just as God gave the Israelites manna from Heaven to save them from physical death in the wilderness, so God sent Jesus from Heaven into the world to be the only deliverer of sinners.
- Peter recognized that Jesus was the Deliverer whom God had promised.

Results

There are many stories from countries all over the world that recount dramatic responses to the Gospel after the Old Testament foundational teaching had prepared the people to respond in faith to the message of the

cross. The clarity of the testimonies is thrilling. They refer to Christ being

their sin-bearer, the perfect sacrifice that fully satisfied God's righteous

demands on their behalf. Significantly absent are references to what they

have done to obtain this new standing with God; the Word of God has changed their worldview. They have been transformed from animists who

believe that they can manipulate the supernatural realm, to followers of

Christ who come empty handed to the foot of the cross just as expressed by

the words of the old hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross

I cling.”

Beyond the clear testimonies are stories of changes in behavior that are expressions of an inward change that can only be the result of a deep

work of God. One example is a vignette that was related to me by Wayne

Gill, a missionary among the Chimane people of Bolivia. The rainbow is the

most dangerous and feared of spiritual beings in the Chimane worldview.

Most sickness and death is attributed to the actions of the rainbow.

Because

of this, Chimane hide in their houses when a rainbow appears in the sky.

One afternoon a rain shower forced a group of young Chimane men stop

their soccer game to seek shelter. After the rain stopped, a brilliant rainbow

appeared right next to the soccer field. As Wayne observed this scenario, he

recognized it as an opportunity to see if the truths of scripture had truly

taken root in their thinking. He watched them look at the rainbow and briefly engage in animated discussion after which he could hear a peal of

laughter as they went back out on the field to continue their interrupted

soccer game. Their actions were a clear indication that their worldview had

been changed at a very deep level, for what they had done was life threatening in the Chimane worldview; they had put their lives on the line.

Truly, their actions spoke louder than words.

IJFM Article - 8

Summary

In searching for effective means of communicating the Gospel effectively, we find in the narrative structure of the Bible God’s choice for

communicating with mankind. As missionaries from countries all over the

world have used the biblical narrative to lay a foundation for the Gospel,

they have given testimony to the power of scripture to bring new understanding to those they teach. A common objection to this mode of teaching is that it takes too long. Some have objected to the length of time needed before arriving at the presentation of the Gospel. Indeed, there are situations where this is a problem; we don't always have all the time we would like. However, in our concern about time, we must be careful not to neglect the foundations, for in so doing we may end up with a beautiful Christian looking structure built on a foundation of animism. How much better to follow Paul's exhortation to build as a "wise master builder" so that what we build will be genuine and will last.

Resources

The following is a listing of materials that are useful in learning more about the chronological teaching program and in developing teaching material for evangelism and church planting²:

Books

Cross, John 1996 *The Stranger on the Road to Emmaus*. Sanford, FL: Good Seed International.

Hesselgrave, David J. 1994 *Scripture and Strategy: the Use of the Bible in Postmodern Church and Mission*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

McIlwain, Trevor 1987-1992 *Building on Firm Foundations* Vols.1-9. Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.

McIlwain, Trevor and Nancy Everson 1991 *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ*. Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.

Schultze, Dell 1984 *God and Man*.

Steffen, Tom 1996 *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry*. La Habra, CA:

Center for Organizational and Ministry Development.

Zook, Mark 1989 *Church Planting Step by Step*. Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.

Videos

²

A free catalog with more information on these resources is available on request. To order call 800-321-

5375 in the
U.S. and Canada or 407-323-3430 from other countries.
IJFM Article - 9

Delivered from the Power of Darkness
EE-TAOW!
EE-TAOW! The next chapter
Now We See Clearly
The Taliabo Story
The Emmaus Road Connection
IJFM Article - 10