



Story and Scripture

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What is good news for one time is not necessarily good news for another. If I am confused and distraught and hear from another “this is what God expects of you...,” it can be good news. However, if my conscience is sensitive and already burdened by guilt for not doing what I ought, then “this is what God expects of you...” will not be good news at all. It will reinforce or add to my burden of guilt.

For ancient Israel, living in a world populated by fertility cults and capricious deities, it was good news indeed to have God set his course with covenant promises and clarify his expectations for his followers. In their original setting the Ten Commandments were part of this good news.

For the religious Jew of Jesus’ day, the situation was quite different. Though Judaism was far more diverse than is commonly recognized, there was in general an enormous pressure on society to “shape up” ethically and religiously. Obedience and devotion were necessary before God’s promises would be fulfilled. It was clear to most people what was expected; the laws had been interpreted, expanded and applied. Jesus did not add to this set of expectations; he cut through it with words sharply focused on what God was doing; he lifted burdens by forgiving sins; he healed lives; he told stories which highlighted the unexpected character of God; he seemed to many to be playful and irreverent in his story telling and his behavior.

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I. DISCERNING THE TIMES

What time is it today? What form and shape might good news take for people of the United States in 1981?

Before trying to answer these questions, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone in a nation as large and diverse as ours experiences the same thing at the same time. The time may be somewhat different in Harlem from what it is in Hatton, North Dakota, or in Edina, Minnesota, from what it is in Wainwright, Alaska. And it may further differ from one individual to another within those lo-

calities. There can be no substitute for perceptive attention to the particular; yet each person is also part of and influenced by the larger whole; it is important to know what time it is in our society as a whole.

Disorientation is a fundamental feature of this larger picture. We do not have a clear sense of the meaning of recent events nor a clear sense of direction for the future. For some this

disorientation is acute. Others may live and cope quite well, but even in these latter instances the pieces just don't seem to cohere or to add up to much. The voice of Joan Didion is not unusual:

...I want you to know, as you read me, precisely who I am and where I am and what is on my mind. I want you to understand exactly what you are getting: you are getting a woman who for some time now has felt radically separated from most of the ideas that seem to interest other people....Quite often during the past several years I have felt myself a sleepwalker, moving through the world unconscious of the moment's high issues, oblivious to its data, alert only to the stuff of bad dreams, the children burning in the locked car in the supermarket parking lot,...the freeway sniper who feels 'real bad' about picking off the family of five....Acquaintances read *The New York Times*, and try to tell me the news of the world. I listen to call-in shows....I have trouble making certain connections. I have trouble maintaining the basic notion that keeping promises matters in a world where everything I was taught seems beside the point.¹

When life has direction and coherence, it also has expectations. One listens to the news, expecting to hear something significant, expecting to hear that life's story has been advanced. But when life comes apart at the seams, absurdities and examples of the nonsensical are what hold fascination; one no longer expects news or knows what counts as news.

A little later on in the same essay, Didion tells of an incident where a man screams at a woman companion and rushes off Didion's airplane into the airport.

It was not until we had passed Diamond Head and were coming in low over the reef for landing at Honolulu, however, that I realized what I most disliked about this incident: I disliked it because it had the aspect of a short story, one of those 'little epiphany' stories in which the main character glimpses a crisis in a stranger's life...and is moved to see his or her own life in a new light. I was not going to Honolulu because I wanted to see life reduced to a short story. I was going to Honolulu because I wanted to see life expanded to a novel, and I still do.²

As a disoriented generation, most people are looking for a "novel," for a coherent story in which to make sense of their lives, collectively and often individually as well.

This is so because many of the "novels" of our lives no longer seem to fit. The "novel" of economic improvement, captured so often in the words "so that my children will have things better than I did," no longer defines our world, as we face decreasing real wages, as we learn to live with scarcity and inflation. The "novel" of technological progress, where builders and innovators were auto-

¹Joan Didion, "In the Islands," *The White Album* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979) 134.

