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HEARING TO TELL:
LISTENING FOR GOSPEL INROADS IN THE STORIES OF NON-CHRISTIANS

By

JASON MICHAEL ABBOTT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

2014

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Graduation Date January 15, 2014

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how the process of listening to the stories of non-Christians can be used to more strategically narrate gospel stories. The researcher focused on how Christians can better approach evangelism narratively by hearing an unbeliever's story and by compassionately telling their own Christ-centered stories into the specific areas in which that individual's narrative has a legitimate need for God's good news in Jesus Christ. The researcher reviewed a wide variety of literature on narrative evangelism and narrative learning. The study employed a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews with six non-Christian participants.

In the area of feelings and the construction of meaning through narrative, this study found that feelings and emotions often guided the interviewees' perceptions of narrative success or failure. In the area of significant events and the role which those events played in the attribution of meaning through narrative, this study found that significant events were often used to place or position the narrators in their own stories. In the area of imagination and the role which it plays in constructing a meaningful future outcome through narrative, this study found that the participants' past experiences (both positive and negative) and their pursuit of pleasure strongly influenced their imagined happily-ever-afters. Finally, in the area of beliefs and the role which those beliefs played in the attribution and construction of meaning through narrative, this study found that participants' beliefs were shared consistently and inconsistently with their professed worldviews through the telling of their stories.

This study concluded that, by carefully listening to the stories of non-Christians, believers can find many excellent opportunities in which to share their own gospel

stories. As Christians listen to the stories of others—to the feelings, major events, imagined endings, and reflected worldviews of non-believers' narratives—they will be better equipped to speak good news stories into areas in which those narratives will have, God willing, the greatest impact.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents, Michael and Julie Abbott, for graciously supporting me during this process. Indeed, throughout my life, their love and care for me has never waned despite my many shortcomings. They were my first models of Christian devotion and continue to be two of the most profoundly Christ-centered influences upon me. (I truly thank God for you mom and dad!)

I would also like to thank each of the wonderful ladies who donated their time and labor in order to transcribe the six interviews for this study. Without Cheryl Cobb, Rachel Gage, Lisa Piergallini, Ann Demarco, and Ann Snyder, I would have perhaps finished this project but would have been greatly more miserable in doing so.

The two churches I served during the course of this study deserve thanks as well. Grace Evangelical Free Church of Jefferson City, Missouri and Community Evangelical Free Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania were both extremely supportive during the research process. Without their generosity and encouragement, this dissertation could not have been completed.

To my wife, Natalie Joy, I would like to offer a special thank you. She has accompanied and encouraged me through much, much graduate work. During the last few years, she has kindly and gently counseled me through computer glitches, program failures, and deadline panics. Yet, through all *my* drama, she has provided a calm and loving presence. She is my biggest fan and most dedicated supporter. (You, Natalie Joy, are God's very good gift to me.)

Finally, and most importantly, I thank God who is the Good Giver and the Great Storyteller for, without his entrance into the human story in the person of Jesus, there would be no gospel story to hear or tell and no happily-ever-after for which to hope.

Chapter One

Introduction

People love stories. They love to share them, and they love to hear them. In fact, telling stories and listening to the stories of others is a uniquely human endeavor. It is a basic social activity capable of bringing purpose and satisfaction to individual and corporate human experience. As author Daniel Taylor explains, "We cannot live our story alone because we are characters in each other's stories. What you do is part of my story; what I do is part of yours. Such awareness encourages shared understandings and shared commitments that are central to a meaningful and contented life."[1] The centrality of stories to the human experience is the reason there are so many stories being told. In fact, each and every day people are inundated with narratives competing for their attention, narratives competing to explain the meaning of things. Examples are abundant.

American Public Media airs a radio program called *The Story* designed exclusively for the purpose of telling compelling narratives. The mission of the program is to "search [stories] out and bundle them up into a daily show."[2] *The Story* began telling these stories in 2006. Episodes vary greatly in terms of the number of stories shared. "[If] a person has a great story to tell we might give them most of the show, another show might have 5-6 segments."[3]

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[1] Daniel Taylor, *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Stories* (St. Paul: Bog Walk Press, 2001), 3.

[2] American Public Media, "The Story," www.TheStory.org (accessed May 24, 2013).

[3] Ibid.

The non-profit organization *StoryCorps* exists to collect the stories of Americans from "all backgrounds and beliefs." The organization collects such stories

> …[to] remind [us] of our shared humanity, strengthen and build the connections between people, teach the value of listening, and weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters. At the same time, we will create an invaluable archive of American voices and wisdom for future generations.[4]

These oral histories are broadcast weekly on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*. *StoryCorps* began collecting and recording these stories in 2003; they have since archived "more than 45,000 interviews with nearly 90,000 participants."[5]

In New York City (and around the world), another storytelling phenomenon is gaining popularity. Young adults stand in line and pay money in order to spend their evening listening to amateur storytellers share their real life experiences. Consequently, clubs are opening to host these shows and to make money in the process. But why? Why are these clubs able to charge for something so basic? Why are people willing to pay for something easily reproduced in the comfort of their living rooms for free? Kristen Scharold suggests that it is because humans are "storytelling animals" who long for "an accumulated narrative with people around them…places where they can know and be known by a larger group, even if only for a night."[6]

However, one does not need to enter a club in New York City, or any other major city, in order to be exposed to the myriad of amateur or professional stories being told. Shane Stacey notes that such storytelling invades most people's homes daily. He writes,

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[4] Storycorps, www.Storycorps.org (accessed May 24, 2013).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Kristen Scharold, "Testify!," *Christianity Today Magazine Online* 55 (January 2011): 2, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/januaryweb-only/testify.html?start=2 (accessed May 25, 2013).

> Today's social media world has turned everyone into a storyteller. Each post points to a different main character. Each new entry clamors for attention and recognition. Every photo depicts another snapshot from a different competing storyline. Immersed in this social media, usually devoid of a biblical framework, young people are left to find their identity in what are, too often, endless, echoing stories of brokenness, selfishness and idolatry.[7]

Yet if the internet is a relatively new way in which the outside world has invaded people's daily lives with competing narratives, then television and radio broadcasts are the internet's parents, and newspapers, magazines, and books are its grandparents.

These examples, however, are merely a few of the numerous storytelling outlets available today. The list of ways, in which people are daily telling and being told stories, is nearly endless. Stories are being told in coffee shops and religious institutions, by political parties and corporations, through the clothing people wear (and don't wear) and the neighborhoods in which they live. There are countless ways to tell stories and innumerable stories being told.

Because of narrative's potential to construct meaning and transform people's lives, educators have long been interested in exploring and using stories to teach. Consequently, much research has been done to discern the potential benefits of narrative learning. The thrust of this research suggests that humans are uniquely and instinctively narrative learners. M. Carolyn Clark theorizes that personal stories help people construct meaning and purpose through the events of their lives. She argues that "It is probably through the examination of our own stories that we can begin to understand the underlying purpose of narrative, which is to enable us to make sense of our experience.

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[7] Shane Stacey, "Shaped by the Story: Refusing the Allure of Lesser Stories," *EFCA Today* 88, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 3.

Because we are instinctive storytellers, this is a fundamental mode of meaning making."[8] Judith Beth Cohen and Deborah Piper agree with Clark's premise. They explain that "we create meaning through recounting our life events in a narrative form."[9]

In short, people use stories to connect the events of their lives in significant ways. They learn through stories. Stories offer meaning about life's purpose or lack thereof. Each person narrates the events of the past, present, and future into an overarching tale of who he or she is and where he or she has been, is now, and hopes to be in the future. Again, storytelling is a uniquely human characteristic, and it is central to the way people make meaning of their lives. Taylor writes that "We tell stories because we hope to find or create significant connections between things. Stories link past, present, and future in a way that tells us where we have been (even before we were born), where we are, and where we could be going."[10]

The stories people adopt determine a great deal about them and what they believe about the world. Furthermore, the stories people hear will shape them, and the stories they tell will shape them and others. As Taylor explains, "You are your stories. You are the product of all the stories you have heard and lived…They have shaped how you see yourself, the world, and your place in it."[11]

The important role stories play in the formation of people's understandings of themselves and of the world around them should not surprise the Christian. For Christians

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[8] M. Carolyn Clark, "Off The Beaten Path: Some Creative Approaches to Adult Learning," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 89 (Spring 2001): 87.

[9] Judith Beth Cohen and Deborah Piper, "Transformation in a Residential Adult Learning Community," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, eds. Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 205.

[10] Taylor, 1.

[11] Ibid.

believe that "this world is the story that God is telling: it is the revelation of his very being. Our world pulses with his life."[12] Taylor explains this perspective in historical terms: "God is telling the world a story. It begins in eternity past and stretches into eternity future. It climaxed two thousand years ago when God entered into his creation in a new way. It could reach its temporal conclusion today—or in five thousand years."[13]

In short, if people are storytelling creatures it is because God is the storytelling creator. It should consequently make sense to Christians that humanity would reflect the storytelling character of God since the Bible teaches that men and women were created as divine image bearers. In the Bible's first chapter the narrator tells us, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."[14]

The constant human propensity to tell stories is thus a lingering imprint of God's image. Men and women were created to tell stories in order to worshipfully reflect the divine storyteller. Moreover, they have been created to find purpose and meaning through their personal story's connection to the divine story. Without such a connection to God's grand redemptive narrative, all storytelling will ultimately end in purposelessness, meaninglessness, and despair. As Taylor explains,

> The gospel story judges our story and finds it wanting. It is a judgment we are invited to accept or reject. If we accept it, then we choose, like characters in a story, to change the plot of our lives. In so doing we do not give up who we are;

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[12] Andrew Shanks, "God Is the Author Who Enters His Story," The Gospel Coalition Blog, entry posted June 10, 2013, www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2013/06/10/god-is-the-author-who-enters-his-story/ (accessed June 29, 2013).

[13] John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds. *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 105.

[14] Genesis 1:27.

> we become more of who we are, that is, more of who we were always meant to be.[15]

Timothy Keller echoes this assessment, when he writes, "[The] gospel story of Jesus is the underlying Reality to which all the stories point. It gives us more than a passing inspiration because it is the true story; it happened."[16]

In the midst of the clamor of so many different stories, Christians are thus able—through their personal narrative's connection to God's grand, redemptive plotline—to tell an ultimately meaningful story. Christian testimonies are a personal reflection, or piece, of God's universal storyline revealed in the Bible. Taylor explains the connection between each believer's story and the biblical story:

> The Bible is many things, but among the most important it is a big storybook devoted to memory. Not memories in the sentimental sense, but memory in the crucial sense of understanding where you come from and what you are to do. And the key to memory is story. The Bible is a book of stories in many different forms—poetry, biography, song, history, letters, and more. It is a collection of stories that are chapters of the one great story: the story of God and his love for his creation. This is the meaning, says the Bible, of the story we call human history: God made us, God loves us, God calls us. That is the master plot of the greatest story ever told . . . It is the story by which all other stories, including our individual stories, are to be understood.[17]

If Taylor is correct, if God's great redemptive narrative is the way in which all human stories find their meaning and purpose; if narrative is a foundational way in which people understand and learn, then Christians are obligated to engage the stories of non-Christians in order to help them connect their personal stories to God's universal story. The believer is called to enter into the stories of non-believers even as the storytelling

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[15] Piper and Taylor, eds., 116.

[16] Timothy Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 228.

[17] Piper and Taylor, eds., 113.

God entered into each Christian's story in the person of Jesus Christ. For, "[In] the appearance of this author within his story, all of the other minor roles foreshadow and echo his . . . [All] other lives suddenly take on a whole new meaning and importance."[18]

Problem Statement

Despite the growing recognition of the prominence of story in daily life and its centrality to human learning, the most popular and widely used methods of evangelism (i.e. teaching people about God's saving work accomplished in Christ Jesus) remain largely propositional in form.[19] Evangelism training in the Western world has focused on teaching facts about God and humanity, about holiness and sinfulness, and about life's essential problem and solution in order to construct a logical and compelling case for placing one's faith in Jesus.

The thinking behind such models is thoroughly western and is entrenched in the curriculum of much Christian education. Tom Steffen explains how this type of thinking was rewarded during his time as a divinity student:

> My formal educators rewarded abstract, linear thinking, not stories that integrated the imagination, emotions and facts. Stories were viewed as subjective, messy, open to multiple interpretations. From these mentors I learned to read the Bible as a textbook, to value word studies and to marshal proof-texts to construct "objective" truth. Their bias soon became my bias, as evidenced in the volumes that comprised my library.[20]

It wasn't until Steffen began doing missions work with the Ifugao of the Philippines that his western outreach presuppositions were challenged and shaken.

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[18] Shanks, 2.

[19] Campus Crusade has constructed many useful propositional models for gospel outreach (e.g. *Have You Heard About The Four Spiritual Laws?*, *Would You Like To Know God Personally?*, and *The Wonderful Discovery Of The Spirit Filled Life?*).

[20] Tom Steffen, "My Journey From Propositional To Narrative Evangelism," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 41, no.2 (April 2005): 201.

He met a people who did not care for or want systematic theology or linear argumentation. Instead, the Ifugao prized characters; they valued relationships; they wanted events and stories. Steffen describes how he struggled with the Ifugao's preference for narratives rather than propositions. He writes, "Two seemingly contradictory theories…fought for supremacy in my mind: definitions or descriptions, categories or characters, left brain or right brain thinking, rationality or relationships, explanations or events, propositional statements or…stories about people"[21]

The Ifugao's distaste for propositions makes sense in the absence of the overarching gospel narrative from which those propositions should emerge. Taylor highlights the problem with a propositional approach to gospel communication that is divorced from the grand redemptive story:

> Propositions are important. The Lord is powerful. The Lord is good. Jesus is the Son of God. Christ did rise from the dead. But propositions depend on the stories out of which they arise for their power and meaning and practical application. The story provides the existential foundation on which the proposition rests. If no story, then no significance for the proposition.[22]

Taylor's statement is not intended to undermine the importance of propositions. Rather their significance should be highlighted as they are rightly situated in relationship to the stories out of which they gain their meaning and power. Again Taylor explains the relationship between propositions and stories:

> Separate stories from historicity and a high standard of truth and you turn the most important stories into mere illustrations. On the other hand, separate propositions from stories and you turn them into abstract ideas, uprooting them from the soil that gives them life. Instead, we should affirm the core propositions but never let them get far from the stories and from our own participation as characters in that story.[23]

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Piper and Taylor, eds., 108-109.

In other words, true stories—those that represent real reality whether fiction or non-fiction—should be (at least partially) identifiable through propositions that succinctly represent the truths contained in the stories. Believers should not expect people to understand the stories from the propositions but, rather, the propositions from the stories. If Christians represent narrative truths with propositions alone, they do not simply put the proverbial cart before the horse, but instead put the cart out without a horse to pull it.

Furthermore, using story to instruct is exemplified over and over again in the Bible. Consider Nathan's rebuke of King David following his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah.[24] Ponder God's use of story to instruct using the interpretation of dreams through Joseph[25] and Daniel.[26] Think for a moment about how Jesus, incarnate God, used stories to instruct people; all the examples of his parabolic teaching are too numerous to list exhaustively here, but Jesus consistently told stories in order to teach (e.g. the story of the Sower,[27] the story of the Good Samaritan,[28] the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus,[29] the story of the Tenants,[30] etc.).

A final reason to seriously consider a narrative approach to evangelism, and another reason to avoid reliance on propositions alone, emerges from a close examination

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[23] Ibid., 112.

[24] 2 Samuel 12:1-13.

[25] Genesis 40:1-41:36.

[26] Daniel 2:31-45.

[27] Matthew 13:1-9.

[28] Luke 10:25-37.

[29] Luke 16:19-31.

[30] Mark 12:1-12.

of the nature of the Bible itself. The Bible is not a book predominantly composed of propositions. It is rather God's narrative—his redemptive story. Thus, Steffen argues that the biblical text is essentially, from Genesis to Revelation, God's tale:

> 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 a 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 predominant genre of Scripture (65-75%).[31]

If God decided to reveal his redemptive lessons primarily through a narrative plotline (i.e. his good creation, our rebellious fall, his gracious and merciful redemption through Jesus, and his restoration of creation in Jesus), then why do Christian outreach efforts so often rely upon propositions about God divorced from stories about God?[32] Why is a narrative approach to outreach so rare? In short, if God has chosen to communicate so often through story then why are Christians not choosing to do so? Clearly, a more thorough understanding and use of narrative in outreach is needed.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how the telling and hearing of stories—both personal and corporate—can be used to pursue evangelism. In order to better grasp how narratives can be used evangelistically, three areas of literature were reviewed. First, literature on Jesus' narrative teaching methods and the Bible's use of

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[31] Tom Steffen, "The Sacred Storybook: Fighting A Fragmented Understanding Of Scripture," *Strategies For Today's Leader* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 9.

[32] Discussing the power of the questions and stories Jesus employed in his evangelism, Jerram Barrs contends, "A straight proclamation and a challenge to faith and repentance can have the effect of raising barriers against the gospel by giving people answers to questions they are not yet ready to ask. Such directness can burn the ground, rather than helping prepare it to become ready soil for the seed of the Word. Instead, Jesus asks questions and tells stories so that he may say things that are difficult for people to hear as direct statements, and so that he may begin to move their heart toward the truth." Jerram Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 64.

story as a genre were examined in order to learn whether or not story is an appropriate evangelistic tool for Christians to use. Second, the secular educational literature on narrative learning was reviewed with a special focus on how human beings learn through the hearing and telling of stories. Third, the narrative evangelism literature was examined in order to understand how narrative has been and can be used evangelistically to form and transform the worldviews of non-Christians. With this literature in mind, four research questions guided this study:

1. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to their feelings through narrative?
2. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to significant events in their lives through narrative?
3. How do non-Christians imagine and construct an ideal future through narrative?
4. How do non-Christians reflect beliefs through narrative?

Significance of the Study

Studying how non-Christians make meaning through the telling of their personal narratives has profound significance for the Church. The Church is called to spread the gospel.[33] Consequently, finding and implementing effective methods of fulfilling this commission are of supreme importance. Since little work has been done in the area of narrative evangelism and since it seemingly presents many natural advantages, this study offers Christian evangelists an opportunity to learn more about how story can be used to encompass and convey biblical truth.

First, this study is valuable because it investigates how non-Christians attach meaning to the events of their lives. What kind of things do they find important and why? What do they long for in the future? Where have they experienced pain and loss and

[33] Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8.

brokenness? Where have they experienced joy and love? Learning how non-believers attach meaning to the events of their lives is the first step in understanding where God is already at work. If Christian evangelists are to be successful in sharing God's story with others then they must first learn to empathize with those to whom they minister. This is truly important.

Second, this study is significant because it affords an opportunity to discern how "echoes of Eden" are present in the life stories of non-Christians and how those echoes provide points of contact for gospel storytelling. Barrs defines echoes of Eden as "the pool of memories within the human race of the truth about our condition."[34] He goes on to explain:

> It seems that among every people on the face of this earth there is recollection of the original good creation; there is awareness that the world we now live in is broken and fallen, and there is recall of the promise and hope of the restoration of what is good. This true knowledge exists sometimes in stronger form, sometimes in weaker, but always is present.[35]

Thus, engaging the stories of non-believers allows these echoes to surface and allows the believer to use them as did the biblical authors who made use of these echoes in communicating the gospel "because pagan religions did indeed contain memories of the true story of our fall into sin and sorrow, our present plight under the powers of darkness, and the hope for a redeemer."[36]

Finally, this study is significant because it explores the primary importance of listening to the stories of unbelievers. Such story-listening is essential for "if we are…to

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[34] Jerram Barrs, *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 74.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 84.

build bridges for the Gospel, it will be necessary to seek to understand the way non-Christians are thinking…what they believe and why they believe it."[37] Too often believers do not take the time to hear and understand the stories of the unbelievers with whom they come into contact. Such an approach is harmful according to Barrs, because "It is not honoring to God, nor is it obedient to His Word, nor does it show any respect for unbelievers if we refuse to make the effort to understand them."[38] Listening to their stories is consequently the beginning step in arriving at such a God-honoring understanding. Only after listening to the stories of non-Christians can Christians begin to tell their own good news stories.

[37] Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 211.

