

“Narrating the World”: What Can Church Leaders Do?

Preaching and Pastoral Leadership

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Who Gets to Narrate the World?

Recently B. Weber and P. Kenyon issued [a clarion call](#) to the evangelical community that has garnered widespread involvement and support by Christian leaders. After briefly setting the stage by affirming the authority of Scripture and noting the myriad of global challenges facing the evangelical church at the beginning of the 21st century, they say “Today, as in the ancient era, the church is confronted by a host of master narratives that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: Who gets to narrate the world? They believe, and rightly so, that if evangelicals are to be faithful in the future in the midst of confusing options, this question must be answered in terms of the biblical narrative: “The Bible tells the true story of the world.” For pastors who recognize the urgency of this call to take hold of the Bible as the true master narrative, what can be done to invite congregations into it?

Pastors in the Grip of the Gospel

The first point may seem elementary, but it is essential. Pastors and church leaders must feel deeply in their bones the following three (intertwining) things: First, there must be a deep sense of the biblical story centered in Jesus Christ as the true story of the whole world. Second, there must be a discerning understanding of the cultural story—the other competing story—that is shaping our lives. This growing insight into culture must be thankfully appreciative as well as severely critical. Third, there must be a comprehension that in the mission of the church to incarnate the good news of the kingdom these two stories intersect; that is, the embodiment of the biblical story, of a faithful witness to the end of the story, will necessarily take on cultural form. The church’s very identity is defined by the words of Jesus to his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 17:21). We are a people sent to make known the good news of the kingdom, the end of the story, in our particular cultural context. That good news must be translated into our cultural situation in a way that affirms the good while at the same time rejecting the idolatry that twists the good. Embodying the story requires a missionary encounter with our culture, a clash of ultimate stories. If these things—a sense of truth and molding power of the biblical story, an affirmative yet antithetical understanding of the cultural story, a recognition of the centrality of our missional identity and calling—are not deeply embedded in the pastor’s heart, they will not take on flesh in the congregational life of the church. But when they do, the question then becomes how can this passion be channelled to help congregations grasp the same vision?

The Importance of the Family in Narrating the World

Families play a crucial role in transmitting the story to the next generation. Pastors need to underscore the crucial importance of family worship (cf. M. Goheen, “Hope for the Christian Family: Family Worship,” in *Clarion* 49, 6 [2000] 125-29) and of reading Bible story books that nurture an understanding of the Bible as one story. In our former church the pastoral team examined a wide range of books written for children, before displaying the best series prominently on a table in the foyer (cf. M. Bratchelor and J. Haysom, *The Children’s Bible in 365 Stories* [Lyon Hudson, 2001]).

Coupled with encouraging parents in family worship and helping them choose helpful materials, pastors must encourage parents to struggle with the cultural story that is shaping their lives and the lives of their children, especially as it is transmitted through television and movies (cf. W.D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* [rev.ed.; Brazos, 2007]). Indeed, “narrating the world” for children will require an intentional and vigorous educational plan of action.

Narrating the World in Worship and Preaching

Neither the intellectualism of Enlightenment-inspired worship nor the self-centred narcissism of some contemporary worship will draw us into the story of Scripture. Rather, worship fashioned on the pattern of the Psalms—focusing on the narrative of God’s mighty deeds—can move us more deeply into God’s story. The story of the Bible is a record of God’s mission, of God’s mighty acts in the world to restore a corrupted creation to again be his kingdom. Worship enables us to celebrate what God has done in the past but not as a stale history lesson. Since we are part of that story our worship also nourishes our participation in his ongoing work which continues to the present and will continue until God’s purposes are fulfilled. As J.E. Burkhart says: “Fundamentally, worship is the celebrative response to what God has done, is doing, and will do” (*Worship* [Westminster John Knox, 1982] 17). The way the worship is structured, the hymns that are chosen, the way various elements are introduced and related to each other all can focus our attention on the story of God’s mighty deeds—past, present and future—in which we find our place.