²*Ibid.*, 144.

matic heroes, no longer fits a world where the social and environmental costs of "progress" must always be carefully weighed. And the "novel" of the "free West" battling the "Communist East"

no longer can make sense of the aspirations of third world nations, who refuse to be pigeonholed as pawns of either superpower.

To be sure, there are some of us caught up in ideologies, but the very need to have an ideology is itself symptomatic of the search Didion describes. Only a disoriented person needs an ideology.

What was good news to the guilty will not be good news to the disoriented.

In the midst of this disorientation, a more overt religiousness has emerged. This constitutes a significant reversal of the secularity which commentators were chronicling up through the 1960s. Those of us nurtured in the caution of that period find ourselves separated by a generation gap from those now ready to be overtly religious, from those now ready to abandon careers, postpone marriage, live in communes, proselytize in airports and shopping centers, and give all to their religion. Those on one side of this generation gap will acknowledge that the “novel” of economic success and the “novel” of technological progress and the “novel” of the cold war no longer hold much meaning but continue nonetheless on automatic pilot; those on the other side are ready to abandon the mainstream in favor of a more overtly religious life.

To be sure, there are some who seem absolutely confident of the proper doctrine and the proper ethics. But the readiness to accept and advocate absolute definitions of right and wrong may often be itself a symptom of the disorientation under discussion. The strict discipline of Zen Buddhism, the strict sexual mores of the Unification Church, and the uncompromising platform of the Moral Majority all fall within this sphere.

What was good news to those moving towards secularity will not be good news for those who find no promise in secularity.

Any message which is good news for today will therefore include elements which depart from conventional wisdom, which are overtly religious, which impart a sense of coherent meaning and direction, which issue in clear implications for a fitting life style.

The Bible is a diverse book, full of many kinds of writing: there are letters, religious and secular poetry, wisdom sayings, apocalyptic visions, theologically interpreted history, prophetic critiques of society, and others. It is so diverse that not all portions speak with equal cogency to every generation.

For example, Luther and Calvin found the book of Revelation to be puzzling and beyond their comprehension. Neither wrote a commentary on it, though both wrote extensively on most other books of the Bible. Yet, for a descendent of the Reformation, living not in the cohesiveness of late medieval Christendom but in the idolatrous fury of Nazi totalitarianism, that same book of Revelation came alive to speak with clarity and eloquence not otherwise possible. From the pen of Hanns Lilje came *The Last Book of the Bible*.³

Another example: For the second-century church, experiencing the confusion of Gnostic reinterpretation of Christianity, the Gospels were very important,

³Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957.

because there one found a flesh and blood Jesus, born a human birth, living a human life, suffering, dying, and rising bodily. Contra Marcion, enfleshment was part of the good news. God cared about the material stuff of human life.⁴ But in the nineteenth century, when the danger was that of reducing persons to cogs in the machinery of society and industry, passages of the Bible

which stressed the spirit and the distinctiveness of human life over against the natural spoke with most eloquence. As for Luther and Calvin, but for reasons quite different, John and Paul, not the Synoptics, then seemed to speak the clearest word.

A final example: when the Bible was read as a textbook of doctrine, as it was in the second century, the thirteenth century and again in the seventeenth century, the focus was on the unchanging truths there revealed by God. Though the historical, time-conditioned nature of the Bible was not denied, this affirmation served no significant purpose; attention was focused on the eternal truths instead. But in the nineteenth century what was historical came to be regarded as objectively true and real. Now the sheer historicity of Biblical accounts was emphasized and debated. This was true for those who tried to find the “historical Jesus” or to separate the authentic words from the later accretions, and it was true for the fundamentalists (as they came eventually to be called) who stressed the historicity of every word. The two differed only in the range of what was acceptable as history; what counted as important was the same for both. (This is why there were no fundamentalists until the nineteenth century.) In this case and in others the same Biblical passages were read in different ways, in the one case as doctrine and in the other as history. Different aspects of the same accounts were valued..