[38] Ibid., 220.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to understand how telling stories can be used to pursue evangelism. In order to better grasp how narratives can be used evangelistically, three areas of literature were reviewed. First, literature on Jesus' narrative teaching methods and the Bible's use of story as a genre was examined in order to determine whether story is an appropriate evangelistic tool. Second, the secular educational literature on narrative learning was reviewed with a special focus on how people learn through stories. Third, the narrative evangelism literature was examined in order to understand how narrative has been and can be used evangelistically to form and transform the worldviews of non-Christians.

> *Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables…*[39]

Why Teach the Sacred Through Story?

Jesus—the Ultimate Teacher

When one reads through the gospels and look at what is recorded about Jesus in them, one cannot escape the image of him as a charismatic and engaging teacher.[40] He arrested the attention of his audiences as only an expert communicator could. James

[39] Mark 4:1-2a.

[40] Marie Noel Keller, "Jesus the Teacher," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25, no. 6 (December 1998): 450.

Dunn expresses well Jesus' ability to draw people into the deepest of discourses by simply using the things they understood best:

> He [Jesus] was a communicator par excellence. Here are no complex philosophical treatises or theological discourses, using obscure technical terms and purporting to explain the mysteries of the cosmos. Rather, we find a whole series of powerful metaphors and memorable parables that catch attention and are readily retained in the memory. And all are drawn from everyday experience—salt and light, birds and flowers, house building, market places, a woman losing a coin, special celebratory meals, greed and debt, and many others.[41]

Chief among Jesus' communication tools was the parable; nearly one-third of the gospel accounts are parables.[42] Yet what is a parable? C. H. Dodd defines parable as a "metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."[43] More succinctly, the *New Bible Dictionary* defines parable as a "somewhat protracted simile or short descriptive story."[44] When these two definitions are brought together, parables can be simply defined as a short story or narrative derived "from everyday life" and used to teach "a moral or religious truth" through comparison.[45] However, the question remains: Why did Jesus so often teach using parables or short stories?

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[41] James D. G. Dunn, "Jesus for Today," *Theology Today* 52, no. 1 (April 1995): 67.

[42] Erich H. Kiehl, "Why Jesus Spoke in Parables," *Concordia Journal* 16, no. 3 (July 1990): 249.

[43] C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Schribner's, 1961), 5.

[44] A. R. Millard, I. Howard Marshall, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, eds. *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 867.

[45] George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 90.

Story—Jesus' Potent Teaching Tool

Much has been written about Jesus' use of stories in his teaching ministry, and the listed benefits of his use of story instruction are many. To begin, Marvin R. Vincent highlights the believability of the parables Jesus told. He explains, "Many of [the parables], most indeed, have a local coloring which always arrests attention…Christ never employed an impossible or improbable incident, and never took it out of its appropriate setting."[46] Agreeing with Vincent, Roy B. Zuck concludes that such realism made Jesus' point in telling the story more accessible to his audience:

> People loved—and remembered—Jesus' stories because they were realistic and because they each made a point, a strong, easy-to-grasp principle understandably relevant to them. Jesus' ability to tell the right story, some long and some short, at the appropriate moment demonstrates his remarkable teaching skill, his unusual ability as a master Storyteller.[47]

Thus, Jesus plumbed familiar subjects with which his hearers could easily identify and relate. The audience knew people like the characters in Jesus' stories; the audience did work like the work in Jesus' stories; the audience experienced broken relationships like the broken relationships in Jesus' stories.[48] Such subjects were familiar territory for those listening to Jesus.

Yet, even though Jesus' subject matter was familiar to his audience, the truths expressed were often alien and otherworldly. This is a second reason Jesus used stories—in order to help his listeners begin to contemplate and grasp the mysteries of the heavenly realm. Norman A. Huffman explains that, by adding atypical narrative elements into the

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[46] Marvin R. Vincent, *Christ as a Teacher* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Company, 1886), 57.

[47] Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995), 307.

[48] Simon J. Kistemaker, "Jesus as Story Teller: Literary Perspectives on the Parables," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 52.

midst of familiar narrative structures, Jesus challenged his listeners to consider mysterious, heavenly realities. He writes, "[Atypical] features [in the parables are] Jesus' usual way of revealing the unworldly character of the coming kingdom of God."[49]

In this way, Jesus' parables were both simple and profound, both normal and enigmatic. His storytelling simultaneously accommodated itself to his audience's way of thinking and challenged it. Colman Barry explains more fully:

> In using this literary form, Jesus was but accommodating himself to his listeners with vivid and intense spontaneity…The daily talk of the Hebrew farmers was of their seeds and their fields; the fishermen talked of their nets and fishing successes. Our Lord used these daily activities of their lives as types for the message of His heavenly kingdom.[50]

By using parables in this fashion, Jesus could challenge his audiences with "the demands of the kingdom of God…There is, consequently, an enigmatic element in the parables—not a hiddenness…but a mysteriousness which belongs to the very subject with which the parables deal."[51]

A third strength of Jesus' use of story was his ability to narrate in response to his audience's questions and concerns. Though his stories were expertly crafted, as noted above, they were never divorced from the situation at hand; they were never stale but always fresh and relevant. Charles W. F. Smith explains this aspect of Jesus' storytelling, saying, "[Jesus'] parables were designed for the times and places and the audiences with which [he] was presented…The parables were struck off in the course of action, in the presence of critics and foes, under the pressure of making a point clear as Jesus

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[49] Norman A. Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus," *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 97, no. 2 (June 1978): 219.

[50] Colman Barry, "The Literary and Artistic Beauty of Christ's Parables," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (October 1948): 376.

[51] Harold Songer, "Jesus' Use of Parables: Matthew 13," *Review And Expositor* 59, no. 4 (October 1962): 494.

responded to his audience, not in seclusion."[52] Zuck agrees with Smith and further argues that Jesus was deeply aware of the situation before him, and that he was always ready and willing to adapt his stories to the current needs of his listeners. He writes, "Jesus did not tell stories to awaken a drowsy audience or to amuse himself. He fitted them to various situations as they arose."[53] Thus, some stories Jesus told answered questions; some stories answered requests; some stories responded to complaints; and, some stories more fully illustrated Jesus' own stated purpose.[54]

A fourth strength of Jesus' narrative teaching technique was its ability to challenge his audience without personally confronting them—without personally setting himself up in opposition to his audience. Stories naturally invite the audience to identify with the narrative's characters and their actions and motivations. Because of this, when Jesus told stories, his audiences were involved. Kistemaker more fully develops this advantage of Jesus' instructive storytelling. He writes, "Jesus' teaching method involves the hearers or readers in the context of the parables. It removes them from their comfort zones and places them in the story to become active participants."[55] Thus, by using narrative instruction, Jesus was able to confront his audience without directly setting himself up as their opponent. His stories become very personal, yet indirect rebukes for those in opposition to God's kingdom, even as it was represented by Jesus' very person. Robert W. Funk explains how Jesus' stories work to do this:

> Those who hear the parables are at liberty to take up positions vis-à-vis the parable as they will. They may elect to insist on justice or they may settle for

[52] Charles W. F. Smith, *The Jesus of the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), 23.

[53] Zuck, 324.

[54] Ibid., 324-326.

[55] Kistemaker, 52.

> grace…[Jesus] offers the new reality on the authority of the parable, as…inversion of received certainties, so that the hearer is free to cross over or not, as he chooses. There is no coercion; God does not "appear" to force the issue. The issue is joined only by the metaphor.[56]

In this way, "Jesus' purpose was to confront His hearers with the need for decision through the Spirit's work, either for or against Him."[57] By telling stories, Jesus brought his listeners to a point of challenging introspection—Which son am I? Who is my brother? Have I really kept the law?—without personally and directly thrusting the confrontational question upon them. Instead, he allowed listeners to find and ask the questions for and of themselves.

Without a doubt, story was a powerful and beneficial tool in Jesus' teaching ministry. He used narratives to engage and challenge people in ways they could understand. He used realistic storylines and familiar settings to teach his listeners; he employed the atypical in the midst of the familiar to challenge his audience's assumptions about God's kingdom; he allowed his interactions with his hearers to drive his narrative instruction; and, he confronted and challenged his listeners through their identification with the characters and situations in the stories. Jesus was truly a master at using narratives in his teaching ministry. However, was story instruction merely something that he could do and do well? Or, does Jesus' methodology challenge his church to rethink its instructional methods for reaching those outside the kingdom of God?

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[56] Robert W. Funk, "Structure in the Narrative Parables of Jesus," *Semeia* 2 (1974): 69-70.

[57] Erich H. Kiehl, "Jesus Taught in Parables," *Concordia Journal* 7, no. 6 (November 1981): 222.

Story Instruction—Not Just For Jesus

Much of the literature examining Jesus' narrative teaching technique also recommends the use of story instruction for the contemporary church. As Zuck notes, story is generally a valuable teaching tool for numerous reasons: people enjoy hearing them; stories challenge people to decipher the point or moral of the narrative; stories help make abstract truths concrete; and, stories encourage people to identify with others.[58] He goes on to argue that instructors "today should follow his [Jesus'] example, for both children and adults enjoy stories and can learn from them."[59]

Others also argue passionately for the use of narrative in order to teach and reach those outside the church. Jeanie Watson eloquently expresses the importance of using stories, both sacred and secular, in Christian outreach:

> Parables—secular stories—teach the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" to those who cannot yet see or hear, to those who are still children in their understanding. Secular stories of the imagination teach the truth of sacred story; they free the entranced and drowsy soul to know that God is Love and that we are one with God in Christ. There is no separation; there is no partiality. "When that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."[60]

Barry agrees with Watson's view and further argues that Jesus' use of the natural world, specifically, and the parable, generally, should guide the church's instruction today. He explains that Christ "in His parables set this standard for us in all Christian ages. Nature is not to be our mistress…[Rather, the Christian] asks her aid to offer God some praiseworthy image, as Christ did."[61]

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[58] Zuck, 310-311.

[59] Ibid., 236.

[60] Jeanie Watson, "Seeing through the Glass: From Secular to Sacred Story," *Christianity and Literature* 37, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 53.

[61] Barry, 383.

Clearly those who have examined Jesus' use of story in his earthly teaching ministry see it as a model for the use of story in the church's instructional methods today. Yet, what if narrative instruction and learning is not merely a good teaching technique or tool but a central part of our human wiring? What if it is a foundational part of being human? What if telling stories and hearing others tell stories is an inextricable part of how people image God? Could this be why Jesus told so many stories during the course of his earthly ministry?[62]

Storytelling and Story-Hearing—a Reflection of God in Humanity

There is something uniquely human about listening to stories and telling stories. Human history seems to expose this truth. Os Guinness explains that sharing stories has always been an important social experience in human history:

> As far back as there have been human beings, there have been stories. From the bard weaving word magic around the fire, to the troubadour singing in the great hall, to the celluloid myths of the grand Hollywood mythmakers, nothing is more human than stories and storytelling. And no stories are more resonant than those that tap the deepest reservoirs of what it is to be human.[63]

James O. Stallings agrees with Guinness and suggests that it is nearly impossible to explain ourselves as human beings without sharing our stories. He explains that it is only when people narrate their experiences that they begin to come near to the heart of their identity. Without telling your story, he writes, "There is something about your particular uniqueness that defies explanation."[64]

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[62] "[The] Gospel writers recorded thirty-nine stories Jesus told." Zuck, 306.

[63] Os Guinness, *Long Journey Home: A Guide to Your Search for the Meaning of Life* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 5.

[64] James O. Stallings, *Telling the Story: Evangelism in the Black Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1988), 100.

For Ranald Macaulay and Jerram Barrs, imagining and creating are unique ways people image their Creator. They describe life as an artistic journey, "Every person is an artist. The whole of life is a creative act. The warp and woof of each life is equivalent to the artist's paints or the musician's sounds. We are all weaving—'creating'—life. Because we are made like God, we are real, though limited, 'creators.'"[65] Furthermore, Macaulay and Barrs assert that Christians are called to mold their living narratives into something lovely and something holy. They conclude, "Christians are to take their lives, all their diverse experiences, and mold them into something beautiful, into what the Bible calls 'the beauty of holiness' (Ps. 29:2 KJV)."[66]

In a similar way, David L. Larsen highlights the need for creativity and imagination in the church's gospel proclamation. He asks, "How can we improve and develop those intensely creative instincts which will enable us to communicate the gospel in appropriate splendor?...How can we obtain and weave the stories, analogies, and images" in a clear and powerful manner?[67] Thus, for Larsen, Macaulay, and Barrs, human imagination and creativity is inextricably connected to people's role as the image and message bearers of God.

In terms of creatively constructing narratives, Stallings goes even further. He connects storytelling and story-hearing to any meaningful communication about God. In other words, he argues that people don't merely image God through the imaginative

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[65] Ranald Macaulay and Jerram Barrs, *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 21.

[66] Ibid., 22.

[67] David L. Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1992), 86-87.

process of storytelling, but there is something about the divine that is only communicable through storytelling.

> What is true of the human self is also true, I believe, when we attempt to speak of God. When we speak of God we speak usually of concepts and universals, as though God were somehow an indefinite noun. God, however, is a proper name, a name not held by anyone else or anything else. A proper name is unique and that uniqueness cannot be universalized. My contention is that as with the human self, so also with God. To speak of God is to speak of stories.[68]

Tom Steffen concurs and argues that the narrative nature of God should challenge the way theology is approached and communicated:

> Stories do not just illustrate theology, like the Pentateuch, they *are* theology . . . Madeleine L'Engle argues, "Jesus was not a theologian. He was God who told stories." If Jesus relied on parabolic stories to communicate his message, does this not imply theology lies resident in the stories? Holistic thinkers would argue it does. The myth that claims theology must be extracted from stories and systematized to be valid theology must be challenged.[69]

Thus, Brad J. Kallenberg explains that the divine revelation "comes to us in the form of a story because God's dealings with us are narratively shaped rather than theoretically driven. In other words, God sent us a gospel rather than a philosophical treatise!"[70]

Story has not been, however, the typical way of understanding God and his creation in the West. Instead, Christian educators have tended to approach the teaching of theology and reaching of non-Christians through propositional reasoning and logical argumentation. Steffen remembers this tendency in his own theological education:

> My formal educators rewarded abstract, linear thinking, not stories that integrated the imagination, emotions and facts. Stories were viewed as subjective, messy, open to multiple interpretations. From these mentors I learned to read the Bible as a textbook, to value word studies and to marshal proof-texts to construct

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[68] Stallings, 100.

[69] Tom A. Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad* (La Habra, CA: Center For Organizational And Ministry Development, 1996), 116.

[70] Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 37.

> "objective" truth. Their bias soon became my bias, as evidenced in the volumes that comprised my library.[71]

This "textbook" view of the Bible and of theological learning causes many, Steffen argues, to "consider stories as entertainment, designed for children, and frowned on by adults . . . Certainly they could not be used to teach theology."[72]

After seminary, Steffen took his "bias" to the mission field, but there he found that his biblical "textbook" approach and logical reasoning skills rang hollow for his audience. He began to consider many questions about the very character of God and the Bible. He asked himself, "Why did God choose to deliver his word predominantly through narrative? What does this teach about God's character? What does this teach us about teaching his Word? Why do we tend to teach doctrines as abstract ideas rather than through the lives of concrete characters?"[73] Eventually, after wrestling with questions such as these, Steffen concluded that story provides much more than a "messy" and "subjective" tool for teaching about God. Instead, story is a key way in which human beings image their creator and, thus, learn things about reality generally and learn things about God specifically. Steffen argues, "We are storytelling animals because the greatest Storyteller of all created us. The human race, made in God's image, is *homo narran* because the Creator is *Deus narran*. God and narrative are inseparable."[74]

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[71] Tom Steffen, "My Journey from Propositional to Narrative Evangelism," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 2005): 201.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid., 203.

[74] Ibid., 204.

If God is "Deus narran" and humanity is "homo narran," then one would expect the primary communication between this narrative God and his narrative creatures to be largely in story form. In fact, it is. Thus, Kallenberg writes:

> Christians are people of the Book, but the Book God delights for us to open for others is neither a philosophical treatise nor a formal logical argument; it is a collection of stories. The evangelist who would assist the lost in timeful conversions that are marked by participation and fluency in the historical life, thought, and speech of the church would do well to remember that the Good News is, above all, the greatest *story* ever told.[75]

Thus, the Bible is the great narrative. It is the moving account of the triune God's loving and "redeeming activity down through history for humankind. In the Bible the early Christian story is found in the Old and New Testaments, with the emphasis on the latter as the fulfillment of the former."[76] Similarly, Robert Webber explains, "God's story is about the *whole* world from its very beginning to the very end. It includes all the nations and governments of the world; it includes the earth, sun and sky; it includes the entire universe. This story even includes you."[77]

The assertion that God is the great narrator and that human beings are created to tell, hear, and understand through story is a bold claim. If it is true, one would expect to see it represented in the nature of human beings generally. In other words, if God is "Deus narran" and human beings are "homo narran," then whether people are Christian or non-Christian, whether they believe they were created in the image of God or do not even believe in a god, narrative should, nonetheless, be a common and even fundamental part of the way they make and communicate meaning.

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[75] Kallenberg, 119.

[76] Stallings, 15.

[77] Robert E. Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 25.

Therefore, the researcher will now turn to the secular educational literature and ask: Does the research in pedagogical learning theory support the idea that storytelling is a fundamental part of human learning? In short, does the educational literature authenticate the claim that human beings are narrative learners?

> *Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To the unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*[78]

What Does the Secular Educational Research Say About Narrative?

Narrative—a Foundational Tool in Human Understanding

In much of the more recent educational research and theory, there has been an awakening to the natural place and potential power of narrative teaching and learning.[79] Many scholars are now "curious about how the narrative process itself—the storying of experience—teaches us something."[80] M. Carolyn Clark argues that story undergirds the human meaning making process and recognizes that it is an "instinctive" part of how people learn:

> It is probably through the examination of our own stories that we can begin to understand the underlying purpose of narrative, which is to enable us to make sense of our experience. Because we are instinctive storytellers, this is a fundamental mode of meaning making.[81]

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[78] Acts 17:22-23.

[79] "The story is a basic communicative and meaning-making device pervasive in human experience; it is no wonder that stories have moved center stage as a source of understanding of the human condition." Sharan B. Merriam and Associates, eds., *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 286.

[80] M. Carolyn Clark, "Off the Beaten Path: Some Creative Approaches to Adult Learning," in *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, vol. 89 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 83.

[81] Ibid., 87.

Thus, story is not a fabricated or unnatural tool imposed upon the teacher or the learner, but "provides a very natural mode of learning, linked as it is to the meaning making process."[82]

Ivor F. Goodson, Gert J.J. Biesta, Michael Tedder, and Norma Adair also recognize the natural potential of narrative for human education. They explain that story is "fundamental" to learning and sustaining a healthy lifestyle. They go much further, however, and argue that an individual's story creates and becomes, to a large extent, that person's identity:

> In a very fundamental sense we exist and live our lives "in" and "through" stories . . . Stories have the potential to provide our lives with continuity, vivacity and endurance. They can create a past of which we have memories and a future about which we have hopes and fears and can thus bring about a sense of the present in which our lives are lived. Stories can give our lives structure, coherence and meaning, or they can provide the backdrop against which we experience our lives as complex, fragmented or without meaning. Stories do not just provide us with a *sense* of who we are. To a large extent the stories about our lives and ourselves *are* who we are.[83]

Stories thus provide not only a tool for making sense of the events of life, but also help people understand and even craft who they are. As Clark points out, humans "make sense of all experience by narrating it (constructing it as a kind of story)," even the story of our own identity.[84]

The educational literature on narrative teaching and learning identifies and depicts storytelling as inextricably bound up with daily human social activity. It is a natural part of how people interact with one another each day, as Marsha Rossiter explains:

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[82] Ibid., 89.

[83] Gert J. J. Biesta, Ivor F. Goodson, Michael Tedder and Norma Adair, *Narrative Learning* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

[84] M. Carolyn Clark, "Narrative Learning: Its Contours and Its Possibilities, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 126 (Summer 2010): 3.

