

The Sacred Storybook: Fighting a Fragmented Understanding of Scripture by Tom Steffen

Today's church member shuffles through the average church with such rapidity that it leads to an incomplete hodgepodge of biblical understanding. Like the tapestry of a quilt, they pick up doctrines from a variety of places and sew them in at random. A pastor of a prominent church makes the following comment: "We get people for around two years. That's it! We can't expect to walk them through a life-long discipleship process. We, therefore, ask ourselves: 'Realistically, how far in the discipleship process can we take these people in two years?'"

Besides a mobile audience, today's Christian workers face a second challenge: a post-Christian audience that lacks a basic Bible background. Linda Migget, in an article titled, *The Emerging Sunday School Avante-garde* makes the following observation regarding seeker kids: More telling is the complaint that traditional curricula re-designed for the kid who already knows the Bible story...Most seeker kids have no biblical basis...To assume that they can ump into the middle of a traditional curriculum is naïve.

What is true of many children today is also true of many adults. Coming from unchurched backgrounds and a transient society, they have little if any Bible background. What can Christian workers do to ensure they grasp a thematic overview of the Bible rather than a few disjointed tests and topics? This article seeks to begin dialogue on this question.

Teaching as Taught

Many Christian workers were taught to view the Bible as God's sacred textbook. Their teachers rewarded them for their ability to unpack meaning, not just from a chapter, paragraph, sentence, phrase or even a word, but even from the very syllables that comprise the word in question. The result has been teachers and students who tend to value the parts over the whole. To many, the whole becomes observed by the parts. Seminary professor David Wells, in his book, *No Room for Truth*, commenting on fragmentation within the seminary curriculum, makes this insider's observation: "Subjects and fields develop their own literatures, working assumptions, vocabularies, technical terms, criteria for what is true and false, and can???" of what literature and what views should be common knowledge among these working in the subjects. The result of this is a profound increase in knowledge but often an equally profound loss in understanding what it all means, how the knowledge in one field should inform that in another."

Will the picture eventually all come together? It might if more Christian workers were taught to view the Bible as God's sacred Storybook with a storyline that ties all the 'little books' together. In such a scenario, the Bible would be seen

as a unified book comprised of various settings, plots, epistles, choice and changes, and a conclusion of hope. Stephen Shoemaker in *God's Stories: New Narratives from Sacred Texts* cogently observes: "If you look at this at its Table of Contents, you see that the Bible is not laid out like a philosophical discourse or a book of systematic theology. It is not a series of lessons or lecture. Its essential shape is story form, a grand, sweeping (if at times untidy) story."

Can piece-meal perspective of Scripture be changed? A transient audience lacking the basics of Christianity seems to allow for a little more than periodical topical teaching. How can Christian workers do a better job fighting such fragmentation? The following four suggestions are presented to begin the process. More will be needed to complete it.

Teaching as Not Taught

If those Christian workers (myself included) who received such piece-meal training can change their paradigm, an appreciation of the Bible's big picture will begin to grow not only in themselves, but in their listeners as well. Here are a few ways to help fight a fragmented understanding of Scripture.

1. Present the Bible as God's sacred Storybook with a storyline that connects Genesis to Revelation. The Bible is much more than referenced proof texts, one-verse sermons, or isolated topical studies. The Bible is a story...God's story. And it is held together by a plot which offers choice, changes and conclusion of hope. The Author introduces over 2,900 characters upon the Bible stage to challenge and transform listeners of different generations, genders, and ethnicities. The Author also chose to make narrative the predominate genre of Scripture (65-75%). It's time to reconnect God's sacred story to ministry.

If Christian workers neglect the storyline of Gods' sacred Storybook, the following may occur:

First, an abridged picture of God will result. Much (if not the majority) of Bible teaching today finds its source in the New Testament. Such an emphasis can leave a vacuum as to the God behind this section of the sacred Storybook. What better way to catch a glimpse of the awesomeness of God, something seldom perceived today, than an introduction to the heroes, heroines, and the rogues introduced upon the Old Testament stage (Psalm 36:1. Proverbs 1:7)?

Argument-based evangelism can become privileged. Highly honed laws establish the parameters of debate. How could evangelism differ, however, if Christian workers viewed Scripture as relational events rather than rational ideas? Would this open evangelism up to others besides specialists who can marshal facts, organize them in logical sequence, and debate them eloquently?