If different parts of the Bible have had cogency in different generations, and if different aspects of the same Biblical accounts have been significant at different times, then what of the Bible today? How is it likely to speak most profoundly to a disoriented generation?

What follows is one proposal, one answer to these questions. It does not claim to be the only answer, to provide the only or even the best way to read the Bible. It claims only to be one appropriate way, to be recommended at this time because it is well suited to convey the good news to persons in our culture.

II. THE BIBLE AS STORY

The proposal: to read the Bible and convey the Bible as story, as a narrative account whose form as well as content is significant.

1. Attending to Features Other Than History

To read the Bible as story is not necessarily to regard it as fiction. Though it may not matter much whether Jesus had a specific traveler in mind as he told the parable of the good Samaritan or a specific family in mind as he told the parable of the prodigal son, though it may not matter much whether Esther or Daniel embody accurate historical accounts of life under the Persians and Babylonians, still

⁴Our current situation may be quite like that of the second century. Human interdependence with nature needs articulation. And some seem ready to fall unaware for the neo-Gnosticism of Eckankar and other similar movements who claim to encompass Christianity within their teachings.

most of the Bible is clearly not fiction. And yet it is in story form. As story, though actual occurrences are embraced, selection has been involved, symbolic significance has been located, and metaphor and images contribute to the meaning of the story. Selection has been made, not on the basis of antecedent causes and subsequent effects, as would be true if it were modern history-writing, but on the basis of transparency: incidents are included wherein the character of God and

the character of human existence in the presence of God are illumined most concretely and fully.

In other words, to read the Bible as story is to attend to features of the Biblical accounts other than their historicity or non-historicity.

2. *Narrative Form an Essential Feature*

To read the Bible as story is not to read it as an illustration, though it may also contain illustrations. An illustration is dispensable, a mere servant of a general idea; once the main point has been understood, the illustration is no longer needed. An allegory is, in this restricted sense, a form of illustration. Once the allegory has been decoded, the story ceases to have its own significance. The content can stand alone.

To read the Bible as story is to recognize that the narrative form is an indispensable feature of what is being said. Hans Frei, in tracing the loss of this insight during the eighteenth century, observes that “Biblical commentators again and again emphasized the simplicity of style, the life-likeness of depiction, the lack of artificiality or heroic elevation in theme in such stories as the first three chapters of Genesis, the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the synoptic gospels.”⁵ Yet, even though these features were noted, these commentators had no category with which to understand the importance of this story form; they missed “the high significance of the literal, narrative shape of the stories for their meaning. And so, one might add, it has by and large remained ever since.”⁶

The narrative form is indispensable because the story cannot be reduced to or translated into a proposition without significant loss of meaning. This loss, to be sure, is not always readily apparent when statements are made in the context of a full awareness and appreciation of story. To say “Jesus died for your sins” is pregnant with meaning when set in the context of a believing community, where the full texture of the gospel story has had its impact on Christian lives, where the statement carries with it an awareness of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and the larger context of God’s total involvement in human history. But in isolation a propositional statement is anemic and flat, unable to enliven and heal. Apart from its full context “Jesus died for your sins” is hollow; the story is indispensable for doctrine and proclamation.

Frederick Buechner, in a sermon on Luke 1:26-35, notes that in its essence Christianity is a story—“a time, a place, a set of characters, and the implied promise, which is common to all stories, that something is coming, something interesting or significant or exciting is about to happen.”⁷

⁵Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974) 10.

⁶*Ibid.* 12.

⁷Frederick Buechner, “The Annunciation,” *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966) 58-59.