> Meaning is constructed, understood, and expressed in story form. Thus, stories and storytelling are pervasive in human experience, communication, and symbolic activity. If we listen to ourselves in everyday communication—around the dinner table, from the pulpit, in the therapist's office, in the classroom—we can hear ourselves in the act of storytelling. Although our everyday stories may be partial or fragmentary, the narrative structure of our meaning making is apparent.[85]

Rossiter insists that there is a natural "narrative structure [in the constructing of] human meaning" revealed during the course of one's daily social interactions. In short, making meaning by telling stories is naturally and inextricably tied to daily social exchanges. Thus, "if we reflect for a moment about how we communicate with students, colleagues, friends, and family every day, we recognize the centrality of storytelling in our lives."[86]

Narrative development is also essential in the earliest stages of human development. Marie A. Stadler and Gay Cuming Ward argue that storytelling is valuable in at least three aspects of a child's development. They explain that storytelling is useful "for the development of oral language" skills, for forming a "bridge to literacy" acquisition, and for growth in a child's "conceptual development."[87] They contend that "narrative development is important for all children" and should be utilized by early childhood educators to foster healthy development in their students.[88] They are not alone in this assertion.[89]

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[85] Marsha Rossiter, "Understanding Adult Development as Narrative," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 84 (Winter 1999): 78.

[86] Marsha Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," *Adult Educational Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (November 1999): 62.

[87] Marie A. Stadler and Gay Cuming Ward, "Supporting the Narrative Development of Young Children," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 33, no. 2 (October 2005): 73.

[88] Ibid., 79.

[89] Cf. Jiryung Ahn, "Review of Children's Identity Construction Via Narrative," *Creative Education* 2, no. 5 (2011): 415-417; Kit Lawson, "The Real Power of Parental Reading Aloud: Exploring the Affective and Attentional Dimensions," *Australian Journal of Education* 56, no. 3 (2012): 257-272.

Furthermore, storytelling has always been a part of human learning. Nancy Lloyd Pfahl and Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner thus argue, in agreement with Guinness, that stories have, since the beginning, accompanied human social and educational existence:

> Throughout human history, storytelling has been a significant means of communication and influence in pre-literate and literate societies. Stories are teaching vehicles that transmit wisdom and understanding of indigenous cultures. Telling and listening to each other's stories of lived experience is a human tendency and capacity that we engage to discover and transmit knowledge, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. Storytelling and listening form natural exchanges often used without intentionality or awareness of their power as co-creational processes that can motivate learners at any stage of development.[90]

Clearly, the secular educational literature largely agrees with the Christian literature concerning the centrality and importance of narrative for teaching and learning. Both see storytelling as a uniquely human characteristic. Yet how is learning accomplished through the telling of stories? How does narrative work to shape and reshape people? How do narratives connect or separate people? What does the secular educational literature have to say about the complex process of narrative learning?

Narrative—a Way to Organize and Make Sense of Life Events

A review of the narrative learning literature makes it clear that stories help learners organize and make sense of the events in their lives. Through a mysterious process of personal reflection and evaluation of events and choices, people attempt to "understand" why they have "acted in a particular way."[91] Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair explain that these "stories…can help us to find new meaning and new direction or

[90] Nancy Lloyd Pfahl and Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner, "Creating New Directions with Story: Narrating Life Experience as Story in Community Adult Education Contexts," *Adult Learning* 18, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 2007): 9.

[91] Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair, 2.

can support us in coming to terms with the way things are and with who we are."[92] Thus, Clark argues that "the central task of the personal narrative is the creation of coherence. Our lives need to make sense, to have their various elements be in a reasonable relationship with one another."[93]

Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair explain that people make sense of their lives by constructing and reconstructing the events they experience into a coherent narrative. In fact, they conclude that stories are both a tool for learning from one's life experiences and, simultaneously, that stories are constructed based on the learning one has gleaned from previous stories. In short, the process is progressive and reiterative in nature. Thus Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair argue:

> Narrative learning is not simply learning *from* the stories we tell about our lives and ourselves. It is learning that happens "in" and "through" the narration. The stories we tell about our lives and ourselves are therefore to a large extent already the result of such learning processes . . . although it is important to see that in most cases such stories remain unfinished—they are part of an ongoing narrative construction and reconstruction.[94]

These narratives are therefore part of a progressive "interior conversation" which takes place in the individual person. This internal dialogue helps people to "work out their position on things; define courses of action, create stories and life missions."[95] It is "an important part of a person's map of learning" or "way of understanding . . . how they act in the world."[96]

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[92] Ibid.

[93] Merriam, ed. *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*, 87.

[94] Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair, 2.

[95] Ibid., 133.

[96] Ibid.

Rossiter agrees that storytelling is an important way in which human beings make sense of their lives. Moreover, she argues, storytelling is an essentially "interpretive" endeavor by which people take past realities and created impressions of their past and interpret them so as to construct a coherent life narrative. She writes, "A narrative orientation to human development is essentially interpretive. Life stories, like literary stories, are made up of that which is discovered and created, that which is remembered from the past as well as a constructed understanding of it."[97] Rossiter thus highlights the essential role the learner's narrative interpretation of past events—both real and created—plays in the learning process.

Peter Alheit sides with Rossiter's position and expresses how the interpretation of past events takes place:

> When recollecting the past, the biographical narrator behaves "as if" he or she were immersing him or herself once again in the situation "back then" and were an "agent" who could explain the consequences of his or her actions from the manner in which they occurred. In this way, he or she conjoins the stream of narrative with the course of "real" events, the narration to the experience.[98]

For Alheit, it is impossible to understand the past apart from the act of interpretive storytelling, and, therefore, storytelling helps create or construct—through the individual's interpretation—the past. So, he concludes, "As 'history' is not understandable save in the form of a narrative, the narration as such 'makes' history."[99] Or as Clark provocatively states, "If we make sense of our experience through storying it, it follows that we construct our understanding…narratively."[100]

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[97] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 60.

[98] Peter Alheit, "Stories and Structures: An Essay on Historical Times, Narratives and Their Hidden Impact on Adult Learning," *Studies in the Education of Adults* 37, no. 2 (Autumn 2005): 204.

[99] Ibid., 205.

Pfahl and Wiessner agree that the learning process, which takes place through narration, is highly interpretive. They explain, "Making these linkages [between the events of a person's past and present reality] frequently leads to revised interpretations, enhanced self-awareness, and learning that precipitate constructive, developmental change."[101] They go further, however, and herald the potential transformative power of narrative interpretation and reinterpretation. They argue that interpretation, through storytelling, has the capability to change people's lives:

> [The] essence of experiential narrative is [the] reinvention of life story and [it] holds [the] potential to catalyze human development and change that transforms life experience. Intentionally bringing multiple dimensions together by using narrative processes empowers learners to reinterpret and reevaluate old ways of being and acting and to explore new ways of life.[102]

Similarly, Clark suggests that story offers transformational potential because of its close "connection" to the individual's sense of "identity." Thus, she argues that "stories offer enormous potential as a mode of personal change. Sometimes that change comes from identifying with a powerful story that makes sense of a person's experience in a new way."[103]

Susan Butcher also sees the potential for individual transformation through storytelling. She argues that it is connected to the self-evaluative nature of narration, "[Story] allows our minds to think outside…our own experiences and to develop creative ways to problem-solve. It also allows us to identify with the theme and character of the

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[100] Clark, "Narrative Learning: Its Contours and Possibilities," 4.

[101] Wiessner, 10.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Merriam, ed. *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*, 88.

story and to [consequently think in new ways]. Through this process, one's own errors in thinking tend to be realized."[104]

Subsequently, telling stories about past events—or, making sense of those events by connecting them in meaningful ways—allows individual narrators/learners to see the patterns of their lives and to interpret them from the outside. So, Alheit writes, "We possess the chance to identify the surplus meaning in our experience of life and to appropriate them for a conscious change in our self- and world-referentiality."[105] In short, story enables the actors/learners to step outside the action and play the role of narrator or interpreter of their own life story. Consequently, participating as narrator of one's own life story provides tremendous opportunity for personal transformation.[106]

In addition to helping individual learners organize, make sense of, critique, and transform through interpreting and reinterpreting the events of their lives, storytelling also offers a coping mechanism during times of transition and tragedy in life. Rossiter concludes that, during times of "dissonance" and difficulty, telling stories helps the learner "renegotiate" life's meaning. She argues:

> It is through narrative that people renegotiate meaning as they deal with what is out of the ordinary. In this renegotiation, one's story is enlarged so as to include unanticipated events, inexplicable happenings, or contradictory perspectives.[107]

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[104] Susan E. Butcher, "Narrative as a Teaching Strategy," *The Journal of Correctional Education* 57, no. 3 (September 2006): 197.

[105] Alheit, 209.

[106] Much has been written about "Transformational Learning" in the educational literature. Jack Mezirow has been a leading contributor in this field. See for example Jack Mezirow, ed. *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

[107] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 68.

Story, therefore, has the capacity to accommodate the unexpected and difficult events when they arise. Moreover, it does not merely provide a mechanism by which to incorporate such events, but also helps the learner explain them. Rossiter continues:

> This is the narrative version of the disorienting dilemma or the cognitive dissonance that triggers learning; the inclination to step outside of one's habitual meanings is stimulated by a breach of coherence in the life narrative. According to the narrative orientation, then, we can appreciate that transformative learning involves a restorying process on the part of the learner.[108]

Thus, by reconstructing one's life story through the "restorying" process so as to encompass and more fully understand life's unexpected events, the individual learns and changes through the "dilemma" or "dissonance" rather than crumbling beneath its weight.

Consequently, Annie Brooks highlights the powerful flexibility of narrative interpretations. She writes, "Narrative offers us a window through which we can view the self, a self that is multiple and complex, a self that is dynamic and changing."[109] In response to such change, the constructed personal narrative "is seen as a means of maintaining coherence…during times of transition."[110] Life story, accordingly, "is not fixed but is told and retold in response to situational change throughout the life course."[111]

Finally, it is important to highlight that narrative learning—the making of meaning through story—is not simply a personal endeavor. Storytelling is a largely social activity. Pfahl and Wiessner note that stories are often told in relationship with others. They write, "Stories are relational; they build relationships, create bonding links between

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Annie Brooks, *Narrative Dimensions of Transformative Learning* (Lansing, MI: Annual Meeting Of The Adult Education Research Conference June 2001), 4.

[110] Rossiter, "Understanding Adult Development as Narrative," 79.

[111] Ibid.

educators and learners, and complement analysis with more holistic views of experience."[112]

Because of storytelling's social nature, there are many and various educational benefits to sharing stories in community. Again, Pfahl and Wiessner explain:

> Narrative unleashes the potential of human imagination to solve problems more creatively. Stories of others' success can stimulate learners' imaginations, opening up new worlds and ways of thinking and acting. They become effective stimulants, motivating learners to find more effective paths that lead to emergence of new ideas and development of realistic, but never-before-envisioned plans. Exposing learners to other learners' ways of thinking helps them to imagine how life could be different . . . Sharing experiences can coalesce participants for mutual support, for stories offer an accessible venue for seeing others' perspectives. They allow adult educators to step into [the] worlds of other adult learners by increasing shared understanding and changing their interactions.[113]

Simply put, telling stories allows people to broaden their imaginative horizons, motivate them to put those new ways of thinking into practice, and cultivates in them a greater awareness of the views of others. Brooks explains this well when she writes, "What we generate internally and share with others becomes a part of the others' understanding of us and in some way probably alters how they understand their world. Similarly, what others express to us becomes a part of the material we have available for making sense of our world."[114] Thus, people don't tell their stories in a vacuum. Narratives are planted in the imaginations of those who listen. In short, "The stories people tell and write concerning their personal lives have an impact on the social world they are living in."[115]

Narrative is a central vehicle for organizing and making sense of the events of one's life. Stories allow people to connect seemingly disconnected events in a meaningful

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[112] Wiessner, 12.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Brooks, 3.

[115] Alheit, 210.

way; they help people to reevaluate those connections and reshape their understandings accordingly; they are interpretive tools by which people concretely and creatively map their personal histories; they have the potential to transform people as they envision and re-envision their identity in and through them; they enable people to cope with life's difficult transitions and unexpected events; and, they are largely social in nature as they shape both the storyteller and the story-hearer. Clearly, storytelling is a fundamental way through which people bring coherence to their lives and make meaning of their lives.

Still, the question remains: how might stories be used to instruct? After all, it is one thing to outline the ways in which people learn through telling stories; it is quite another to outline how story can be used instructively. What are some practical ways story can be used to help others learn, grow, and transform their lives? How can narrative instruction be done well?

Narrative—A Way to Facilitate Learning

With a narrative approach to teaching, the focus is shifted from a curriculum generated from external objectives to a learner-generated curriculum.[116] In other words, the teacher—by listening to and pursuing a better understanding of the learner's story—attempts to develop teaching or developmental goals that are learner-centric. Rossiter explains how this learner-centered approach changes the instructor's foundational questions:

> The narrative approach to development recasts the basic question related to practice by shifting emphasis to the learners' lived experience. The question, both in practice and research, becomes: What is the developmental narrative this

[116] Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair explain, "Narrative learning is a way to understand learning that instead of dealing with the acquisition of externally prescribed content (such as a defined curriculum) explores the learning which is involved in the construction and ongoing maintenance of stories about one's life." Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair, 133.

> learner is living? What is the plot of her or his story? . . . And, what is the meaning of this learning experience in this learner's story?[117]

By focusing questions on a learner's "lived experience" and his or her understanding of that experience, teachers are able to "appreciate developmental change more richly in terms of the self-stories that document, commemorate, and define…transitions."[118] Furthermore, teachers "can [then] entertain a multiplicity of developmental trajectories, as…[they] see normative phases or changes in the context of life narratives."[119] Thus, one of the most important pieces "of the educator's role in attending the learning process is to acknowledge and respect the individuality of the learners' stories."[120]

As educators adopt a learner-centric methodology through a narrative approach to teaching and learning, they must be careful to gracefully keep the narrative's focus on the learner's sense of self. Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair explain that when the narrator's sense of self is divorced from the narrative then the learning potential is greatly diminished. They write:

> [One] important pattern emerging from the data . . . seems to suggest that in those cases where the self is part of what the ongoing narration is about, the narrative has a tendency to remain more open—which . . . seems to impact positively on the efficacy of the storying, that is, on the action potential of narrative learning.[121]

So the teacher using narrative learning needs to remember that "the self is not a fixed entity, an autonomous agent…but rather, the self is an unfolding story."[122] Thus, the

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[117] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 67.

[118] Ibid., 66.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid., 68.

[121] Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair, 128.

[122] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 62.

educator's task is to accompany learners through the storytelling process while simultaneously helping them to understand and transform themselves through their unfolding narratives.

As educators actively participate in the learners' stories, they should also be aware of the interplay between the individuals' past remembrances and narrative constructions of those remembrances and their concurrent projections of their future hopes and dreams. As Rossiter explains, for learning and transformation to occur, teachers must guide students away from hoping for what is in the past and impossible and toward hoping for what is in the future and still possible. Similarly, Rossiter suggests, teachers need to help their students remain open to future possibilities while steering them away from fixation on a single desired outcome:

> The narrative strategy appropriate for the past is recollection, as expressed in the story, whereas the strategy for the future is most appropriately characterized by hope. A problem arises, developmentally, when we confuse one with the other. For example, when we attach hope to the past, hoping for what was not and cannot be in the past, we lose the actual recollected story of the past and are left with an insufficient elaborated self-story. Likewise, when we engage in recollection in connection with the future, we project a possibility so completely into the future that we seem to recollect the future before it has happened. Then we lose the projected scenario, the openness to actual possibilities. In short, a confusion of the two narrative strategies results in an inability to locate oneself in the past or in the future.[123]

When narrative learners focus their hopes on the past or when they project too definitively on what is ahead, the potential for healthy and real change is greatly diminished. Rossiter explains that most people can recall those whom they know or have known "whose self-stories are so fully elaborated…that little room is left…for change.

[123] Ibid., 63.

Likewise, we can…call to mind those who seem…to apply hope to the past rather than to tell a recollected story of it."[124]

Rossiter goes on to list four distinct roles the teacher can play in the narrative learning process. First, she notes that "the educator is a character in the learner's story."[125] In relationship to the narrator, the instructor enters into the narrative. This is a prerequisite for teaching in the narrative learning process. Thus, the teacher and the student "learn from stories…by recognizing the narratives in which [they] are positioned."[126]

Second, Rossiter explains that teachers play the role of "the 'keepers' of the learner's story, by which…[they] provide a safe environment in which learners can tell their story."[127] This is essential if learning is to take place narratively. Pfahl and Wiessner explain the "foundational" importance of trust to successful narrative learning, writing, "Building trust between the adult educator and each learner, and among a group's learners, is foundational for creating teaching environments conducive to using narrative processes for learning. Storytelling does not happen spontaneously when power differentials are rampant."[128] Teachers, therefore, must first create a safe place and build a caring relationship for narrative to be effectively used for transformative learning.

A third role the teacher can play, according to Rossiter, is narrative "editor or critic." In this role, teachers help "the learner to question what kind of story she or he is

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[124] Ibid., 64.

[125] Ibid., 68.

[126] Clark, 6.

[127] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 68.

[128] Wiessner, 10.

telling and to identify the assumptions that are driving it."[129] Consequently, there are many questions that help guide instructional editing and critiquing. Brooks explains:

> For example, we can focus on how is the story told, what are the central plot elements, how are they joined together, what devices are used to create coherence? We can do the same at the level of language: what metaphors are used, is the story in active or passive voice, what types of words are used to characterize the protagonists in the story? We can also probe the content of the narrative: what are the overarching themes, what events are chosen to convey these themes, how do these themes relate to one another? All of these approaches offer us ways to interpret what the informant is experiencing and what meaning they are giving to that experience.[130]

Through the use of such questions, educators can help learners "reflect critically upon the stories, information, and ideas that have surfaced. They may explore alternative scenarios that will empower learners to begin rewriting their life stories in ways that embrace action and change."[131]

Finally, Rossiter argues that the teacher "can assist as a coauthor with the learners as they fashion a revised self-narrative that is more inclusive of the realities of their lives."[132] Pfahl and Wiessner agree with Rossiter but see coauthoring as a two-step process. The first step is to plot out with the learner a hopeful future. They explain that this means identifying "strategies and tasks that lead to new, more desirable scripts for the future."[133] The second step of coauthoring is to help the learner strategize a personalized action plan. They contend that "This analytical step is critical to the

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[129] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 68.

[130] Brooks, 3.

[131] Wiessner, 11.

[132] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 68.

[133] Wiessner, 11.

continuous process of action and reflection that enlarges learners' experiences, deepens their meanings, and optimizes possibilities for change."[134]

To Rossiter's four roles, Pfahl and Wiessner add two more. First, they explain that setting apart adequate time for listening to stories and talking about stories with the learner is essential. They write, "Once adult educators set a learning stage by committing time and space and by building trust, they encourage and listen to life stories of learners, talking with them about past and present experiences."[135] Second, Pfahl and Wiessner conclude that teachers need to encourage the narrative drive in the learner. Thus, they argue, "By using techniques of retelling and extending experiential stories, educators can foster learning, sustain momentum, and further learner development."[136]

In summary, there are numerous ways in which teachers can instruct and guide the learner through the use of personal narratives. They can derive goals and objectives that are learner-centric; they can help learners keep their sense of self intimately connected to their narration; and, they can steer learners away from hoping to change or reclaim the past or on constructing an overly definitive conception of the future. Instructors also play a number of roles in the narrative process in order to foster transformative learning. They enter into the learner's story themselves as actors; they are trustees of the story and should create a safe environment for learning; they are editors and critics who help learners to question and revise their stories; they are coauthors with the learner; and, they are encouragers of the learner's narrative momentum—helping the learner use narratives as positive learning vehicles into the future.

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

The secular educational literature thus shows that narrative is a potentially powerful educational tool. Indeed, people make meaning through telling and retelling their stories. The literature also stresses the promise narrative instruction has for transformational learning. Simply put, it highlights that storytelling can be utilized as a powerful vehicle to help students make sense of the experiences of their lives.

Now it is time to answer another question: What place might narrative teaching and learning have in evangelism? We have established Jesus as the ultimate storytelling teacher, the Bible as a narratively driven book, and narrative as a valid and even preferred instructional method in the secular educational literature. How then do all these come together in the realm of sacred instruction and outreach?