One-fourth-of-the-book evangelism can take preference. Why did Paul tie Jewish and Gentile evangelism to the Old Testament (three-quarters of the book) yet many Christian workers today find little need to do so? Why does

present-day evangelism tend to overlook the broader cosmic conflict between God and Satan, and the consequent ensuing battle for human allegiance, even in the midst of a deluge of writings on spiritual warfare? Christian workers would do well to follow Paul Harvey's model and tell 'the rest of the story.

Follow up, rather than foundation, may receive the focus.

Foundational characters and themes, such as Adam (sin, fall and promise), Noah (hope), Abraham (justification by faith), Moses (law and grace), Job (God's sovereignty), David (Kingdom reign), and Jonah (grace for the undeserving) not only set the backdrop for God's story, they tie the complete story together.

Timid testimonies (faith stories) will prevail. Even though faith stories (note Paul's examples: Acts 9:1-19, 22:1-21, 25:23-26:23) can connect powerfully with friends, family and foes, they often take a back seat to formula-based evangelism models which can be delivered quickly. Why is it Christian workers often spend more time teaching the 'hows' of evangelistic models than the 'hows' of personal faith stories? Faith stories that integrate emotion, reason, history, transcultural experiences, and point towards Christ deserve much more attention by trainers. Done sensitively, faith stories can provide a non-threatening way to unleash the laity majority into evangelism.

But communicating the entire Bible as story only adds time to the task, some readers may argue. Possibly, but not if the Christian workers....

2. Structure the sanctuary as story. During the European Middle ages, artists transformed cathedras into 'Bibles in stone and glass'. Walls and ceilings provided a sweeping overview of the Bible, linking isolated pictures to the big picture. What's the second millennium version of a visual storyline on the walls (and screens) of traditional church buildings? Of house churches? Of warehouse churches? Of theatre churches? Does modern technology make weekly updates possible for ongoing review and new additions?

Such visual storytelling would allow Christian workers and artists to show how the present snapshot (topic) under discussion connects to the big picture. Structuring the sanctuary as story would provide the listeners, teachers (and artists) with a sense of continuity over time and cultures, and a story that ends in hope.

3. Compose a song which conveys the overall story of the Bible, and sing it often. I am indebted to the Ifugao of the Philippines for this idea. After hearing a sweeping presentation of the Gospel from Genesis through the ascension, several Ifugao, using a traditional tune, compose a song that presents the story of good news from start to finish. This song provides the Ifugao a sweeping overview of the storyline of the sacred Storybook every time it's sung. Moreover, it calls for congregational participation as they join in on the chorus after each stanza. Adding more stanzas that cover the remainder of the Bible would complete the story. Such a sweeping overview would provide first-time visitors an

introduction to the unified nature of Gods' sacred Storybook while reinforcing the cosmic drama for regular attendees.

4. Develop curricula which covers the big story through a series of smaller stories, and teach it often. Stephen reviewed a host of Old Testament characters, developing a pot that the hostile audience was not about to accept (Acts 7). How long did it take for Stephen to do this? An hour? Two hours? On the Emmaus Road, Jesus reviewed key Old Testament characters, providing two despondent disciples a sweeping overview which would restore their hope (Luke 24). It takes approximately 2.5 hours to walk seven miles.

Conclusion

A mobile audience which lacks the Bible basics requires a big picture understanding of the sacred Storybook. God has a story for them, whether for antagonistic groups like Stephen faced, despondent disciples encountered by Jesus, or those in need of Christ who the Christian worker meets on a daily basis. A multi-strategy approach that views the Bible as God's sacred Storybook rather than a sacred Textbook to be dissected; which promotes art, song, and curricula that will connect the isolated snapshots (topics) to the big picture (themes.) will help to fight the fragmented understanding of Scripture which so many Christian workers have inherited and passed on to future generations unwittingly. Starting with the drama when it's three-quarters over will no longer cut it with today's audience, nor will topical studies unconnected to the big picture. Christian workers can fight a fragmented understanding of God's drama by making sure their listener tie it all together through the sacred Storybook, narrative, art, song and curricula.