If we whittle away long enough, it is a story that we come to at last. And if we take even the fanciest and most metaphysical kind of theologian or preacher and keep on questioning him far enough—Why is this so? All right, but why is *that* so? Yes, but how do we know that it’s so?—even he is forced finally to take off his spectacles and push his books off to one side and say, ‘Once upon a time there was...,’ and then everybody leans forward a little and starts to listen. Stories have enormous power for us...⁸

What's on Buechner's mind here is the power the story form has to draw us into its own frame of reference. A story entices us to turn attention away from the here and now, away from the "story" or lack of story in our own lives, to attend to the story being told. Story has the unique capacity to introduce us to a wholly different outlook from the one we are living and to see this outlook embodied in the lives of other persons. In other words, story has the capacity to change one's orientation and frame of reference; story has the capacity to form and influence a person's identity.

It is this unique capacity of story to shape identity which makes it important in a time of disorientation that the Bible be heard not only as good news but also as good news in story form. Teachings can discipline an oriented life; education is necessary in order for maturity to develop; but the basic orientation comes from the gospel as story.

3. Story and Listener

The story form is suited to the content of the gospel message. For one thing, stories focus on people and on God as person-like, on their interactions with others and with their surroundings. Because the gospel message intends to characterize a new relationship with God, the story form is appropriate.

For another, a story releases the creative involvement of the listener. One's imagination goes to work, one's mind actively seeks out clues as to the ending of the story, one's mind draws implications and connections with other incidents in one's life. This is particularly true of an oral or written story as distinguished, for example, from a televised story. The radio version of "The Lone Ranger" is much better than the televised version, because it enlists the active imagination of the listener. (When a radio station in New Haven, Connecticut, broadcast a fifteen-minute episode just before work, it received dozens of phone calls from persons late for work, because these persons would not leave their cars until they heard the ending; they were so "caught up" in the story.) This involvement makes the reader/listener a significant part of the story telling enterprise. In the case of the Biblical message, the story form affirms the dignity and value of the listener/reader. The form conveys something of the message; the form itself helps to convey the *agape* of the gospel.

Cannot Socratic teaching also involve the listener? Yes, of course, but Socratic teaching presupposes knowledge in the student; it employs recall and inference, whereas story has the capacity to bring to the listener/reader a whole new world of possibilities not already inherent in that person's knowledge or outlook.

⁸*Ibid.*, 59.

Thus, a story can open new possibilities and present new alternatives in a form which is readily applicable to human lives. This again is part of what enables it to form and inform human identity so effectively.

4. Unity and Vignettes

To read the Bible as story is not necessarily to read it as a single story, as a unitary document. To be sure, I believe there *is* a single story of God and his people unfolding through human history, and I understand Christian teaching to endorse this affirmation. But the Bible is

not identical with that story; it is instead a series of vignettes which point to that overarchingly coherent story and embody moments of that larger story. These vignettes are such as to reveal the identity of God and his purposes and such as to reveal the character of human existence. They introduce life-transforming possibilities for those who hear them. The stories of the Patriarchs, the story of the Exodus, the story of David, the stories of the Prophets, the story of Jesus, and the many others of the Bible are such vignettes.

The fact that there are (in a sense) fragmentary vignettes should not be surprising, because identity is always sketched in this way. If you ask me to tell you about my wife, I may try to use adjectives (charming, trustworthy, somewhat compulsive), but after a few adjectives, if you are really interested, I will start telling you stories, and from these stories you will be able to say, “Ah, yes, now I can sense who she is and what she is like.” So long as she is alive and growing and doing significant things, however, a biography will not really be possible; the ending cannot be written and in its absence there is no overall perspective. Almost the same is true of God and humanity. Their identities can be characterized by story, but story which remains in vignette form. The stories of the Bible are complete in the sense of introducing us authoritatively to God; what they provide is sufficient for their purpose. The end is not totally unknown, given the trustworthy promises and the proleptic view provided by Christ, but we may still not write the final chapters of God’s story.

Again, the important fact is that the participation of the listener/reader materially affects the shape of the story as it is now unfolding. The Bible as story leaves room for this participation. While the stories of the Bible are complete in themselves, the overarching unitary story which the church confesses in faith to be there is not yet over and has not yet been written.