> *Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."*[137]

What Does the Evangelism Literature Say About Narrative?

Storytelling Evangelism—Two Model Narrators

In the evangelism literature, there has historically been little attention paid to using narrative as an outreach strategy. However, that does not mean there has been little attention paid to the potential power of stories to introduce people to Christian ideas and themes. C.S. Lewis in the middle twentieth century argued that the narrative was much more than mere entertainment:

> It seems to me that in talking of books which are "mere stories"—books, that is, which concern themselves principally with the imagined event and not with character or society—nearly everyone makes the assumption that "excitement" is the only pleasure they ever give or are intended to give. *Excitement*, in this sense, may be defined as the alternate tension and appeasement of imagined anxiety. This is what I think untrue.[138]

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[137] John 4:39.

Lewis argues that stories help people think beyond the practical and mundane, and instead lead people to that which the "desperately practical perspective of real life [excludes]."[139] Furthermore narratives "introduce the marvelous or supernatural"[140] while, simultaneously and paradoxically, encouraging the reader to go "back with renewed pleasure to the actual."[141] As Lewis explains, "The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region."[142]

Clearly, Lewis saw and valued the power of story. He also harnessed it in his own fictional work. In fact, Lewis even highlights narrative's unique power to captivate the listener's imagination in one of his own stories—*The Horse and His Boy*. As four unlikely characters are brought together, one of them, Bree, asks another, Aravis, to tell her story. At this point, Lewis' narrator comments that in Aravis' culture storytelling is "taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays."[143] Obviously, Lewis saw the unique potential of story to bring people together relationally, and to captivate their attention.

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[138] Lesley Walmsley, ed., *C.S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 493.

[139] Ibid., 497.

[140] Ibid., 498.

[141] Ibid., 500.

[142] Ibid., 500-501.

[143] C.S. Lewis, *The Complete Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1998), 150.

Another scholar inside Lewis' circle of friends saw a similar potential in story. J.R.R. Tolkien believed the crafting of stories to be an exercise in sub-creating. In short, storytellers image the Grand Storyteller when they construct their worlds, and when those stories are constructed well, Tolkien explains, "You…believe it, while you are, as it were, inside."[144] He later connects his argument directly to gospel proclamation for the Christian artist. He writes that in "the 'eucatastrophe' [or moment when the protagonist escapes destruction] we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world."[145] This "evangelium," or good news, echoes in both Tolkien's and Lewis' fiction. The evanglium reverberations in their stories have introduced many a reader—whether Christian or non-Christian—to gospel truths. Or as Lewis explains, story, with such echoes of good news, "takes . . . the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity.'"[146]

Yet, one might protest: It is fine that master storytellers like Lewis and Tolkien craft stories for such good news purposes, but how do everyday storytellers do this work? In other words, what strategies or techniques for gospel storytelling can the average layperson use? Or, how can a "normal" Christian narrate the gospel through story? To address such concerns, the focus of this study will now center on three areas of practice highlighted in the narrative evangelism literature. These three areas are: how one prepares to tell evangelistic stories; how one tells formative/transformative evangelistic stories; and how one might share stories positively and negatively in Christian outreach.

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[144] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 60.

[145] Ibid., 88.

[146] Walmsley, 524.

Storytelling Evangelism—Purposeful Preparations

It is often a temptation when trying to win people to Christ to attempt to speed up the conversion process. Christians can rush things in an excitement to share all they know with non-Christians. Yet, Jerram Barrs suggests that outreach can sometimes be a "slow process" in which the evangelist must learn to trust that God is working first and foremost in the unbeliever. He explains that there are many questions those wanting to share the gospel must ask of themselves. Barrs writes, "For us, the challenge is, do we believe that God is the one who saves? . . . Do we recognize that many of those we meet are not yet ready to hear the Gospel?"[147]

Barrs highlights the importance of getting to know the person with whom you are sharing the good news. In order to do this, the evangelist must spend time hearing others tell the stories of their lives and asking sincere questions. Barrs explains:

> Francis Schaeffer used to say that if he had only one hour with someone, he would spend fifty-five minutes asking questions and five minutes trying to say something that would speak to his or her situation, once he understood a little more about what was going on in his or her heart and mind. What is needed is genuine love and concern for the person we are meeting, a readiness to ask questions because we truly desire to know the person, and prayer for the discernment of the Holy Spirit about what to say.[148]

Jesus modeled such questioning, listening, and prayerful preparation in his interactions with those he met during the course of his earthly ministry. Therefore, Barrs writes, "If He [Jesus] felt it was important to pray for the Father's wisdom as to what questions were appropriate to ask each individual He met, then so should we!"[149]

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[147] Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism*, 224.

[148] Ibid., 225.

[149] Ibid.

Steffen agrees with Barrs. He urges those who would share their gospel stories with others to first understand the stories of those with whom they would share. Referring to the evangelist as the "messenger" and the unbeliever as the "mariner," Steffen explains how one should prepare to first hear before telling:

> This role sequence calls for the messenger to enter the mariner's storyland with the express purpose of learning his or her lifestories *before* becoming a storyteller. It demands the messenger earn the right to be heard *before* beginning ministry, so that when stories are told, they are told to friends. This approach brings credibility not only to the storyteller, but also to the stories told.[150]

In order to better understand the other's "storyland," Steffen suggests that evangelists collect not only non-believers' stories but also their "proverbs" or wisdom sayings.[151] Then, Steffen argues, the evangelist should begin to "analyze" storytelling and worldview construction from the non-Christian's or mariner's perspective.[152]

In fact, knowing one's audience, asserts Rick Richardson, is one of the biggest challenges facing gospel proclamation today. Contemporary audiences, he explains, are incredibly diverse and subject to change:

> [We] have to understand the emerging sensibilities, the new shape of consciousness, the epochal shift in the questions people are asking. Some will respond to new renditions of old answers that satisfied people earlier. But many will not be so satisfied. We need to start at a different point with them. We need to enter their world, just as Jesus entered ours. We need to make sense of their sensibilities and communicate to their emerging consciousness.[153]

Approaching non-believers without grasping who they are and how they communicate sets the Christian evangelist up for failure when sharing good news stories, argues Richardson. Listening to non-Christians and attempting to better understand them helps

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[150] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 21.

[151] Ibid., 22.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 38.

the believer avoid "building" a "communication bridge to a mindset and an age that are passing away, or at least being radically transformed."[154]

Leslie Newbigin asserts that listening to non-Christians and hearing their stories begins a process of learning their cultural language. He argues that "communication has to be in the language of the captor culture."[155] Newbigin goes on to explain that the language non-Christians use embodies their "way of understanding things."[156] He argues that when cultural language is ignored, the proclamation of the gospel "will simply be an unmeaning sound that cannot change anything."[157] Thus, hearing the stories and learning the language of others is primary and must be done before the Christian story can be shared meaningfully.

J.P. Moreland and Tim Muehlhoff summarize well the importance, when preparing to do evangelism, of listening to others:

> If we want persons of a different faith to listen to our story, then we must listen to theirs. If we want others to attend to our convictions, then we must first attend to theirs. If we desire for others to cultivate common ground with our faith, we must do so first. In doing so we will create a communication climate that will allow us to gently probe truths central to their faith.[158]

Thus, first listening to others tell their stories is of primary importance if the evangelist expects in return to be heard. To "neglect [listening to others] is to respond to a person in folly…and shame…Rather than talking prematurely, the wise conversationalist knows

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[154] Ibid., 42-43.

[155] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 5.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Ibid., 6.

[158] J.P. Moreland and Tim Muehlhoff, *The God Conversation: Using Stories and Illustrations to Explain Your Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 55-56.

that ‘good understanding wins favor’ (Prov. 13:15).”[159] Furthermore, “the genuine answer counts only if we have genuinely listened first.”[160]

Along with hearing and understanding the stories of others, storytelling evangelists must attempt to understand deeply their own stories before storying the gospel message for others. This is not easily accomplished, however. Steffen explains that knowing one’s own story “landscape” is often the most complicated task one undertakes in preparing to do narrative evangelism. He writes, “Of the . . . landscapes, probably the most difficult to really know is one’s own.”[161] In order to decipher one’s own narrative “landscape,” Steffen argues, people need to investigate and interpret their own “history”[162] and their own “social environment.”[163]

Likewise, Webber argues that a keen sense of who one is and where one has come from is essential in evangelistic work. He explains that there is an ever-evolving contemporary situation in which evangelists find themselves, and that they must be willing and able to learn about their current context and how they entered into that context in order to do effective outreach: “[We] must take into account the contemporary situation we find ourselves in. We can more effectively bring the biblical-theological narrative to our present situation when we know where we are and how we got here.”[164]

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[159] Ibid., 150-151.

[160] Ibid., 151.

[161] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 23.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid., 25.

[164] Webber, 137.

Webber does not believe that this is a merely personal endeavor. Instead, it is a complex process of understanding one's own history as it is wrapped up with the history of the church itself. Thus, Webber writes, "I am not suggesting that you memorize all the details of church history, but that you understand the narrative" of the church generally.[165]

The importance of getting to know those with whom the gospel is being shared and of getting to know oneself points to the relational nature of narrative evangelism. Sharing the gospel through stories does not simply work in one direction. It is a back and forth process by and through which the individuals involved change and are changed by each other. Tim George explains the messy and complex process that takes place. He writes:

> Our involvement with the unbeliever allows us to share our lives. We become interconnected with each other and all those who have intersected our lives. Before long we have become wrapped up in a web of connections with nonbelievers that we would never have met if we did not listen to who was affecting our friend's life, and getting to know them through the one [with whom] we have been witnessing. As we listen to their life stories from month-to-month, week-to-week, or even day-to-day we listen to the way that God has been active. While we tell our own stories we tell how God had his hand upon our lives. When we share our stories with the unbeliever and mention God's providence, the typical evangelistic barriers have already been destroyed because we have become enmeshed in the life of the unbeliever.[166]

This sharpening and shaping process takes place as evangelists get to know non-Christians. Both are being changed. Stallings highlights the community nature of storytelling and story-hearing and how people in the community change through the process. He explains that personal stories "are personal only to the extent that the

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[165] Ibid.

[166] Tim George, "Personal Evangelism Presentation: Narrative Evangelism," AM International Blog, entry posted March 11, 2003, www.amintl.org/evangelism/narrative.htm (accessed June 5, 2013).

individual who lives out his or her experience in a community is shaped by the community while at the same time…shaping…the community."[167]

For that reason, Christians preparing to practice narrative evangelism must seek to hear and better understand the stories of those to whom they are reaching out; they must also seek to more deeply know their own personal stories. They would also do well to remember that there is a mutual shaping that takes place through the sharing of stories. Yet, there is still one more thing to know well in preparing to share good news narratives—the gospel message itself.

Steffen stresses the importance of knowing the various "Bible landscapes" when doing narrative outreach. A strong understanding of the Bible's big story and the smaller individual stories that compose that big picture story allows the evangelist to develop a fuller and more precise gospel plotline.[168] Steffen writes:

> Storytellers who want to communicate effectively with a specific people group will make sure they have an adequate understanding of the different Bible landscapes. This knowledge will allow them to provide a scenery backdrop (history, setting, context) for the Bible stories so that truth walks onto the stage with meaning. Such a background will also help assure that the listeners will grasp the socio-cultural distinctives of stories coming from different time periods in Israel's history: tribal, peasant, kingdom, Palestine, Greco-Roman, making it less likely to add extra-biblical material.[169]

Thus, Steffen explains, the narrative evangelist would do well to ask a number of questions before launching into evangelistic storytelling. He encourages them to ask,

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[167] Stallings, 15.

[168]For an excellent example of how to teach the Bible's redemptive historical plotline see Tom A. Steffen and James O. Terry, "The Sweeping Story of Scripture Taught through Time," *Missiology: An International Review* 35, no. 3 (July 2007): 315-335.

[169] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 19.

"What are the Bible symbols that will speak to the host culture? Which Bible characters will? What type of messengers will the host culture identify with best?"[170]

Webber also highlights the importance of knowing the Bible's narrative. He especially sees the need for such a grasp of the biblical story in the current cultural climate in which relationships and stories are often preferred over propositions and proofs. Webber explains:

> [We] need knowledge of the biblical-theological narrative. The modern apologetic uses reason, science and other disciplines to prove the accuracy and superiority of God's narrative. The postmodern apologetic, which looks back to the apostles and the apostolic tradition developed by the ancient fathers, simply tells the story. The comprehensive story of God is a story that *stands on its own* and does not need external support.[171]

There is thus a need for the evangelist to know the biblical story and smaller biblical stories well. This is a complex task, argues Richard L. Pratt, Jr. When people come to read their Bibles—hoping to gain a better grasp of the narrative—they must remember that they are "not hearing texts spoken directly to [them]; [but they] are *overhearing* stories told to others. This fact creates tension, pulling [them] back and forth between the relevance and distance of these stories."[172]

Storytelling Evangelism—Transformation Through Narratives

Following (and even during) the intensive preparatory work of hearing the stories of others, getting to know one's own story background, and beginning to grasp well the grand biblical storyline and smaller storylines that compose it, narrative evangelists can and should begin to share their own stories. Such stories should develop for the listener

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[170] Tom Steffen, "Pedagogical Conversions: From Proposition to Story and Symbol," *Missiology: An International Review* 38, no. 2 (April 2010): 148-149.

[171] Webber, 136.

[172] Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt Publishers, 1990), 15.

the Christian meta-narrative. William Larkin defines meta-narrative as a "story we tell ourselves, about what we do, and what is expected; it is a story that links our smaller stories together and gives us unity, social, psychological and intellectual."[173] Larkin goes on to warn that when Christians share their stories with non-Christians—united in and through God's grand narrative—there will naturally be pushback since postmodern society generally believes that "no meta-narrative is large enough to include the experiences and realities of all people."[174]

Yet, these stories must nonetheless be shared because telling them begins the complex process of forming and transforming worldviews. Steffen stresses the importance of story in the formation and survival of any worldview whether Christian or non-Christian:

> Worldview, the linguistic-cultural assumptions and presuppositions that distinguish one people group from another and form subcultures within, finds its foundational meaning in myths and stories. Myths and stories convey their message through historical or fictional characters and beings, sometimes rationally, sometimes in contradictory ways. They are communicated orally, in written prose or on the screen. Those not found in print or picture change over time as legitimate and illegitimate contextualization takes place. Nevertheless, these two powerful genres form, warn, heal, and transform every worldview, whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaism, scientific, or Christian. To survive, any worldview requires the recitation of myths and stories.[175]

Steffen therefore urges the sharing of the Christian narrative because, unlike other meta-narratives, biblical stories "find themselves rooted in history and the Supernatural . . .

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[173] William J. Larkin, "The Recovery of Luke-Acts as 'Grand Narrative' for the Church's Evangelistic and Edification Tasks in a Postmodern Age," *Journal ofThe Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 3 (September 2000): 405.

[174] Ibid., 407.

[175] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 31-32.

Through these powerful stories and our faithstories (which connect to them), the Holy Spirit transforms the worldviews of people and communities."[176]

Kallenberg concurs with Steffen. Story, he contends, has the potential to form and reform worldviews and is at the heart of conversion. He explains how this change of allegiances takes place in relationship to storytelling:

> If we understand a paradigm as the defining set of beliefs embodied in the life of a community, then a paradigm shift involves for the individual an exchange of allegiance from an old community to a new one. On the level of community, an individual aligns with the communal web of belief by participating in the form of communal life that contributes to the telling of a story.[177]

Furthermore, Kallenberg suggests, only in the gospel storyline are "the scattered details of our lives…brought into focus by reading them through the lens of the story's setting, characters, plot, and ending."[178]

It consequently makes a huge difference which story the church tells to the unbelieving world. Bryan Stone argues that Christians must make a conscious effort to root their evangelistic storytelling firmly in the redemptive narrative of God:

> It is true, of course, that we embody stories in largely unconscious ways. But these stories are no less powerful in forming the way we act or the way we think of ourselves, our neighbors, the church, and the world. It makes a very great difference, therefore, whether the practice of evangelism is grounded in the biblical narrative of the people of Israel, the life and work of Jesus, and the acts of the apostles, or whether it is instead grounded in the story of patriarchy, the story of capitalism, the story of the Enlightenment, or any in a long line of imperial stories, including that relatively recent story called the United States of America.[179]

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[176] Ibid., 32.

[177] Kallenberg, 42.

[178] Ibid., 109.

[179] Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 59.

It is thus essential to tell the biblical story and not some other story since stories "pass on beliefs, attitudes, and ideals" to the people who listen.[180] For, as Stallings explains, "Such transmission is not neutral. Passing on the collective character from one generation to the next [is] a way of preserving reality or the world view."[181]

Storytelling Evangelism—Positive and Negative Strategies

When attempting to practice narrative evangelism, Christians have the opportunity to use both their own personal stories and the Bible's stories. Rich Lamb explains that the believer's "own story . . . is more than just a history."[182] He argues, "When we speak of experiences we have had, friendships or relationships we have valued . . . we invite people to join us, to learn with us as we have learned."[183] Thus, a personal story can be an intimate invitation, from the Christian to the non-believer, to engage in personal relationship. Consequently, Steffen explains that when believers offer their personal stories of grace and redemption "they offer listeners two cherished gifts—friendship with themselves as well as the Friend of friends, Jesus Christ."[184]

On the other hand, telling Bible stories is quite different than telling personal stories. As Lamb explains, "[In] evangelistic conversations…telling a story about how Jesus communicated some gospel truth can often be much more effective than opening a Bible and reading or quoting at length."[185] Lamb thus urges Christians to consider how

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[180] Stallings, 14.

[181] Ibid., 15.

[182] Rich Lamb, "Narrative Evangelism,"InterVarsity Ministry Exchange, article posted for download April 14, 2006, http://cms.intervarsity.org/mx/item/4723/ (accessed June 12, 2013).

[183] Ibid.

[184] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 87.

they "can appropriately recount the stories of the gospels or of the Old Testament in ways and terms that both appeal and communicate to people today."[186] When believers tell such stories, Lamb insists, they begin to "contextualize" the biblical storyline for those who have perhaps never cracked a Bible or been in a church.

After differentiating between the telling of personal stories and biblical stories, Lamb proposes two keys for the evangelistic use of either type of narrative. Drawing his strategic insights from a study of Jesus' earthly ministry, Lamb explains that good evangelistic storytelling should first create "confusion and foster curiosity" and second should reveal divine truth "in stages."[187] Concerning the former strategy, Lamb writes that effective storytellers "recount incidents in a way that draws out people's curiosity. People must be confused by our lives, our actions, our words—before they will be challenged or influenced by them."[188] Lamb sees this strategy displayed in Jesus' storytelling, because he "used familiar ideas and concepts…in unfamiliar ways… This…[consequently] led to confusion and increased curiosity in his listeners' minds."[189]

With regards to the latter strategy of unveiling truth in stages, Lamb explains how it helps the storyteller discern who is interested in the message and who is not, "There are ways to teach so that those who are most responsive can ask to hear more, without those who aren't ready to hear getting burned over by hearing more than they can respond positively to….We can tell stories in a way to communicate gospel content in an

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[185] Lamb.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid.

intriguing way."[190] Lamb's model is again Jesus' storytelling. He notes that Jesus, through his stories, reveals truth in stages to his listeners—not all at once. He writes, "Jesus was willing to tell, in the form of a story, part of the truth . . . He did not have to make sure everyone understood it all."[191] Barrs agrees with Lamb's observation about Jesus, and he highlights the challenge for contemporary evangelists who want to say more than is required at the moment. He writes, "For us, the challenge is, do we believe that God is the one who saves? Do we truly acknowledge that he is the one who does the hard labor?"[192]

In addition to Lamb's two strategic benefits of evangelistic storytelling, Steffen adds four more. First, he argues that through the telling of faith stories, there is a welcoming invitation to dialogue. Steffen explains, "Rather than alienate listeners through polemic debates or apologetics, faithstories tend to tease listeners into the dialogue."[193] The benefit of such a dialogue is that it "challenges worldview distortion" and "dares family, friends, and foes to intellectually, pictorially, and emotionally consider the validity of the testimony."[194]

A second strategic benefit of storytelling outreach, according to Steffen, is that of the Christian's personal gospel accounts being recounted by others. Once the faith story has been told, he argues, it becomes a public story and can—and likely will—be retold. "Well-articulated faithstories often become repeated by those not experiencing a faith-

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[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid.