Perhaps baptism and the Lord’s Supper are especially capable of reminding us that we are part of an ongoing story. Each of these rites focuses on the mightiest of God’s deeds—the cross of Jesus. Yet it matters how we focus on Christ’s crucifixion. Too often our celebration of these sacraments nurtures a passive reception of the means of grace designed solely to give individual salvation. Yet there is no better place to remind the congregation that this is our call to communal participation in God’s mission. The cross is that place where God accomplished his purpose to defeat sin and evil for the sake of the creation he loved. In baptism we are incorporated into the community that shares in this victory and is called to make it known to the world. Baptism is a rite of initiation into a community that continues the mission of Jesus until the end. The Eucharist continually nourishes us for that mission by orienting our lives to the central event where the victory of the kingdom was accomplished and pointing us forward to the culmination of God’s purpose. Put simply, both sacraments should be communal, eschatological, and missional, and our liturgical celebration of them should foster this view.

Preaching is a central element of worship. The business of preaching is to bring us face to face with Jesus Christ and all his saving power to equip us for our mission in the world. Jesus stands as the fulfilment of a long story. The OT was written to form and equip a people to play their role in God’s redemptive purposes for the world. The NT tells the story of Israel with Jesus as the fulfilment, applying that story to form a faithful missional people in new cultural contexts. Thus to preach Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, is to form a missional people to embody God’s purposes in the world. Jesus reveals and accomplishes the end of universal history. Our preaching of Christ is God’s power to give us kingdom life and equip us for our mission in the world. Seen from this perspective, the rampant practice of distilling principles from the text to satisfy an immediate gratification for relevance seems a far cry from what is needed. Sermon bits or morsels separated from their redemptive-historical context may be tasty, but, like candy, will not nourish us. It may help us feel better or comfort us or guide us or inform us but leave the idolatrous cultural story untouched.

Spiritual Formation for Life in God’s Story

A lesson from the early church may help us gain perspective on spiritual formation. The ancient church’s distinctive sense of identity developed as an alternative story was pressed on the catechumen in the process of catechism. The story of the Bible supplanted the story that gripped the public life of Roman culture. The whole catechetical process had a pastoral purpose to empower a

distinctive people (cf. E. Ferguson, "Irenaeus' Proof of the Apostolic Preaching and Early Catechetical Tradition," *Studia Patristica* 18, no. 3 [1989] 119-40). This admirably summarizes the purpose of spiritual formation and church education. Yet when the church is viewed as a voluntary religious organization, and churches in capitalist fashion compete for members, and demands for belonging are pretty low. Programs for spiritual formation either do not exist or are offered as consumer items that may enrich the religious life of members. Or alternatively they remain much indebted to the Enlightenment tradition: catechism is about only knowledge. Although it is evident there is a need for much more intentional effort to fashion "educational" programs to lead children and adults deeper into the biblical story, perhaps the new members class is a strategic place to begin. Designing that class with the express intention of challenging new members to take their place in the story of the Bible can go a long way to start on the right foot.

Understanding the comprehensive scope of the biblical narrative will challenge any kind of spiritual-sacred dichotomy that limits the gospel to so-called religious and moral concerns. Following Jesus involves being shaped by the gospel in our whole lives. Living in the biblical story means to witness to the true purpose for which God has created the various cultural and societal structures. To simply accept the existing structures, shaped as they are by the idolatry of the cultural story, is to deny Christ's cosmic Lordship. And so this equipping task is an important part of the pastor's calling. We might consider the work of pastors in two parts: the first half is to gather the people for worship. The other half is to send them back to their daily callings equipped to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Creating space for members to share about their callings and how they relate it to following Christ, gathering together folk from similar professions and callings for discussion of what it would mean to be faithful to the gospel, setting up worldview or current issues classes that discuss the significance of the gospel for public life, and the encouragement of small groups whose purpose is to nourish people for their callings in public life are but a few of the possibilities.

A New Ecclesial Self-Understanding

Some of what has been suggested in this brief essay may seem unrealistic. But the difficulty does not stem so much from the impossibility of taking on these responsibilities as from a self-understanding that many Christians have that would undermine these efforts. In a nutshell, we have fit the biblical story into the cultural story and allow that cultural story to define our identity. In some churches it will be a long and tedious task, requiring massive amounts of patience, to slowly nurture a renewed self-understanding that is shaped by the gospel. We can be thankful that the kingdom is God's work and we are only called to be faithful at the place we are. The size of the task will deepen and broaden our prayer life and lead us to root our own lives and efforts more deeply in the power of the gospel.