During the past century and a half, since the separation of the historical and the literary into separate interpretive categories, the unity of the Bible has been entrusted to the discipline of Biblical theology. Students of the Bible are finding this discipline increasingly problematic as evidence of diversity accumulates. Some now speak convincingly of several theologies in the Bible rather than a single Biblical theology. To the degree that this is true, Biblical theology no longer provides an avenue of access to the meaning and significance of the Bible, because the endeavor to find a set of concepts or a set of teachings to bridge the historical distance between then and now no longer seems viable. The significant advantage of reading the Bible as story is that its significance is accessible without assumptions regarding its internal consistency. In order to describe for you my wife, I am not limited to a single story or even to an entirely consistent and sequential series of stories; I can be sketchy while still affirming that whatever I say about her which is true will reflect and embody the one story of her life and identity.

What is being said here about the lack of uniformity in the Bible shares Luther’s outlook rather than Calvin’s. Luther could revel in the diversity of the Bible, because the diversity itself bore witness to the vitality of God’s encounter with his people; Calvin, though recognizing the same diversity, downplayed its importance. For Calvin all parts of the Bible have the same Spirit as their author and must therefore in principle say the same thing.⁹ Here the unitary character of the Bible is an assumption influencing exegesis. To read the Bible as story is to read the Bible, along with Luther, without this particular assumption.

5. Occasional Literature

To read the Bible as story is to read it as occasional literature. The Bible contains literature written in each case by a particular person for a particular purpose at a particular time. As occasional literature it has a capacity to transcend generations and create its own context. In order to understand and appreciate an ancient philosopher, I need to endorse consciously (even if only hypothetically) certain assumptions he makes. His teachings will not move me unless I do so. But one does not need to endorse assumptions ahead of time, before occasional literature catches a person up in its own world. It creates its own context. The story of Naomi and Ruth, for example, speaks afresh even though we recognize immediately that its setting is not identical with our own; we do not have to grant assumptions first.

The task of exegesis is not to remove the story but to enable it to speak. In Hans Frei's words: "The aim of an exegesis which simply looks for the sense of a story...is in the final analysis that of reading the story itself....And therefore the theoretical devices we use to make our reading more alert, appropriate, and intelligent ought to be designed to leave the story itself as unencumbered as possible."¹⁰

The occasional literature is diverse enough, however, to provide a range of possibilities. And the guiding principle in emphasis and selection should be that of historical analogy. The stories whose context was relatively similar to the context of our hearers/readers will speak most directly. In our day this means far more emphasis on the Old Testament and its narratives than is usually the case.

6. Multiple References

To read the Bible as story is to recognize the multi-layered references involved. A story can be simultaneously historical, symbolic, kerygmatic, and existentially involving. Though simple enough to follow with ease, a story is complex enough to involve manifold references and implications. This is why a good story, a deep and significant story is so discussible. A group of people in a living room have no trouble filling an evening with lively dialogue about a good novel. And each participant will discover in the observations of others facets and implications to the story which are immediately recognizable as true, though not pre-

⁹*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1, ix, 2. To some degree the difference between Luther and Calvin comes because Luther works with the root metaphor of encounter and Calvin with the root metaphor of revealed knowledge.

¹⁰Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) xv.

viously formulated. The appreciation of the story will grow as its "complexity" unfolds. There need be no insistence that a story mean only one thing. As story it can have implications for God, for human beings, for the biography of a particular human being, for then, for now, and for the future. Because every story employs metaphor and images, because every story is a metaphor of reality, it can mean in more than one way on more than one level.

To read the Bible as story is thus to escape the tyranny of an either/or: the either/or of literal or symbolic, the either/or of historical or theological, the either/or of then or now. To read the Bible as story is to read most sections of the Bible both literally and symbolically, both

historically and theologically, with importance for both then and now.

7. *Story and Community*

To read the Bible as story is to read it in community. There is more than one aspect to this.

One aspect is the open-ended character of story. Though holding promise for the future and giving clues to the future, a story invites participation in a non-controlling way and is therefore open-ended. Those moved by the story, those influenced by it form together into a community which is itself part of the larger story.