[192] Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 61.

[193] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 86.

[194] Ibid., 87.

allegiance change to Christ . . . Faithstories, because of their earthiness, often become public stories. Telling stories spawns stories," explains Steffen.[195]

This phenomenon is something that Michael Green highlights in his study of the early history of Christian outreach. Speaking about informal evangelism strategies and lay-evangelism in the early church, Green writes, "They [common lay Christians] went everywhere gossiping the gospel; they did it naturally, enthusiastically, and with the conviction of those who are not paid to say that sort of thing."[196] Consequently, their gospel stories were made public and retold—sometimes even depicted in drawings by the non-Christians who heard them.[197]

A third strategic benefit of sharing faith stories, according to Steffen, is their ability to narrow the time gap between events far removed from contemporary, secular life. Steffen explains, "Well-articulated faithstories tie the past and future to the present. They eclipse time, making it possible for stories of Old Testament Israelites and New Testament believers to impact any generation at any time."[198] When the historical gap is narrowed between the everyday lives of non-Christians and those of men and women in the Bible, Steffen argues, two things happen: First, "Such historical stories provide today's mariners [unbelievers] with lighthouses and safe harbors in which to drop

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[195] Ibid.

[196] Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 243.

[197] Green includes the account of a young boy, "Alexamenos," who was seemingly mocked for his Christian faith by his peers. A crude drawing—of a crucified man, with a donkey's head, and a boy worshiping before it—is all that survives to illumine the third century incident. Ibid., 245.

[198] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 87.

anchors."[199] And second, "They…serve as worldview critiques, challenging mariners to accept personal/collective responsibility for past, present, and future actions."[200]

Steffen lists one last strategic benefit of storytelling evangelism, namely that it begins an assimilation process that will continue once a non-Christian becomes a Christian. Steffen explains that "faithstories connect evangelism to follow-up, resulting in a distinct community of faith."[201] Steffen also notes additional benefits to this approach:

> When new communities of faith begin to form, the faithstories of novice believers create new terminology, providing word symbols that become standard inclusions in narratives, songs, and literature . . . They exhibit certain kinetics and intonations that will become benchmarks to qualify future members. They define time in relation to conversion: a point, a process, a process/point/process, and so forth. Those who story their faith articulate theology formally. They may also develop an assimilation ritual to introduce new members into the community of faith, e.g. the requirement of new converts to articulate their faithstory before other members. And they provide opportunity over time to clarify and modify Christianity for themselves and others.[202]

Stone supports Steffen's point when he argues that storytelling and story-hearing is a central part of learning to follow Jesus. Stone explains that "one of the central tasks involved in the process of learning to become a Christian is learning the stories that give Christian life unity, focus, and direction."[203] Thus, to become a follower of Jesus "is to join a story and to allow that story to begin to narrate our lives."[204]

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[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Ibid.

[202] Ibid., 87-88.

[203] Stone, 39.

[204] Ibid.

A final key strategy for doing narrative outreach effectively is helping non-Christians to connect their stories to the grand story of God.[205] This strategy surfaced again and again in the evangelism literature. As C.S. Song explains, the stories that Christians tell—as with "Jesus' story-parables"—should be the place where "God and humans meet."[206] Peter Cha and Greg Jao further explain why this is so:

> [The] grand narrative of Christianity offers more than simply a suitable background, because our living God is not a God who is hidden in a historical or cosmic backdrop, but is a God who speaks and relates to each of us today. To put it differently, the grand narrative of the gospel invites . . . postmoderns to come to know our Creator, our heavenly Father, who desires to teach and remind us who we really are and to fellowship with us as we continue to write our own life narratives.[207]

Therefore, an important goal for the narrative evangelist is to help non-Christians find a place for their individual stories to fit into the ultimate story of God. Jimmy Long explains, "Story is the starting point for narrative evangelism. We place our story in the context of God's story."[208]

Helping people locate their stories in God's grand narrative is important because, without God's big-picture story, non-Christians have only individual purpose and individual meaning; moreover, they cannot truly understand who they are. Anthony C. Thiselton notes that "Postmodernism…tells part of the story about the human self, but not

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[205] Interestingly, Steffen notes the importance of first making certain that God's grand story is understood by Christians and conveyed in the décor and worship of the church before expecting believers to be able to help nonbelievers connect their story to God's story through narrative evangelism. See Tom A. Steffen, "The Sacred Storybook: Fighting a Fragmented Understanding of Scripture," *Strategies For Today's Leader* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2000).

[206] C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), x.

[207] D.A. Carson, ed. *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 229.

[208] Ibid., 329.

the whole story…Selfhood discovers its identity and personhood within a larger purposive narrative which allows room for agency, responsibility and hope."[209]

Christopher Wright eloquently expresses why there is no place for God's grand story or metanarrative in postmodernism:

> Postmodernism . . . not only celebrates the local, the contextual and the particular, it goes on to affirm that this is all we've got. There is no grand narrative (or metanarrative) that explains everything, and any claims that there is some truth for all that embraces the totality of life and meaning are rejected as oppressive power plays. Thus radically postmodern hermeneutics delights in a multiplicity of readings and perspectives but rejects the possibility of any single truth or unitive coherence.[210]

Though many Christians find themselves in such a postmodern context, Wright expresses the opportunity that such a relativistic climate presents for the telling of God's grand story. He explains that the gospel is not "an aggressively totalizing story that suppresses all others."[211] It is not like a river with only one channel, but "rather a complex mixture of all kinds of smaller narratives, many of them rather self-contained, with all kinds of other material embedded within them—more like a great delta."[212]

Therefore, Wright suggests, those in the postmodern world can continue to celebrate the particular and individual while experiencing ultimate meaning and purpose if they are connected to God's grand story because it does not squelch the smaller stories, but finds a specific and meaningful place for them.

> [Within] *this* story, as narrated or anticipated by the Bible, there is at work the God whose mission is evident from creation to new creation. This is the story of

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[209] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), ix.

[210] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 45.

[211] Ibid., 64.

[212] Ibid.

> God's mission. It is a coherent story with a universal claim. But it is also a story that affirms humanity in all its particular cultural variety. This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories.[213]

Thus, like small stories that must find their meaning in the larger context of a grand story, each person's story finds its meaning in the context of God's great redemptive story. This then is the key to evangelism—helping non-Christians connect their stories to God's grand story. As Gabriel Fackre explains, "Evangelism connects the story with my story."[214]

However, there are potential weaknesses to be aware of when practicing storytelling evangelism. Steffen highlights three: First, he explains that Christians can unwittingly develop a foreign language known only by other Christians. When this language is used to express God's redemptive story, it can fail to communicate to unbelievers. Steffen writes, "The same terminology used to create solidarity and to socialize new members can also cause outsiders to feel separated, even alienated."[215] Narrative evangelists, he warns, must therefore be careful not to us "Christianese" when sharing their faithstories with non-Christians.

A second potential weakness of sharing faithstories evangelistically with unbelievers is that they "can diminish Christ's preeminence." Steffen argues that storytellers must be careful not to allow the attention to focus on their actions or circumstances over and above God's redemptive activity in those actions or circumstances:

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[213] Ibid., 47.

[214] Gabriel Fackre, *Word in Deed: Theological Themes in Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), 59.

[215] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 89.

> Individual stories that glorify physical healing and/or the acquisition of material blessings, sordid past activities, or alleged total freedom gained from past temptations can focus the spotlight on the storyteller rather than Christ. Whether intuitively or intentionally, when this happens, the Storybook and the Storyline take a subservient role to the storyteller.[216]

A third possible weakness is that telling faith stories can sometimes create a sense of spiritual envy or "spiritual defeat" in the listener. Steffen explains that when non-Christians hear "certain faithstories" they "will wish they had lived a more despicable life so they could present such a stimulating testimony. Others will feel they will never be able to live up to the standard conveyed in the faithstory."[217] Those telling evangelistic narratives must therefore be careful not to sensationalize the depths of personal sins or the steps of required righteousness but instead focus the attention on the completed work of God freely offered in Christ. Or as Steffen puts it, "Storytellers must be careful how they smith faithstories for the stories in turn smith the storytellers, the listeners, and most importantly, the God they intend to convey."[218]

Mark Dever adds two more potential pitfalls that are specifically related to sharing personal faithstories or testimonies evangelistically. First, he warns that testimonies may share the events surrounding an individual's conversion, and even do so powerfully, yet never share the specifics of the good news:

> Certainly a testimony of what we know God to have done in our lives may include the good news, but it also may not. In telling people how we have seen God help us, we may not actually make clear his claim on our lives or explain what Christ did on the cross. It's good to share our testimony of what God has done in our lives, but in sharing our testimonies we may not actually make clear

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[216] Ibid.

[217] Ibid.

[218] Ibid.

> what Christ's claims are on other people. In order to evangelize, we must be clear about that.[219]

Second, Dever encourages those sharing their testimonies to recognize the challenge of the cultural climate in which they find themselves. Though personal faithstories may be welcomed as significant in a postmodern context, Dever argues that that does not meant that they will be welcomed as significant beyond or outside of the storyteller's personal sphere:

> Testimony is, of course, popular in our postmodern, that's-good-for-you age. Who would object to your thinking you've gotten something good from Christ? But wait and see what happens when you try to move the conversation from what Jesus has done for you to the facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and how that all applies to your nonbelieving friend.[220]

Consequently, those using narratives evangelistically must recognize that, according to Dever, the contemporary atmosphere which welcomes the telling and hearing of personal stories will equally rebel against the idea that personal faithstories are anything but personal.

Summary of Literature

In this section of the study, three areas of literature relevant to the evangelistic use of narrative were examined. First, literature on Jesus' narrative teaching methods and the Bible's use of story as a genre were considered in order to determine whether story is an appropriate evangelistic tool or method for followers of Jesus and believers in the word of God. Second, the secular educational literature on narrative learning was reviewed with a special focus on how human beings learn through the hearing and telling of stories. Finally, the narrative evangelism literature was examined in order to understand how

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[219] Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 73.

[220] Ibid., 73-74.

narratives have been and can be used evangelistically so as to form and transform the worldviews of non-Christians.

Chapter Three

Project Methodology

The purpose of this study was to better understand how telling and hearing stories—both personal and corporate—can be used to pursue evangelism. Four areas have been identified that are important to understand: (1) the role feelings play in the attribution and construction of meaning in narrative, (2) the role significant events play in the attribution and construction of meaning in narrative, (3) the role the imagination plays in the attribution and construction of a meaningful future outcome in narrative, and (4) the role belief plays in the attribution and construction of meaning through narrative. These four areas led to four research questions that guided this study:

1. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to their feelings through narrative?
2. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to significant events in their lives through narrative?
3. How do non-Christians imagine and construct an ideal future through narrative?
4. How do non-Christians reflect beliefs through narrative?

Because this study sought to understand how narrative is used by non-Christians to attribute meaning to their lives, a qualitative research project was constructed and pursued.

In this chapter, the methods employed to research how narratives can be used evangelistically will be described. First, the design of this qualitative study will be detailed. Second, the selection of participants will be outlined (i.e. type of sampling used,

criteria and rational for selecting participants, and how participants were selected and recruited). Third, the interview process of gathering data will be described. Fourth, the "constant comparative" strategy for data analysis will be detailed. Fifth, the researcher's position (e.g. assumptions, worldviews, biases, etc.) will be summarized. And finally, the limitations of this study will be evaluated and explained.

Design of the Study

Because this research project takes a qualitative approach, it is imperative to first understand the nature of qualitative research. In *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis,* Sharan B. Merriam and Associates explain, "Qualitative research is a powerful tool for learning more about our lives and the sociohistorical context in which we live."[221] It is research focused on gaining knowledge from the perspective of the participant. Merriam and Associates explain that such participant-focused research is question driven. Therefore, understanding "the meanings people derive from a situation . . . requires asking important questions, questions that lend themselves to qualitative inquiry."[222] The end goal of qualitative research—Donna Redmann, Judith Lambrecht, and Wanda Stitt-Gohdes explain—is thus "to portray the complex pattern of the entity or process being studied in sufficient depth and detail so that one who has no experience can gain an understanding."[223]

Merriam identifies five foundational characteristics of qualitative research. First, one must pursue understanding from the perspective of the participant as opposed to the

[221] Merriam and Associates, eds., xv.

[222] Ibid.

[223] Judith J. Lambrecht, Donna H. Redmann, and Wanda L. Stitt-Gohdes, "The Critical Incident Technique: A Tool for Qualitative Research," *The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal* XXXXII, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 136.

researcher. Second, the researcher is primary in both the collection and the analysis of data. Third, in qualitative research, the researcher is required to do firsthand, context specific observation. Fourth, qualitative research is inductive rather than deductive so that its findings guide and construct the hypotheses. Fifth, and finally, qualitative research results are rich in description in order to capture, as much as possible, the essence of the person, object, or phenomenon being studied.[224] Thus, "qualitative research is effective at examining in depth understandings about a given phenomenon by a particular group of individuals at the expense of generalizability."[225]

Qualitative research offered many benefits to better grasp how non-Christians use personal narratives to construct meaning. Since understanding the interviewee's perspective is essential to this project, qualitative research was the best methodology to investigate how individuals make meaning through the telling of their personal narratives. Because the researcher is the primary tool for data collection in qualitative research, this approach allows for a flexibility that is ideal for gathering the interviewee's personal stories and the meanings, feelings, motivations, and hopes conveyed through those stories. The nature of intimate, face-to-face interviews allowed for the collection of non-verbal data (e.g. tears, smiles, grimaces, etc.). Finally, the descriptive nature of qualitative research focuses on richly portraying the individual being interviewed; such detailed portrayals help those with no previous experience in a given area more quickly comprehend the subject and implications of the study.

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[224] Sharan Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 6-8.

[225] Lambrecht, Redmann, and Stitt-Gohdes, 135.

Another strength of qualitative research is that its findings guide and form its hypotheses. Redmann, Lambrecht, and Stitt-Gohdes explain, "The qualitative researcher…prefers that the hypotheses and definitions emerge as the study develops. In other words, the qualitative researcher gathers the data and then tries to develop an understanding."[226] The aim of such inductive research is to "gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively deriving postulates or hypotheses to be tested."[227] Qualitative research is thus ideal for a study that aims to more fully grasp how non-Christians make meaning by telling personal stories and helps to form "themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypotheses, and even substantive theory"[228] in this area.

Participant Sample Selection

In order to locate interview subjects for the study, the researcher used the following criteria: non-Christians who hold a variety of beliefs (e.g. atheistic, agnostic, pantheistic, etc.), who would share a "meaningful narrative" from their past, and who represent a close proximity in age range (i.e. between thirty and forty years old) and life stage (beginning of career and family). In order to find such participants, the researcher consulted congregants from his local church to see if any of them could put him in contact with subjects who met the above criteria.

During the course of gathering interview subjects, the researcher made a move from a small city of around forty thousand inhabitants in Missouri to a small city of around fifty thousand inhabitants in Pennsylvania. Because of the move, the interview

[226] Ibid., 136.

[227] Merriam and Associates, eds., 5.

[228] Ibid.

subjects participating in the research are split between the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic portions of the United States. Two of the six live in the Midwest while the other four live on the East Coast. All, however, have in common the above listed criteria.

Once a possible subject was located, the researcher made contact by way of an introductory letter indicating his identity, his relationship to the potential interviewee's friend (i.e. the person through whom he located the prospective interviewee), and the nature and extent of his research. The letter also made inquiry as to the potential subject's willingness to participate in the research project. The individual was given an email address by which to accept or decline the interview request. As noted above, six participants responded positively.

Data Collection and Analysis

After locating a willing participant who fit all of the set criteria, the researcher sent the participant a pre-interview survey. This survey was designed to collect basic background information. It consisted of seven short-answer questions (e.g. How old are you? Where do you currently live? What is your highest completed educational level?) and seven questions that requested a more descriptive answer of three to five sentences (e.g. How would you describe the community in which you grew up? How would you describe your family when you were growing up? How would you describe your religious background/heritage?). The complete survey can be found in the Appendix.

Once a participant completed the pre-interview survey, a person-to-person interview time was established. The place and time of the interview was determined by choice of the interviewee. This was intended to allow them the choice of the most natural and comfortable interview environment. Sometimes the interviews were conducted in a

library; sometimes they were conducted in bars or restaurants. The choice was solely up to the interviewee.

Before meeting for the primary face-to-face interview, the interviewee was asked to recall and come prepared to share an especially meaningful event from his or her life—an event that exemplified, in his or her estimation, what life is all about. In qualitative research this method of gathering data is called the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) or the Critical Incident Method (CIM). Andrea Ellinger and Karen Watkins describe CIT as "a systematic and sequential method for collecting observed incidents, or observations previously made which are then reported from memory."[229] Such an approach enables the researcher to "understand the mental models and rationale that guide behaviors, the environmental factors that influence behaviors, and resulting outcomes associated with specific behaviors in addition to actual behaviors that are described and collected."[230]

Once the research participant and researcher were together for the interview, the participant was asked to begin to share his or her meaningful event. The interviews, at this point, followed a semi-structured format. Merriam explains this approach:

> In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions . . . [The] largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.[231]

The following eight questions served to guide the semi-structured interviews:

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[229] Karen E. Watkins and Andrea D. Ellinger, "Updating the Critical Incident Technique after Forty-Four Years," in *1998 Proceedings of the Academy Of Human Resource Development*, ed. R. Torraco (Baton Rouge, LA: Academy of Human Resource Development, 1998), 286.

[230] Ibid., 291.

[231] Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, 74.

1. How did the situation make you feel?
2. Why do you think you felt that way?
3. What does this event mean to you?
4. Why do you think it means so much?
5. How might this situation ideally impact your future choices?
6. How might this situation be wasted in your future choices?
7. What did this situation teach you about life?
8. How are the lessons that you learned more than merely personal?

Because semi-structured format of the interviews, questions were not pursued in the same order, and some questions were pursued more in one interview than they were in another interview. The extent to which each question was pursued depended largely on the interviewee's response and the choice of the researcher to ask for more or less detail following a given response.

Interviews were recorded onto the researcher's laptop computer through an audio recording program and then graciously and diligently transcribed by a volunteer secretarial team. Once the researcher received the transcripts, they were studied and analyzed using the constant comparative method as described by Merriam:

> The research begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated.[232]

Researcher Position

The researcher is an evangelical Christian pastor who strongly believes in the exclusivity of the person and message of Jesus Christ—his identity as incarnate God, his

[232] Ibid., 159.

perfect representative earthly life (especially in his obedient missional life, death, resurrection, and ascension), and his certain return one day to finally destroy sin and death and usher in his glorious eternal reign. These convictions about Jesus are gleaned from the message of the Bible, which the researcher believes to be the truthful and inspired word of God. The researcher also believes that God has revealed himself largely through the grand story of scripture and that he has created human beings as story-telling and story-hearing people. In short, the researcher believes that narrative is a key way humans have been created by God to learn and form meaningful conclusions about life and their purpose in life.

Furthermore, the researcher has a background in education. He taught high school English and completed a master's degree in education. The researcher has been previously interested in how people learn through narratives during the course of his preparation as a teacher, and during his time as a teacher. These interests have consequently found a place in his current work as a pastor and, specifically, into his teaching of Christians in the church as well as his evangelistic instruction of non-Christians outside the church.

Without a doubt, the above influences and convictions have directed and even biased the current study. As Merriam and Associates explain, "[The] human instrument has shortcomings and biases that might have an impact on the study. Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or "subjectivities," it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data."[233] Consequently, the researcher has attempted to divulge as fully as possible his assumptions and beliefs in conducting and pursuing this research project.

[233] Merriam and Associates, eds., 5.

Study Limitations

There were many limitations to this study. To begin, as mentioned above, the researcher made a move from one location (Missouri) to another location (Pennsylvania) during the middle of the research project. The move limited his ability to gather and interview subjects from a more controlled geographic area and over a more limited timeframe. (There were about eight months separating the first interview and the final interview.) With limited money and time, the researcher was unable to travel back to Missouri to complete his gathering of participants in that location. If it had been possible to do so, there would have been conceivable benefits in limiting the disparate social and cultural factors that, without a doubt, shape individuals differently in the two regions.

Financial limitations also restricted the number of subjects interviewed. There were some willing participants who would have nicely fit the desired criteria of the study, but they also moved and therefore were unable to meet for a person-to-person interview. Thus, the sample was limited to six individuals, three men and three women.

Finally, many of the interviews were also limited to an hour because of the research participants' work or family schedules. Some interviews were conducted during lunch breaks; this consequently constrained the amount of time available. Some interviews were conducted after the participant's work ended and before his or her children's practices began; this also restricted the time of the interview. These factors certainly narrowed the number of questions that could be pursued and, therefore, the amount of data that could be collected and analyzed for the project.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand how telling and hearing stories—both personal and corporate—can be used to pursue evangelism. The methodology detailed in this chapter was implemented to gather and analyze data to pursue that goal. As outlined above, the study was designed as a qualitative research project using the Critical Incident Technique or Method. The interviews with six different non-Christian participants were semi-structured in form, and the constant comparative method was used to analyze the collected data. The findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to better understand how telling and hearing stories—both personal and corporate—can be used to pursue evangelism. Four areas have been identified that are important to understand: (1) the role feelings play in the attribution and construction of meaning in narrative, (2) the role significant events play in the attribution and construction of meaning in narrative, (3) the role the imagination plays in the attribution and construction of a meaningful future outcome in narrative, and (4) the role belief plays in the attribution and construction of meaning through narrative. These four areas led to four research questions that guided this study:

1. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to their feelings through narrative?
2. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to significant events in their lives through narrative?
3. How do non-Christians imagine and construct an ideal future through narrative?
4. How do non-Christians reflect beliefs through narrative?

In order to study and begin to answer these four research questions, six non-Christian participants were interviewed—Franney, Hamilton, Ross, Marsha, Rick, and Elaine. These participants were each asked to share a personal narrative from their lives that they considered to be especially meaningful.

Introduction of the Participants

Franney

Franney was thirty-seven years old at the time of the interview. She described her hometown as "a conservative, middle-American town with little diversity." After leaving home for the Army, she thought of hometown and described it to others as something akin to "white bread," meaning it was in many ways average and nondescript.

Growing up, she had both parents in the home, but "it was rare for both of [them] to be at home" simultaneously. Her mother was a nurse, and her father was a highway patrolman. She had two younger brothers, and they were all involved in sports. She recalled that there was never a game where she "didn't have a parent present."

Her family attended and was active in a United Methodist church. She remembered that they were very committed to "not only the Sunday services but also other groups and activities sponsored by the church." Furthermore, her family was "closely tied to [her] grandparents' General Baptist church." She described her parents' choice to attend a Baptist church when she was in high school as "particularly traumatic" because she "was pregnant…and no longer attending services with close friends." She recalled the day her mother told her she "didn't have to attend any longer." On that day, she stopped attending church regularly.

Franney described her current religious beliefs in pantheistic terms. She believes "that God is everything." She regularly prays and meditates "through…yoga practices" which she "dedicates to God's love." She believes that her spirit "has lived many lifetimes and will keep living until [her] spirit has learned [her] lessons and becomes perfect: only then will [her] soul be able to rest in heaven." Nonetheless, she said she

missed attending church mostly because of the community aspect, yet she "would not consider going [back] because…[it] would be…for the wrong reasons."

At the time of the interview, Franney was working for the state as a fisheries office manager in the Department of Conservation. She has been married twice and had three children with three separate fathers. She completed some college course work, but is not planning on furthering her formal education. The meaningful life story she shared was about finding out that she was adopted and coming to terms with the implications of her adoption in her present life situation.

Hamilton

Hamilton was thirty-six years old. He described his community as a "largely conservative town" in the Midwest. Despite its conservative leanings, he noted that his hometown "has its progressive elements, both culturally and politically." He described it as a "safe community."

When asked to describe his family, he explained them as "loving and close." Both parents were in the home while he was growing up, and he had three siblings—an older brother, a younger sister, and a twin brother. Their family did not move around, and his parents were for the most part supportive and encouraging.

Hamilton characterized his religious background or heritage "as both Catholic and Baptist." He explained, "I had no firmly set religious affiliation." However, his parents "were both religious people…[who] encouraged their children to make their [own] decisions regarding religion." Looking back, Hamilton wondered whether the "decision they had in mind was to choose between being Catholic [or] Baptist." He "chose neither"

and “what little religious instruction” he received was “by way of the sermons, lectures and speeches of Reverend. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior.”

Hamilton described his current religious beliefs and practices as non-existent. He explained, “I don’t have any religious beliefs or practices. Here, I’m defining religion . . . as a belief in a supernatural deity that created the universe and mankind and takes an interest in the goings on of mankind.” He characterized himself as an atheist.

At the time of the interview, Hamilton was working as a lawyer for the state in the Attorney General’s Office. He was married without kids. He had completed a bachelor’s degree in political science and graduated from law school. The meaningful life narrative he shared was about meeting his then future wife, their eventual engagement and marriage, and their deep and evolving relationship since then.

Ross

Ross was thirty-six years old at the time of the interview. He was living in New York City, but described the midwestern community in which he grew up as a “nice medium-sized small town—a state capital with a big high school.”

He characterized his family as “a small family unit” of four—Ross, his younger sister, and his mother and father. He remembered that they were “usually pretty happy,” though generally isolated from extended family. He explained that his dad had a few close relatives living a couple of hours away from them but that his mom’s family were all in Ireland. Consequently, he explained, “it was just the four of us, together, in our day-to-day lives.”

Ross’s religious background was Roman Catholic. However, he pointed out that he was “never that into it.” He also recalled that his dad was Methodist, which meant he

"would always mumble a few extra things in church that …were Methodist things…they don't do in Catholic Mass." He remembered that as a boy he had a comic book version of the Bible that he would read and that he "really got into." However, he also found the stories in the comic book Bible "disturbing and frightening." He "chose not to be confirmed" as a Roman Catholic.

He concluded that he considered himself to be an agnostic, and he explained that he "could never be atheist" because he has "no idea what's going on" and he can't just "pick one way." He noted that "there are so many" religious beliefs to choose from and that he sees "smart people who have chosen all totally different ones." He appreciates "the good parts" of any religion but thought there were also parts that were "outdated or even totally crazy" in all of them. In a way, he wishes he could believe because he sees that religious faith "gives a lot of people comfort and purpose." Yet, in the end, he doesn't "feel it" when it comes to religious convictions.

At the time of the interview, Ross was working as a bookseller and an improv coach in New York City. He has a bachelor's degree in acting and was working on a career in comedy. He was divorced and had no children. The meaningful story he shared concerned two loosely connected events from his childhood in which he told lies in order to avoid difficult or uncomfortable social situations.

Marsha

Marsha was thirty-four years old and still lived in the same community in which she grew up. She described it as "a very tightknit community where everyone looked out for everyone else." She and her family lived in the suburbs.

Marsha was from a family of four—herself, her parents, and her younger sister. She recalled that "growing up [her] family was very happy." In fact, she characterized their relationship as "very close" and remembered that there was "a lot of laughter." Then, when she was thirteen, her parents divorced. She joked that there was "still a lot of laughter, just on separate weekends."

Growing up, she recalled, her father's parents were Christian Scientists and her mother's family was Presbyterian. However, she was not brought up in either church. Religious belief and practice was simply not an important part of her upbringing. Instead, she remembers being raised to be strong and not have a "princess mentality." She explained this was because her mother did not want Marsha or her sister to believe that they were "going to get rescued or whatever."

When Marsha described her current religious beliefs, she characterized herself "as a secular humanist." She explained, "I do not go to church. I do not believe in one God overall." Instead, she believed that a meaningful life was to know that she "touched someone's life in a positive way." That, she explained, "would be the greatest outcome of all."

Marsha was working as a legislative assistant for a state house representative at the time of the interview. She had gone back to school and was in her junior year of college. She was on her second marriage and had one daughter from her first marriage. The meaningful life story she shared was about her parents' divorce and about the positive and negative lessons that painful situation had taught her.

Rick

Rick was thirty-one years old at the time of the interview. He grew up in the suburbs of a community in which he built strong relationships. In fact, Rick's best friend lived next door to him throughout his childhood. Moreover, he described his family as "loving" and said that they taught him and his two sisters "well."

When asked to describe his religious background, Rick explained that his parents came from two very different religious traditions. His mother was raised Catholic while his dad was raised Jewish. Consequently, his mother and father decided to take their children to a United Church of Christ until Rick was fifteen years old. He remembered that he only went to Jewish temple occasionally for bar mitzvahs.

Rick characterized his current religious beliefs as unimportant. In fact, he explained that he rarely thinks about his beliefs. He mentioned that he would not think about such things on a daily basis. Moreover, he explained that he did not go to church. His philosophy is to "live life and treat others as nicely as possible." He continued, "I want people to think of me as a good and caring person."

Rick was working as a marketing representative at the time of the interview. He had completed a bachelor's degree in business from a large state university. He was married and had one child, a son. The meaningful life narrative Rick shared concerned his "then girlfriend, now wife," and his move out to Colorado following graduation from college. It was a narrative that he suggested exemplified the kind of "non-pretentious" person he wanted to be and "the kind of [relaxed] life [he] always wanted to live."

Elaine

Elaine was twenty-seven years old. She spent her childhood in two quite different communities. Up until the age of nine years old she lived in a small city in New England, and then moved to a major metropolitan area in the northeastern United States. However, in both locations she explained that her family was "very involved in Jewish community. It was a very close-knit community consisting of upper-middle class families." Thus, no matter the size of the city Elaine lived in, she felt she had a smaller "loving and nurturing environment" of support.

She described her immediate family as "very loving" and as "the most important thing" to her growing up. She remembered that they "would always have family meals together, and share pretty much everything." She recalled sharing a bedroom and clothing with her two older sisters. Despite the close quarters, she explained that her family—her parents, older brother, two older sisters, and she—"all got along pretty well." In reflecting on her family, she explained, "My family is the most important thing to me. It was a value that was instilled in me my entire life."

When asked to describe her religious heritage, Elaine characterized it as a "modern Orthodox Jewish" upbringing. She described her parents as not coming from a very observant background. Yet, they sent their children to Jewish day school and, as the kids attended the school, Elaine explained that they all "became more religious."

In describing her current religious beliefs, Elaine commented that her religious beliefs haven't changed but her practices are "more aligned with the Conservative Jewish movement." She explained, "I use electricity and ride in cars on the Sabbath, which I would not have done growing up."

Elaine was working as a part-time director of recruitment at a private Jewish day school at the time of the interview. She had completed a bachelor's degree in criminology and criminal justice from a large state university. She was married and had a two-year-old son and another child due later that year. The meaningful life story Elaine shared was about getting married to her husband, who was also Jewish, and the importance for them of raising their children to respect and love Jewish traditions and community. She explained that if her children didn't "embrace" the Jewish religion that it "would be hard for" her.

Narrative Themes

As the six participants shared their meaningful life stories, several themes emerged in the four research areas that were constructed to understand how telling and hearing stories—both personal and corporate—can be used to pursue evangelism.

Common Themes Regarding the Attribution of Meaning through Feelings

As the participants were interviewed, two key themes emerged with regard to the role feelings played in their attribution of meaning to their stories. First, positive or negative feelings emerged when the interviewees' stories either met or failed to meet their personal standard of narrative success, or met or failed to meet the narrative success standards of their peers. Second, the pursuit of positive feelings or the avoidance of negative feelings tended to direct the narrative choices participants made.

Emotions and the Perception of Narrative Success

In Hamilton's story, establishing a deep intimacy with his wife was one measure of a successful marital narrative. For example, he pointed out that when they were beginning to date, her initiative in breaking down his "standoffish" barriers really

attracted him to her. He explained, “She gave me a hug and . . . that would have taken months, if it were up to me.” He continued, “I was enamored just because of that hug, just because it made me feel good.” For Hamilton, this movement toward intimacy—especially against the backdrop of his “standoffish” demeanor—became one standard of success for the story of his relationship with his wife.

Consequently, Hamilton experienced positive feelings when he perceived that he and his wife were moving toward greater intimacy and negative feelings when he perceived that they were moving away from such intimacy. When discussing their wedding, he explained, “I know that if I make her happy, I feel good. I have a sense of accomplishment.” In short, Hamilton saw the endearing of himself to his wife as movement toward a successful marriage narrative. Furthermore, he explained, “I actually enjoy arguments because I know we’re going to figure it out.” Again, his positive feelings are connected to his perception of growing deeper intimacy with his wife.

In Franney’s story of coming to terms with her adoption, her idea of a successful narrative was tied to finding acceptance in family. Consequently, feelings of fear continued to emerge throughout the telling of her story whenever she considered the possibility of rejection. For example, she mentioned that arguments with her adoptive mother often made her feel tense and unsettled. She explained, “When I was younger, I always felt misplaced with my adoptive family.” She continued, “My adoptive mom never let me forget I wasn’t her natural child. That was really painful since my natural mother had already rejected me.”

A few minutes later Franney came back to her fear of being rejected. She confessed that she wanted her adoptive parents “to be pleased” and “to be proud.”

However, she continued, “That has always been such a struggle with my adoptive mother because she is so conditional with her love.” Thus, upon considering making contact with her natural mother, she explained, “I just don’t want to open myself up to that kind of rejection or feeling like I’m not accepted.” Consequently, in Franney’s story, negative feelings—of being misplaced, rejected, and unloved—continued to surface whenever she considered her relationship with her adoptive mother and the future possibility of being rejected by her natural mother.

Rick had a narrative goal of moving to Colorado to live in a “relaxed atmosphere” and to experience “stress-free living.” However, as Rick’s story unfolded, this carefree ideal constantly bumped into the reality of stress and hardship. Therefore, negative emotions arose as stress inevitably entered his story. For example, Rick admitted that things became hectic when he and his wife decided to move home from Colorado in order to start a family. He explained, “It was stressful moving back. We returned to the gloom, the cold winters, all the snow. You know, it’s negative ten degrees for ten days in a row. The sun never shines.” Furthermore, there were financial stressors. He continued, “Our lives are stressful at times because we’re not making the money that we used to make.” In this way, negative feelings continued to surface as Rick relayed the numerous ways the stresses of life crept into his story and complicated his goal of living a “relaxed” and “stress-free” life style.

As Elaine told her story—of marrying her Jewish husband and raising a traditional, Jewish family together—her feelings were regularly measured against the stories of her peers. This emerged twice when Elaine was talking about her Jewish wedding ceremony coming to a close. She explained, “After our wedding, we were so

happy. There wasn't a letdown. I'm not sad the wedding is over, which is nice, because a lot of people are. They are so upset." Then again she explained, "Everyone was happy. It was like a celebration of our two families together. Sometimes there's animosity, but there was no problem; everyone was happy." Clearly, the satisfaction which Elaine shared in her story was produced and measured, in part, against her perceptions of the dissatisfaction of others whom she had known.

Like Elaine, Ross expressed appreciation or gratitude while telling his story when he perceived that he had been fortunate compared with others who had lost people they loved. He explained, "I feel I have been really lucky up to this point in that I can name only a handful of people who died." A little later, he expressed how he does not undervalue his good circumstances because he recognizes that there are others whose situations are far less fortunate than his situation. He reasoned:

> Let's just say I was in a miserable country and that I knew there was a guy out there living it up really good. I might have a feeling like, 'Ah, that guy is having it great.' But, then if I saw him being like, 'Aw, I'm sad,' I'd be like, 'Aw, give me your life. I'll enjoy it. I'll use it well.' I would resent that!

Thus for Ross, positive feelings emerged as he recognized the privileged position of his story in comparison to the less fortunate stories of those whom he knew or those in impoverished or difficult situations whom he did not know.

As Marsha told the story of her parents' divorce, she likewise discussed her negative feelings of isolation and jealousy in terms of her perception of the successful marriages of her friends' parents. In sharing how she, her sister, and their mother had to "band together" following the divorce, Marsha explained that their relationship was important, "especially because I was one of the only kids I knew whose parents were divorced, which really sucked. I mean it really sucked!" A little later in the interview, she

continued, “It was hard dealing with all those emotions because my parents weren’t together. I would kind of sit back and look at my friends and be really jealous that they got to have that.” Marsha’s negative emotions emerged against the backdrop of her picture of the successful marriage stories of her friends’ parents.

Emotions and Narrative Direction

During the course of the interviews, it became clear that many times the participants’ pursuit of a certain positive feeling or avoidance of a certain negative feeling drove them to choose specific paths for their stories. Rick, for instance, avoided unpleasant realities in order to pursue his goal of living out his “stress-free, relaxed” story. Thus, when his father was diagnosed with cancer, he “removed” himself “from the whole situation.” He explained, “That’s how I handle stress.” He continued:

> I just remove myself, so in one aspect, I don’t know what’s going on. My dad, he’s going to have surgery. He’s going to go to chemo, you know; he’s got a bladder bag that holds his urine. And he’s taking all these drugs and I kind of just, I want to know, but I don’t want to know. I don’t want that stress in my life, so I just don’t talk about it.

Avoiding the “depressing” reality of his dad’s cancer and minimizing the “stressful” realities of moving back from Colorado and the financial pressures that ensued were how Rick pursued positive feelings and avoided negative feelings. As he put it, with regard to the illnesses of loved ones, “I don’t want it to affect me negatively. It’s depressing for me to think about.”

A similar pattern emerged in Marsha’s story. After considering the pain her parents’ divorce caused her, Marsha commented soberly, “It was a massive divorce. It was just hurtful, and it was just awful.” Then she turned her attention to her future and to her daughter. She explained, “I just don’t ever want to get to a point where I feel it’s

necessary to be that nasty. I wouldn't want that example for my daughter either. It's not something I'd want to show her." Clearly, the negative emotions Marsha experienced as a child had created a narrative course to be avoided in her future.

For Ross, avoiding a potentially sad situation drove him to lie. He shared that as a child his family's dog—on two separate occasions—bit children in their neighborhood. On the second occasion, he remembered that he was the only one present when the child was bitten. He explained, "I just remember feeling like this is a serious thing, and a sad thing in our family." He knew that his parents might be forced to put the dog to sleep if anyone found out. Consequently, he remembered the he "convinced this kid not to tell anyone he had been bitten." He explained, "Killing the dog felt like too big of a move; I didn't want it to happen." Thus, Ross convinced the other child to conspire with him to lie in order that his family might avoid the potential sadness of losing their pet. His avoidance of this potential "sad thing" for his family moved him to choose to lie.

Franney's pursuit of specific feelings also affected the choices she made in her story. As she talked about her relationships with the various fathers of her three children, it was apparent that her constant desire to be wanted and affirmed had played a role in her choice to move from one relationship to another. She shared how her adoptive mother's criticisms of her had made her "feel unlovable" and, as she began to cry, Franney related how this had affected her relationship choices with men. "I have never been content. I think that's the thing with all my relationships. I'm super happy when I'm in love, but when it all settles down I get to the point of feeling like 'whatever.'" She continued by sharing how the relationships would end. "I would think, it would be so easy not to care. I feel like I give up on my relationships." For Franney, a need to feel wanted and loved

compelled her to leave relationships in which those feelings had dulled and to pursue relationships in which those feelings could be felt afresh.

Elaine's love for her Jewish family upbringing strongly influenced her choice to marry a Jewish man and to raise a family modeled after her own. As she explained, "Family is and was the most important thing to me growing up." Furthermore, she revealed that he brother and two sisters had all married Jewish spouses. "My brother is more religious and lives in Israel and married someone Jewish. My sister married someone who converted to Judaism, and my other sister married someone who is half Jewish." Thus, when it came time for her to marry, maintaining feelings of family unity and affirmation influenced her choice of a husband. She explained, "For me, I knew marrying a Jewish man was very important, and not marrying a Jewish man would have been very hard for my parents and my grandparents." She concluded, "It would have been something that was hard for my family to deal with, but it would have been hard for me to deal with as well." Clearly, Elaine's decision to marry someone who was Jewish was somewhat influenced by her desire to please her family and feel their affirmation.

Common Themes Regarding the Attribution of Meaning to Significant Events

From the interviews, two important themes emerged in relationship to the attribution of meaning to narrative events. First, narrative events were used to situate and understand the interviewees' current situation. Second, narrative events were used to situate and understand the other actors who played roles in their personal stories.