Another aspect is the complexity of the simple story. The implications are sorted out by people coming together in dialogue and discussion, in counseling and in reflections on their own lived stories.

Yet another aspect is the role of repetition and celebration. Only as stories are tied to a variety of moments in our individual and collective lives do they take on the rich cluster of connections which makes them constitutive of who we are. For this reason, the story of the Last Supper, for example, is appropriately repeated at every Eucharist. The richer the cluster of connections between the Biblical story and the “story” which is our own life, the more significant the connections become, the more able the story is to influence who we are. It makes a difference as to who we are if we sing “I will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously...” from Exodus 15 rather than “I will sing unto myself, for I have triumphed gloriously.”

The gospel is not just words; it is incarnate words. We must therefore attend seriously to symbol, ritual, proper naming, group interaction, ethical guidance, and so on. We don’t “just tell” the story; it grasps us, it begins to live in us. As it lives so, we embody it.

8. *Connections with Life*

To convey the Bible as story is to make contact between the Biblical story and the story of someone else’s life. This is done by comparisons and by contrast, by setting it in contrast to the familiar stories in a person’s life or by allowing it to reinforce some familiar story in a person’s life. In the words of Richard Jensen, whose comments on story preaching as a whole I recommend as appropriate implications of what is being said here about the Bible: “The aim of story preaching is to create a world in story which is safe enough for people to enter (distance) and

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powerful enough to involve the hearer in personal participation in words of judgment and grace. The aim of story preaching is *experiential*.”¹¹ The task of the preacher is to bring together the Biblical story and the hearer’s story so as to break open the hearer’s life story and allow the gospel story to do its work.

Commenting on Jesus, Buechner says, “He evokes rather than explains. He catches by surprise. He doesn’t let the homiletic seams show. He is sometimes cryptic, sometimes obscure, sometimes irreverent, always provocative. He tells stories.”¹²

9. *Attending to the Religious*

To read the Bible as story is to read it in an overtly religious way. To be overtly religious

is to attend explicitly to the character of God; it is to cultivate a religious relationship with God through ritual, prayer and devotion. In our age, it is inappropriate to distill the Christian message into a secular gospel or a demythologized humanism. To be sure, there are times and places where one may appropriately demythologize the Bible (and Bultmann's context was one such time and place: Nazi Germany, 1941), but demythologization is not appropriate for a disoriented generation. In the vacuum created by the dissolution of old myths, stories, or "novels," in the vacuum created by secularization and the tyranny of the empirical, God-talk must be overt and explicit. Orientation comes in part from finding oneself related clearly to God; story introduces him to a generation whose acquaintance with the character of God cannot be assumed.

The mere belief in the existence of God, a belief which continues to be affirmed by well over 90% of Americans, is not enough to provide a "novel" for a person's life, to provide meaning and direction. It is only a full acquaintance with the character of God which can do that. It is because God is the God of the Exodus that sojourners are not to be oppressed. It is because God is the God who covenants with his people that the dignity of others is to be respected, even by kings and governments. It is because God purposes a new heaven and a new earth that his people risk innovation and strain forward with restless anticipation for greater justice and human dignity.

In a secular age, a cautious filter is employed; the principle of selective emphasis is what is credible to that secular culture. In a disoriented age, this cautious filter can be laid aside (temporarily), as the full story is allowed to have its own impact. The task is not to make sense of the story in terms of a secular referent but to enter the world of the Biblical story and look back at society from its perspective.

Even the miracle stories need not be filtered out. Interpreters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tended to do so as they sought historical-causal explanations for Biblical events. A "miracle" cannot serve this kind of historical explanation. But when read as story, the Biblical accounts of miracles convey a sense of the character, identity and purpose of God as much as other segments of the Bible.

¹¹Richard Jensen, *Telling the Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 138-139.

¹²Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 62-63.