Significant Events in Understanding Self

Both Elaine and Hamilton shared their respective wedding ceremonies as examples of a significant event in the development of their individual story. For Elaine,

having a Jewish wedding ceremony was something that connected her to a Jewish past and signified her movement into the next stage of her future Jewish narrative. She characterized the unique traditions she inherited and performed as holy events for her. She explained, “I think there is something very sacred about doing something that people have done for hundreds of years, I mean thousands of years—a continuation of it.” In this way, Elaine saw her Jewish wedding as a meaningful event that connected her to and situated her in a much larger Jewish story.

To Hamilton, the wedding ceremony was meaningful because it expressed the progress he and his wife had made in learning to trust one another during their years of dating. In explaining, he recalled:

> I had returned to drinking, and it was destructive for us and for me. I was drinking way too much and she told me, “If you don’t stop drinking, I’m not saying I’m going to leave you, but I’m going to have to really think about it.” I told her that I’m going to stop. She wasn’t the reason that I stopped, but it definitely helped. She stayed with me through that and that meant a lot to me. I knew a long time before I asked her to marry me that I wanted to marry her, that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

In Hamilton’s view, his wife’s faithfulness through difficult times made their marriage ceremony meaningful in comparison to other “meaningless” ceremonies. He recalled, “I didn’t go to my undergraduate graduation because I didn’t want to do something that I thought was meaningless.” In contrast, he explained that “the one ceremony I don’t feel that way about would be my marriage; it was actually something I was celebrating.” Thus for Hamilton, his wedding was a significant event in his story because it represented the love and trust that had developed between him and his wife; it represented progress in their relationship.

Rick shared his move to Colorado as a key narrative event because, in his view, it epitomized his pursuit of a "carefree lifestyle." The literal move west also signified a figurative move for him—a move from a stressful life to a relaxed life. He explained, "We had friends who moved out there the year before and I always wanted to move to Colorado." A little later Rick continued, He, his girlfriend, and his friend talked about it one day, and said "Hey! Let's do it! It was the whole relaxed vibe." Consequently, the move was an event, from Rick's point of view, that exemplified what he wanted. As he explained, "It lived up to everything I wanted it to be. For four and a half years, it was fantastic."

Yet, Rick no longer lived in Colorado. When he discussed his living situation at the time of the interview, his enthusiasm waned. Upon being asked to explain why he shared the move to Colorado as meaningful, he replied, "The lifestyle in Colorado is the way I want to live my life." Then a bit later he longingly explained, "I tell my wife at least weekly that I want to move back to Colorado." He continued, "When our kids graduate and are out of the house that's where I want to retire, and it's still on my mind. It's on my mind almost every day that I miss Colorado." Clearly, Rick saw the move to Colorado and his time there as representing an ideal narrative position, and he saw his current situation (at the time of the interview) as less than an ideal position because it was not Colorado or "the way" he wanted "to live his life."

One further example of significant events being used to situate an interviewee in his or her narrative occurred in Ross's story. He relayed, from a broad historical perspective, the benefits of living in the wealth and luxury of the United States in the twenty-first century.

> Today, I have a place I can live; I have a comfortable warm place to sleep. I have food. I have no worries that I'm going to not have access to food or to running water. There are just all these things that are tremendous advantages. Historically speaking, I am winning. If you look at all of human history and even most of humanity on earth right now, I am doing extraordinarily well.

For Ross, being an American with all the luxuries it offered him in the twenty-first century was an occurrence or an event that allowed him to value his current story as a successful one. He positioned himself as "winning" in the broader human narrative.

Significant Events in Understanding Others

As Marsha told the story of her parents' divorce, she used the divorce and the events that surrounded it in order to better understand both her mother and her father. For Marsha, her mother was a hero who thrived after being abandoned by her husband. After her father left, Marsha explained, "It was just me and my mom and my sister for a long time. I got to watch my mother struggle. I got to watch her be this amazing single mom." A little later she continued to express how her mother overcame difficult circumstances and, in the process, demonstrated sacrificial love for her children. Marsha recalled, "Everything my mother did was about us or for us. She did all of the household fixing stuff. So, she was just this amazing single woman." In this way, Marsha used the event of the divorce and the events that surrounded it to situate her mother very positively in her narrative.

In contrast, Marsha's father was positioned much more negatively. Concerning his role in the divorce, she explained, "I was thirteen. I was actually away at the beach with my friend, and I came back and my dad was gone. He left." A little later in the interview, she continued, "He didn't tell my mother anything. My mom came home from work and all his stuff was gone. He dropped my sister off at a friend's house and said,

'I'm leaving your mother.'" Thus, as Marsha relayed the events surrounding her parents' divorce, she interpreted those events in order to position her parents in the narrative. She situated her father's participation in the divorce negatively and her mother's participation in the divorce positively.

Similarly, when Franney shared about her adoption, she used the significant events of her story to understand and position her adoptive and natural mothers in the narrative. She contemplated her conflicted relationship with her adoptive mother while telling her story. On the one hand, she recalled how supportive both her adoptive parents were. She explained that they "never missed a game" she played while growing up. For Franney, such actions positively reflected on her adoptive mother and father. She mentioned how much she appreciated that kind of support and consequently explained, "I don't want to hurt them ever!"

On the other hand, Franney remembered how her adoptive mother had intentionally thrown away the only letter and the few pictures her natural mother ever sent her. She recalled, "I went to find that shoebox and the letter was not in there. She had cleaned out everything. That letter was gone. Those pictures were gone." Franney then reflected on what that event demonstrated about her adoptive mother. She continued, "When I got up enough courage to actually confront her it was like a physical fight. She was so upset with me. So upset! It was her insecurities." In this way, Franney interpreted the event so as to explain her adoptive mother's actions as personal "insecurities."

Franney also used the letter and the events it relayed to interpret and understand her natural mother. When the letter arrived, Franney began to put together the circumstances surrounding her adoption. Consequently, she found a more sympathetic

place in her story for her natural mother, who lived in a small town and was abandoned by Franney's biological father when she was pregnant. Franney went on to explain that her natural mother "started going out with this guy named Greg, who had come back from the military. Basically, their agreement was that she would give up the baby and 'forget about' Franney's father. If she did those two things then Greg would marry her. Finally, concerning her natural mother, Franney sympathetically relayed, "She was desperate!" Thus, the events which the letter relayed helped Franney position her mother more positively in the story of her adoption.

One final example of the use of significant events in order to understand and position others in one's narrative occurred as Hamilton relayed his story. While expressing how he and his wife had met and fallen in love, he shared that he needed to make a difficult decision to leave a job as a plaintiff's lawyer in order to spend more time with her. In a narrative aside, he mentioned that his mother had been involved in a very serious car accident and had lost her leg. He explained, "I was frustrated because I felt like I was leaving… I wanted to be a plaintiff's lawyer. I wanted to represent people who had been injured in particular by doctors, also by people in auto accidents. Obviously my upbringing and my mother's circumstances had a lot to do with that."

Clearly, Hamilton's aspiration to represent those who had been injured in car accidents and received poor medical care following such accidents developed out of the events surrounding his mother's own auto accident. Because of his understanding of that significant event, Hamilton had positioned negligent drivers and doctors in his narrative as negative characters who needed to be held legally responsible for their actions.

Conversely, he positioned those injured in such accidents as positive characters who needed a legal advocate.

Common Themes Regarding Imagining and Constructing an Ideal Future

From the interviews, two important themes emerged when participants were asked to construct an ideal narrative future or a "happily ever after" conclusion to their stories. First, their ideal narrative futures were often guided by their positive or negative experiences in their narrative pasts. Second, their ideal narrative futures were regularly constructed with the goal of maximizing pleasure or minimizing pain.

Ideal Futures Guided by Narrative Pasts

Elaine's narrative brimmed full of positive family memories from her childhood. She characterized family as "the most important thing" when she was growing up. Furthermore, being Jewish was an integral part of that "nurturing and loving" story. Family relationships and Jewish community combined to form a positive and "close-knit" narrative past for her.

Thus, upon being asked to construct her ideal future narrative, Elaine imported her positive past experiences into her conceptions of an ideal future narrative experience. Reflecting on her past, she explained what outcomes would make her future narrative a failure. She commented, "I have all these things—but if family wasn't there, then that would be tragic. If the Jewish religion was lost then those would be the two tragic things I would pick out." When she was later asked to imagine a successful future for her children, she again used positive past family experiences in order to construct an ideal future. She explained, "I want my children to be happy and healthy. I want them to find someone that makes them a better person. I mean, that was the biggest thing for both me

and my husband." For Elaine, those "biggest" past experiences for her and her spouse guided her conception of a successful future story.

Ross's story was largely about the pursuit of comfort even if it meant lying to avoid uncomfortable situations. Consequently, when he was asked to construct an ideal future narrative, he imagined that such an ideal future would be to have "the wisdom to accept the things you cannot change." Ross explained what such a future would look like by telling a story from his past that, for him, detailed what his future should not look like.

> My sister has a tendency to get annoyed with our mom. She and my mom will get in these silly little fights. I don't get in those kinds of fights with my mom. I remember telling my sister, "Calm down. Don't do this." She was getting pissed off at me for not taking part in the fight and not letting her have the fight. And I told her, "You're going to regret this. This is an unimportant thing. You don't need to be annoyed at her."

Reflecting on what this situation had taught him, Ross concluded that in situations like this argument, while what the other person is doing might not be right, "you're usually going to be more unhappy if you are continually surprised by it." Consequently, he explained didn't want to be someone who behaved that way in the future. Clearly, Ross's vision of an ideal future was constructed using these less than ideal narrative experiences from his past.

A final example of an interviewee's past story being used to construct an ideal future story emerged during Marsha's interview. Her ideal future revolved around providing a faithful and stable home for her daughter. Interestingly, her memories of her parents' broken marriage and unstable personal lives following their divorce directed her conception of a successful future story.

> The things that I had to see as the child of an alcoholic, specifically because I lived with my mom all of the time, are things I don't ever want my daughter to

> see. There are still images burned into my memory that will stick with me forever. And, I don't want to be that person to my daughter, ever!

After detailing an especially traumatic memory of her mother getting drunk and passing out naked at an overnight party she was hosting, Marsha concluded that "alcoholism and infidelity were the downfall of their marriage." Consequently, her conception of a successful future story was to build a faithful marriage with her husband and to provide a stable home environment for her daughter. This is how she imagined her "happily ever after" should look.

Ideal Future Constructed to Maximize Pleasure and Minimize Pain

Interviewees also regularly imagined their ideal future narratives in a way that maximized the experience of pleasure and minimized the experience of pain. For example when Rick was asked how he would deal with a tragic future narrative, he was unwilling to interact with an imagined tragic future in any detail. He dismissed the possibility, "If something were to happen, if my wife were to get sick, if my son were to get sick, I don't know how I would react, because it really hasn't happened to our family." He wistfully explained, "hopefully this would never happen." Obviously Rick was not prepared to deal with a tragic future story.

Elaine also imagined an ideal future as being relatively painless and full of the things that she enjoyed the most as opposed to one characterized by loss or tragedy. When asked what outcomes might constitute a "successful" or "well-lived" life, she responded that for her "having a large, loving family" with "healthy and happy children" and many "friends who value who you are" would compose such a "well-lived" life. When asked, on the flipside, what might constitute an "unsuccessful" or "poorly lived"

life, she answered, “Not being close with family” and having a lot of “enemies” would be a “poorly lived” future story.

This theme emerged in subtle ways as many of the interviewees narrated their stories. Thus for Franney, having a “peaceful heart and mind” was a key component of living a “successful” future narrative, while being “full of regret” for joys she had not experienced would be an “unsuccessful” future story. Ross also did not want to live in a future that had “regrets.” Instead, he wanted to enjoy life by “living in the moment” while not taking life’s pleasures “for granted.” Finally, Hamilton wanted to enjoy the “comfort” of progressively knowing his wife better, as that would constitute an ideal future story for him. He explained, “I hope to be eighty years old and have her start to say something and before she can finish, I can say, ‘I know that’ and really know it.” Later in the interview he continued, “To know each other, there is something that’s comforting in that and also something to be proud of in that.” For most of the participants, an ideal future story would contain many of life’s pleasures and few (if any) of life’s pains.

Common Themes Regarding Beliefs

During the telling of their personal stories, the interviewees expressed many personal beliefs. As these were considered and analyzed, two themes developed. First, many of the participants’ beliefs were consistent with their specific type of non-Christian perspective. In short, they quite naturally represented their particular brand of belief as they told their stories. Second, despite expressing beliefs consistent with their specific worldviews, many other beliefs which they shared were inconsistent with their particular worldviews. Interestingly, often the participants quite naturally represented much that was in common with or unique to a Christian worldview.

Consistent Beliefs

Each of the participants in the study shared beliefs that were fairly consistent with their professed worldviews. For example, Rick described his religious views in ambivalent terms. He explained that he was not going to church and that he doesn't think about his beliefs on a daily basis. He explained that he simply tries to "live life and treat others as nicely as possible."

Consequently, he shared that life does not always need to be reasoned out. In short, he suggested that he did not always need a purpose for doing what he did, "I mean, just live life and let it happen. You know, the days are going to go by and the calendar is going to roll. It's going to be 2013, 2014, 2015: I'll be fifty, sixty, seventy years old one day and I'm not going to worry about it. That's how I live, in the moment. I don't worry about stuff." In order to clarify, Rick disclosed an example from his daily life. He explained, "I'll say to my wife, 'Can I put twenty dollars in the car?' She'll say, 'Wait until Thursday.' I'll wait until Thursday. I don't need to know why. I don't ask questions, and it helps." In this way, Rick relayed beliefs that were very consistent with his religiously ambivalent confession. As he put it, there is no reason to over think things when dealing with people: "whatever they want, just do it."

Ross also consistently represented his agnostic beliefs during the narration of his story. When, for example, he was asked to share one general lesson his story could teach others, he was very noncommittal. He waffled:

> I don't know. I don't know. That's tough. Everyone's got to, uh, everyone's got a different take on what they think it means. Uh, I don't know what it means. So, it's hard for me to say. It's sort of like saying like, "Uh, hey do you want to climb inside a Jell-O ladder?" If I said that to you, you wouldn't know what that means. So, it would be kind of like you have no way of processing it. I feel like there's an element of nonsense to it, like I don't know what it means.

For Ross, there was no clear answer or lesson in the events of his story. Consequently, he was "open" to most anything but simultaneously unsure about most things. He explained, "I'm willing to take on your idea of what you might think may happen. I'm also willing to take on that guy's idea of what might happen." He joked, "You never know, the craziest guy in the room could be the guy who's just like, 'I see the matrix.'" In these ways and others, Ross's agnostic beliefs were quite consistently expressed as he shared his story.

When Hamilton shared his story, he offered "selflessness" as a "transcendent" human good. This seemed to contradict his atheistic worldview, but his justification for his belief was part of a godless conception of how things "evolved." He explained, "Yes. I think selflessness is transcendent. It's true for us species-wide. As a general rule of thumb, it is better to act with a selfless nature as opposed to a selfish nature." A little later in the interview he detailed why he believes this is the case. He shared, "It must have evolved that way. Those parents who weren't selfless towards their children didn't survive and so this trait worked its way up the species." Hamilton, with this reasoning, attempted to express a belief in "selflessness" that was consistent with his atheism.

Finally, Marsha expressed views that were quite consistent with her secular humanist belief system. Upon being asked whether the lessons she learned from her story were "merely personal" or for "other people" or even "all of humanity," she explained, "No. I think my lessons are my lessons. Your lessons are your lessons. You know, everyone's story is different." Marsha did not want to argue for any universal truth from her story. The truths were merely personal for her and equally personal for others. She

believed her story's lessons were merely relatively applicable, not universally applicable. As she summarized it, "The standard for truth is that you exist. You're it."

Inconsistent Beliefs

As well as sharing beliefs consistent with their worldviews, each of the participants in the study also shared beliefs that were fairly inconsistent with their professed worldviews. For instance, Hamilton could not consistently assert his atheism as he shared the narrative about his love for his wife. When asked if he believed that the love he felt was merely the result of evolutionary mechanisms, he could not agree. He explained, "Science can only take us so far. There's more to us than science can measure." Though Hamilton was willing to assign the "transcendent good" of "selflessness" to evolution, he refused to do the same with the love he felt for his wife. He confessed that it is "odd for somebody who likes science so much" to say that, "but it demonstrates that I don't practice science."

While Elaine shared how important building a traditional Jewish family was for her, she also shared beliefs inconsistent with her professed conservative Jewish worldview. When asked if she believed in God toward the end of the interview, she shared, "There is not one tangible thing that is God. It's more that God is everywhere and in every action you do." Then a little later, she described religion as a tool that helps people come to God, but not as an expression of truth about God. Elaine explained, "I'm very accepting. For me, even though I feel like I'm Jewish, that doesn't mean I don't think people can't be Christian and have their beliefs." Consequently, even though on a Elaine claimed to daily recite the Hebrew Shema—that prayer that God is one and that

there is no other God—she expressed beliefs that were contrary to that traditional Hebrew confession.

From her secular humanist perspective in which she explained that there were no transcendent lessons but only personal lessons, Marsha nevertheless confessed that she believed all things happen for a reason or a purpose. While detailing the struggles she and her husband had faced together, she explained, “I’m the kind of person that believes everything happens for a reason. I mean everyone says that, but I truly believe that. There’s a reason that we’re going through what we’re going through right now. And it has made our marriage infinitely stronger.” Clearly Marsha believed that there was a purpose for the events in her story, even those events outside of her control. Yet, Marsha did not believe there was a purpose giver or, as she explained, “one god over all.” Thus, her belief that all things had happened “for a reason” was inconsistent with her professed secular humanist worldview.

A final example of the inconsistency between an interviewee’s shared beliefs and professed worldview emerged as Franney told her story. She characterized her religious belief in pantheistic terms. She shared, “My belief is that God is everything.” Yet, when she was asked to share a lesson which she had learned from her story, she described God as personal and not as an impersonal “everything.” She explained that if people are not careful they “miss the bigger picture of what god is trying to tell” them.

However, moments later, despite having just professed that people need to “listen” in order to hear “what god is trying to tell” them, Franney explained that nothing in life happens for a reason. “I try not to be a person who says, ‘Everything happens for a reason.’ I don’t really think everything happens for a reason. I think everything happens.”

Obviously, Franney's beliefs waffle back and forth between an impersonal, random, pantheistic conception of life and a personal, intentional, theistic conception of life. In this way, her beliefs are not always consistent with her professed worldview.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined how six non-Christians constructed meaning through the telling of a significant life story. The role feelings, significant events, the imagined future, and professed beliefs played in constructing and attributing meaning through that story were evaluated using the compare and contrast method. The next chapter is devoted to consolidating both the literary research from chapter two and the non-Christian interview research from chapter four in order to unveil any relevant common thematics between the two areas of data. At the conclusion of the next chapter, the researcher will make recommendations.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

In this final chapter, the goal was to integrate the literature from chapter two and the interview results from chapter four in order to better understand how narratives may be used to do Christian outreach. To accomplish this task, the themes from chapter four were used to guide a discussion between the interviewee's stories and the relevant literature on the topic of narrative evangelism and narrative learning.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand how telling and hearing stories—both personal and corporate—can be used to pursue evangelism. Four areas were identified that are important to understand: (1) the role feelings play in the attribution and construction of meaning in narrative, (2) the role significant events play in the attribution and construction of meaning in narrative, (3) the role the imagination plays in the attribution and construction of a meaningful future outcome in narrative, and (4) the role belief plays in the attribution and construction of meaning through narrative. These four areas led to four research questions that guided this study:

1. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to their feelings through narrative?
2. How do non-Christians attribute meaning to significant events in their lives through narrative?
3. How do non-Christians imagine and construct an ideal future through narrative?
4. How do non-Christians reflect beliefs through narrative?

In chapter two of this study, relevant literature was reviewed in three primary areas: (1) literature on Jesus' narrative teaching methods and the Bible's use of story generally, (2) literature on narrative learning from current secular educational research, and (3) literature on the use of narrative for Christian outreach. In chapter three, this study's research methodology was identified and explained; furthermore, the researcher's position and the study's limitations were noted. Chapter four summarized and highlighted the findings from the interviews. Finally, this chapter will draw conclusions and make recommendations by initiating a dialogue between the relevant literature from chapter two and the interview themes from chapter four.

Emotions Guide Perceptions of and Choices in One's Life Narrative

Often during the course of the interviews, we found the participants to be quite pleased with the results of their stories. Hamilton was satisfied with the intimacy that had developed and was continuing to develop between him and his wife; Elaine was thankful that her entire family was "happy" during the planning of her Jewish wedding and with the wedding ceremony itself; and Ross was appreciative, even grateful, when he reflected on the "really lucky" events of his relatively prosperous and healthy narrative.

Yet, while some perceived their stories to be successful, we found that others were not satisfied, thankful, or appreciative of their past or current narratives. Franney felt fear when she considered the possibility of again being rejected as she was initially by her natural mother and then, a second time, by her adoptive mother; Rick felt dissatisfied with living away from "stress-free" Colorado and not having the money that he and his wife used to make there. Marsha felt jealous that her friends got to have a relatively happy childhood and parents who were not divorced. These three narratives

were full of negative feelings of fear, dissatisfaction, and jealousy, and we found that these negative feelings affected each participant's future narrative choices.

One clear example of this emerged as Franney told her story. She explained that she felt "unlovable" because of her adoptive mother's criticism of her. She went on to share how she felt repetitively discontent with her romantic relationships. As she put it, "I'm super happy when I'm in love, but when it all settles down I get to the point of feeling like 'whatever.'" Clearly, Franney longed to feel constantly in love. However, when the intensity of those feelings naturally waned—as they always will—she decided to "give up" on her relationships. In this way, Franney's desire to feel constantly in love had created an unhealthy cycle in her life; she had had three children with three separate fathers and had been married twice. No earthly romantic relationship could ever satisfy her insatiable desire to feel always loved and wanted.

Franney's narrative was being controlled by her need to be loved; her feelings had trapped her in a destructive cyclical storyline. As Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair explained in chapter two of this study, "Stories can give our lives structure, coherence and meaning, or they can provide the backdrop against which we experience our lives as complex, fragmented or without meaning."[234] Franney was experiencing a complex, fragmented, and meaningless narrative. Her need to feel constantly loved was making her very unhappy. What Franney needed was to "reinterpret and reevaluate [her] old ways of being and acting and to explore new ways of life."[235] She needed to identify "with a powerful story that makes sense of a person's experience in a new way."[236]

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[234] Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair, 1.

[235] Wiessner, 10.

This is precisely where the ultimate story of God's gospel love provides the answer to Franney's insatiable need to feel loved. This is where a fragmented and broken storyline finds its perfect unity. Thus, after much Christ-like prayer for "the Father's wisdom as to what questions [are] appropriate to ask,"[237] and after much sincere questioning and listening "with the express purpose of learning"[238] from the story, the time may well be right for connecting Franney's broken narrative to God's perfectly restorative narrative.

It is worth highlighting at this point that our gospel story answer must meet the unbeliever's narrative question or need. In short, Franney's narrative need was to find an ultimately satisfying love—a constant and unconditional love. We would thus be misguided to meet her with a good news story detailing how we find rest in the person of Jesus or describing how we find righteousness in him. Though she, without question, needs to find her rest and righteousness in Jesus Christ, such stories would not speak to her perceived need. As author Rick Richardson explains, "We need to enter their [non-Christians'] world, just as Jesus entered ours. We need to make sense of their sensibilities and communicate to their emerging consciousness."[239] For any gospel storytelling that neglects to enter into the non-believer's world and to answer the non-believer's questions will likely only be "an unmeaning sound that cannot change anything."[240]

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[236] Merriam, ed., *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*, 88.

[237] Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism*, 225.

[238] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 21.

[239] Richardson, 38.

[240] Newbigin, 6.

Significant Events Place and Define the Story's Characters

As the study's participants shared their stories, we noted that the important events of their narratives were typically used to position the various players in the story (both the storyteller and the other characters in the storyteller's story) as either advocates or adversaries. The events, in other words, were often interpreted to represent the characters' motives.

For example, Hamilton shared about a major turning point in his relationship with his wife. He used these events to both explain how their love for and intimacy with one another had grown, and to characterize his wife as a major advocate—even a heroine—thus far in his life's story. He recalled:

> I had returned to drinking, and it was destructive for us and for me. I was drinking way too much and she told me, "If you don't stop drinking, I'm not saying I'm going to leave you, but I'm going to have to really think about it." I told her that I'm going to stop. She wasn't the reason that I stopped, but it definitely helped. She stayed with me through that and that meant a lot to me. I knew a long time before I asked her to marry me that I wanted to marry her, that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

In this way, Hamilton used a major event of his story to locate himself and his wife in the progression of their romance. Namely, he used it to show that they had grown in their love for one another by working to end his destructive drinking pattern. Furthermore, Hamilton used this event to better understand his wife as a character in his life's narrative. In his estimation, this interaction showed that his wife was a faithful and good person and obviously wanted what was best for him.

Marsha narrated how her mother "struggled" yet was an "amazing single mom" after her father had an affair and left their family; she used these events to locate her mother as a heroine and her father, in many ways, as a villain in her story. In a similar

fashion, Franney positioned her adoptive mother as a villainess and herself as a victim in her narrative by sharing how her adoptive mom had thrown away the only letter and pictures her natural mother had ever sent to her. Rick interpreted his move to Colorado as evidence that he was spontaneous and free—living "the relaxed vibe" lifestyle of which he had always dreamed. Consequently, his move back represented the opposite about him—that he was now restricted and confined by life's pressures. In these ways and others, our study's participants used major events to position and define themselves (and others) through the telling of their stories.

This observation (gleaned from the stories we collected in chapter four) fits well with what the educational literature has said. Clark noted that we "make sense of all experience by narrating it (constructing it as a kind of story)," even the story of our own identity.[241] Or, as Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair explained, stories "can help us to find new meaning and new direction or can support us in coming to terms with the way things are and with whom we are."[242] Basically, as we relay the events of our stories, we are interpreting ourselves and others.

Such narrative interpretations are progressive however. Stories are told and retold, and our interpretations are transformed through this process of retelling or reinterpreting. Thus, storytelling and re-storytelling "frequently leads to revised interpretations, enhanced self-awareness, and learning that precipitates constructive, developmental change."[243]

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[241] Clark, 3.

[242] Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair, 2.

[243] Pfahl and Wiessner, 10.

All of this has profound implications for evangelism when we consider that storytelling is not an activity that typically occurs in isolation. The telling and retelling of stories—the interpreting and reinterpreting of the events of our lives and of ourselves in and through those events—is usually done in community with others. "Stories are relational; they build relationships, [and] create bonding links."[244] Furthermore, as Pfahl and Wiessner note, "stories offer an accessible venue for seeing others' perspectives."[245] Consequently, as we hear the stories of others and share our own stories in response, we reinterpret events together. In short, we are blessed to be able to help those with whom we are in relationship progressively understand their stories and themselves in terms of God's grand redemptive story.

Therefore, in doing narrative evangelism, we must utilize the transformative potential of our storytelling. We should first respectfully listen to how our non-Christian friends interpret their stories (and our own stories for that matter) and only then begin to narrate our gospel stories and interpretations to them in response. Furthermore, this process must not be done in isolation from a faith that "God is the one who saves," not us.[246] Thus, narrative evangelism should always be pursued by listening for the ways "God has been active" in our friend's story and by explaining "how God [has] had his hand upon" our life stories in a similar way.[247]

It is worth noting that this is not a simple endeavor but an often slow and arduous process. Sometimes we must "recognize that many of those we meet are not yet ready to

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[244] Ibid., 12.

[245] Ibid.

[246] Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism*, 224.

[247] Tim George, "Personal Evangelism Presentation: Narrative Evangelism," AM International Blog, entry posted March 11, 2003, http://www.amintl.org/evangelism/narrative.htm (accessed June 5, 2013).

hear the Gospel."[248] Therefore, much of our time may be initially spent listening to our non-Christian friends and really loving them in order to win a chance to be heard. For as Moreland and Muehlhoff explain, "If we want persons of a different faith to listen to our story, then we must listen to theirs. If we want others to attend to our convictions, then we must first attend to theirs. If we desire for others to cultivate common ground with our faith, we must do so first."[249]

Many times our non-Christian friends will tell stories and share events that are hostile to Christianity. Often it will be difficult to listen to such stories without objecting. Yet, as events are shared that villainize Christians and even Christ Jesus himself, it is important to faithfully remember the transformative power of gospel stories and, more importantly, to "remember that the Good News is, above all, the greatest *story* ever told."[250]

God's narrative is a story "about the *whole* world from its very beginning to the very end."[251] It is a story that includes us and our non-Christian friends as well. And, in the end, it is essential to recall that Jesus "was God who told stories"[252] and that his earthly life's missional story is what made possible our transformation from enemies to friends of God. By listening to our non-Christian friends' stories and by speaking gospel stories in response, we can (through God's grace) help them reinterpret and retell the events of their life stories in connection to God's ultimate good news story.

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[248] Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism*, 224.

[249] Moreland and Muehlhoff, 55-56.

[250] Kallenberg, 119.

[251] Webber, 25.

[252] Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*, 116.

Past Experiences, an Ideal Future, and Maximizing Pleasure

As we interviewed the study's participants and asked them to construct an ideal future ending for their narratives, it became clear that their experiences (both positive and negative) and their pursuit of happiness or pleasure strongly influenced their imagined happily-ever-afters. For example, Elaine's overwhelmingly positive childhood memories of family interactions and Jewish traditional practices directed and fueled her ideal future family narrative for her marriage and her children; Jewish family was "the most important thing" for her. Since these things had provided so much joy in Elaine's past story, a future story without a happy family and Jewish religion seemed like a "tragic" ending to her.

We encountered these themes in Ross's and Marsha's stories as well. For Ross, the experience of watching his mother and sister quibble over what he considered "unimportant things" drove him to imagine an ideal future in which he would have "the wisdom to accept the things [he could not] change." He reflected that he would be "more unhappy" in his future if he—like his mother and sister—attempted to change the things about other people which he did not like. Similarly, for Marsha, an ideal future involved avoiding past negative experiences. She supposed a happy future would be to provide a stable and peaceful home environment for her daughter. She remembered how tumultuous and unhappy her parents' divorce had been for her and explained, "I don't want to be that person to my daughter, ever!" In these ways and others, positive and negative experiences and the pursuit of happiness proved a strong influence on the interviewees' imagined happily-ever-after futures.

Yet, are such future conceptions realistic? Is a future story devoid of painful experiences and replete with pleasurable experiences even possible? Such stories simply don't typically ring true in our dangerous and fallen world. Because of this, Jesus didn't tell such unrealistic stories. His stories were always "realistic" and "relevant" to his hearers.[253] Indeed, as Vincent argued in chapter two of this study, "Christ never employed an impossible or improbable incident" in his stories.[254] Therefore, those who heard Jesus' parables "loved—and remembered" them because they had experienced broken relationships like those in Jesus' narratives and knew sinful people like those in Jesus' narratives.[255] Consequently, speaking stories that ring true into the plotline of a non-Christian's idealized and unrealistic future narrative provides yet another excellent opportunity for the storytelling evangelist.

When confronting such improbable conceptions of an individual's future story, sharing a Christian's gospel-centered future narrative conception has a unique advantage; for, it can be simultaneously rational and hopeful. It is a story that incorporates the current reality of sin and brokenness and, concurrently, the future hope of righteousness and restoration. It is a story that allows its narrator to be both realistic about the present and idealistic about the future.

Another advantage of telling such gospel-centered future narratives is that they rather naturally and graciously challenge those listening. This is an inherent strength in storytelling evangelism; the story confronts the audience on behalf of the storyteller. In short, the hearers are involved "in the context" of the story; they are removed "from their

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[253] Zuck, 307.

[254] Vincent, 57.

[255] Kistemaker, 52.

comfort zones and [placed] in the story [as] active participants."[256] Thus, all "who hear…are at liberty to take up positions…There is no coercion."[257] The listeners are allowed to find and ask questions about the reasonableness of their own future narrative hopes. The storytelling evangelist is consequently somewhat removed from the often awkward and isolating activity of directly confronting unbelievers with their story's flaws since unbelievers are invited, by the narrative, to personally and introspectively do this on their own.

It is worth noting that evangelistic stories, realistic yet hopeful gospel stories, demand transparency and humility from the narrator. In order for our narratives to speak honestly about life in a fallen world and to speak of hope that one day there will be a happily-ever-after for all those who are in Christ Jesus, we must tell stories that represent both the futility of life on our own and the victory of life in Christ. There can be no sugarcoating of our stories. To do so would essentially lead us and the listener to a gospel of works in which there is no hopeful ending.

Consistent and Inconsistent Beliefs Emerge Through Storytelling

As the study's participants shared their stories, we found that they rather naturally, yet unwittingly, revealed many of their most deeply held beliefs. Sometimes these beliefs were quite consistent with their professed worldviews. However, many times the personal beliefs that emerged through the sharing of their narratives were beliefs that were inconsistent with the interviewees' professed worldviews. In other words, many of the participants described or defined themselves as one type of person (e.g. as an atheist or a Jewish theist), but inadvertently shared convictions in their stories

[256] Ibid.

[257] Funk, 69-70.

that revealed themselves to be living in a way that was inconsistent with how they had described or defined themselves.

Some fascinating examples of such inconsistencies emerged. For example, Hamilton failed to hold to his professed atheism when he talked about how he loved his wife. Though he was consistent in asserting a rather mechanistic view of human behavior for most of the interview, he was unable to import such a view into his most intimate of relationships. So he explained, “There’s more to us than science can measure.” Then, when he was asked if this was consistent with what naturalistic science would say, he confessed that it “demonstrates that I don’t practice science.”

Elaine provided another remarkable instance of such inconsistency. As she narrated her traditional Jewish family story, she clearly understood herself to be from a “conservative Jewish” worldview. In harmony with this profession, she explained that she daily recites the Hebrew Shema, a prayer that asserts that there is only one God. However, when asked toward the end of her story to detail her specific beliefs about God, she explained, “There is not one tangible thing that is God. It’s more that God is everywhere and in every action you do.” Consequently, like Hamilton, Elaine’s professed beliefs (i.e. her conservative Jewish worldview) and practiced beliefs (i.e. some variation of pantheism) were not soundly consistent with one another as her story unfolded during the course of the interview.

Many such opposing convictions were revealed through the other participants’ storytelling as well. Marsha professed a secular humanist worldview but nonetheless confessed that “everything happens for a reason.” Franney characterized herself as a pantheist and explained that “God is everything,” yet later described God as personal,

caring, and communicative. Thus, she shared that people should be careful to listen, or they might "miss the bigger picture of what god is trying to tell" them.

Such inconsistency (between professed and practiced beliefs) provides an open door for good news storytelling or narrative evangelism. Moreover, the Christian should not be surprised by such inconsistencies in the stories of non-believers since we recognize that God is the creator of all; thus, vestiges of his crafting continue to be present in believer and non-believer alike. In fact, one of those vestiges is storytelling itself. "We are storytelling animals because the greatest Storyteller of all created us. The human race, made in God's image, is *homo narran* because the Creator is *Deus narran*."[258]

Consequently, when non-Christians tell us their stories, we should anticipate and make note of areas in which their professed worldviews and their practiced beliefs are at odds with one another. For these contradictions will often be areas in which "God's image" is still reflected in the life of the unbeliever; these may well be the areas in which God is at work in that particular person's life. In short, such inconsistencies may highlight areas of longing in a non-believer's life that can only be satisfied through a relationship with God made possible in Jesus Christ. Therefore, as we tell our gospel stories, we would do well to tell those that point to the satisfaction that only the Incarnate Son can provide for the specific longings of our unbelieving friend.

By bringing such areas to their attention, we are helping them to "renegotiate meaning as they deal with what is out of the ordinary [or] contradictory" in their narratives.[259] Thus storytelling evangelism, when done well, can gently highlight non-

[258] Steffen, "My Journey from Propositional to Narrative Evangelism," 204.

believers' contradictory beliefs and help the person "step outside…[their] habitual meanings…[by] stimulating…a breach of coherence in the life narrative."[260] Such a "disorienting dilemma or…cognitive dissonance…triggers learning."[261] Furthermore, this learning is precisely what may lead to transformation since our life stories are "not fixed…but told and retold in response to situational change throughout the life course."[262] In the end, the storytelling evangelist is helping the non-believer to "reflect critically upon the stories, information, and ideas" they have narrated by offering an alternative—more consistent—narrative.[263]

Using stories in this way is nothing new. It is what Jesus did with his parables; it is what Lewis and Tolkien did with their fairy stories; and, it is what all Christians are called to do with their testimonies—namely, to narrate clear and understandable gospel stories. As Lewis explains, such good news storytelling "takes…the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity.'"[264] It reveals to non-Christians their deeply familiar longings and simultaneously reveals the only One who meets and satisfies those longings. This is the goal of narrative evangelism.

It is important, as we close this section, to stress that Christians must humbly be aware of and be at war against our own propensity toward inconsistent living; it is not

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[259] Rossiter, "A Narrative Approach to Development: Implications for Adult Education," 68.

[260] Ibid.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Rossiter, "Understanding Adult Development as Narrative," 79.

[263] Pfahl and Wiessner, 11.

[264] Walmsley, ed., 524.

merely unbelievers who say they believe one thing but demonstrate they believe another. Followers of Jesus are just as prone to do this as anyone else. Therefore, if we plan to speak gospel stories that highlight the inconsistent beliefs of others, it would be wise to first take inventory and work on the inconsistencies in our own life stories. For it is not only our calling to speak gospel stories, but also to live out our gospel stories. As Macaulay and Barrs have argued, "Christians are to take their lives, all their diverse experiences, and mold them into something beautiful, into what the Bible calls 'the beauty of holiness' (Ps. 29:2 KJV)."[265] This is an important calling. A story told against a backdrop of hypocrisy is not appealing, and such stories will not speak good news into the lives of unbelievers.

Recommendations for Further Research

Our current study focused attention on how narratives could be used to pursue evangelism with specific attention given to the role feelings, significant narrative events, imagined future outcomes, and beliefs played in the stories the non-Christian participants shared. Because attention was mainly focused on these four areas, there were necessarily other areas of study that were not given adequate attention. Thus, what follows are some potential areas for the further study of narrative evangelism.

In this study, each of the participants shared a story they felt was especially meaningful to them. None of the participants knew one another, and none of the participants were characters in the other participants' stories. Instead, each story that was told was self-contained; there were no overlapping narratives being studied. Yet, it would be beneficial to see how one story would emerge differently if multiple participants in a single narrative were interviewed. In other words, how would the various characters

[265] Barrs, *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience*, 22.

locate one another differently according to their unique position and perspective in the story? By having different narrators share the same story, much could be learned about how significant events are used to interpret the motives of others and then used to position them either positively or negatively in that story.

This study primarily focused attention on the stories non-believers told (e.g. How do non-believers make meaning of their feelings through the telling of their stories? How do non-Christians' beliefs surface through the telling of their narratives?). However, it would be quite beneficial to study and better understand how unbelievers hear and make sense of the gospel stories that narrative evangelists tell. Thus, one could construct a qualitative research project in which non-Christian participants were told a good news story and asked a series of questions in order to discern how they interpret and critique that story. Learning how to rightly hear the stories non-believers tell in order to better grasp how we can help them understand their own story is only half the task narrative evangelists face. We must also better comprehend how gospel storytelling can be most worshipfully and effectively done.

Appendix

Basic Question:

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you currently live?
3. How many siblings do you have?
4. What is your highest completed educational level?
5. What is your occupation?
6. Are you married? If not, have you been married?
7. Do you have children? If so, how many?

Pre-interview Questions: Please answer the following with a short descriptive paragraph (e.g. 3-5 sentences).

1. How would you describe the community in which you grew up?
2. How would you describe your family when you were growing up?
3. How would you describe your religious background / heritage?
4. How would you describe your current religious beliefs and practices?
5. What is something that gives your life meaning / purpose? Why is this meaningful / purposeful?
6. At the end of your life, what outcome(s) might constitute a successful / well-lived life?
7. What outcome(s) might constitute an unsuccessful / poorly-lived life?

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