10. Story and Response

To read the Bible as story is to sense the kind of response people made to God, the response of Israel at different periods, of the church in different places,¹³ the response of patriarchs, prophets, and apostles. This diverse set of responses becomes the stuff from which clear guidance for life style is fashioned. Yet even before such clarity is achieved there is a sense of orientation, a sense of priorities, a sense of the appropriate and inappropriate which comes along with the stories. This basic "sense" discovers in those stories neither readily transferable universal norms nor the irrelevant attitudes of an archaic document; it discovers there instead the profile of a life style along with the freedom to apply it creatively in the present.

What reading the Bible as story can do, furthermore, is to break open conventional wisdom so as to enable us to read our own social context clearly and correctly. Alongside this such a reading conveys the character of God and the direction of his purposes. And along with this there are examples of both the creative response and the failures of others. The hard work of

ethics is putting these ingredients together.¹⁴

III. DOING THEOLOGY WITH THE BIBLE AS STORY

The proposal here is therefore to read the Bible as story. The argument is that this reading enables it to speak most appropriately and effectively to a disoriented generation like our own.¹⁵ As story the Bible contains elements which depart from conventional wisdom; its content is a departure and its very form departs from the conventional expectation that religion be comprised of “teachings” which one accepts or rejects on the basis of some independent criteria. As story the Bible imparts a sense of coherent meaning and direction, it forms and informs identity. As story it is overtly religious. As story it conveys a sense of what is fitting, a sense which can be developed into clear implications for a viable life style, even though somewhat more indirectly than by those who claim to find in the Bible a detailed absolute moral code.

Our preaching can be story-telling.¹⁶ Our evangelization can be story-telling instead of the usual rehearsal of a watered-down theory of the Atonement. Our celebrations can be story-telling and story-repeating.

This will not take the place of exegesis, but all the exegetical information about who wrote the text, when, to whom, and for what purpose will serve the

¹³Leander Keck, for example, attempts in *The New Testament Experience of Faith* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1976), to understand the New Testament in terms of the problems facing the church and the author of each New Testament writing in each separate locality: Palestine, Antioch, Rome and Ephesus.

¹⁴The following volume, though it does not develop the concept of story, does provide a significant example of the deliberate procedure involved in bringing together the gospel and the contemporary situation: Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

¹⁵I suspect that “conservative” or “evangelical” churches are growing despite their theology. They are growing because immersion in the stories of the Bible provides a religious orientation for disoriented people. Though I cannot accept their theology, I see no theological impediment to affirming the Bible as story in even clearer ways than is found there.

¹⁶See Jensen’s *Telling the Story* for examples.

story-telling. This will likewise not take the place of theological and ethical study and reflection; the full wisdom of both is necessary to sort out the appropriate implications of the story for Christian identity in the present. Exegesis, theology, and ethics do their highest work as servants of Biblical story and its re-telling in our own day.

In 1978 the English actor Alec McCowen, in a surprising and remarkable testimony to the power of story in our own day, recited the King James Version of St. Mark’s Gospel, word for word in its entirety, to sell-out crowds in New York and Boston theaters. There were no costumes and no supporting cast. The only stage props were a table, chairs, a pitcher of water and a glass. This was unencumbered story-telling!

In a review of that event, Nelvin Vos writes:

How do you and I come to believe, to trust, to accept as true? One answer, and an important one, is: we believe in and through stories....The story is the meaning. There is no way around the story, or underneath it, as if we could peel it down to what is ‘really’ meant. The story is what penetrates and moves it [sic]. It is not

simply that we have gotten the point, but that we have been interpreted by the story itself. We have been grasped by the story.¹⁷

“McCowen came on as if the author of Mark’s Gospel were an inspired storyteller which of course he was.”¹⁸ Perhaps this is why the theater recital was so powerful: “very few in the audience would not say that they have heard the Word ever before so powerfully direct. The Word lives. That’s the truth; that’s the Gospel truth.”¹⁹ Amen.

¹⁷Nelvin Vos, “Getting the Word,” *The Cresset* 42 (1979) 23-24.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 22.