

BIBLICAL STORYTELLING AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA Tom Boomershine

Many bemoan the impact of television on our culture and the church but few propose how to use it creatively. Innovation and creativity generally involve the reappropriation of something old rather than the creation of something wholly new. For example, the invention of the airplane involved the adaptation of the basic principles of a bird's wings in combination with the mechanics of the propeller. Similarly, innovative teaching of the Bible in this age of electronic media will involve the adaptation of old educational principles in new forms. Thus, I would propose that we explore the ancient educational methods of Biblical storytelling in combination with the electronic media of audio and video tape. We may not be able to broadcast on the major radio and television networks. But, with the development of video cassettes and cable television, we can begin to learn how to use these media in local churches as a means for creative interpretation of the Bible.

Educational Methods of Biblical Storytelling

Over half of the Bible is narrative. These narratives were composed in an oral culture in which the composition, transmission, and public performance of the narrative was done by speaking. A basic educational process was the memorization of the stories. As we are now learning through the study of existing oral cultures, this memorization was probably not word for word. Memorization in oral cultures generally involved the memorization of basic formulas and structures. The stories were then composed anew at each telling. The way in which we learn and tell jokes today is a remnant of that ancient educational process. With the writing down of Biblical narratives, different patterns of memorization appeared in ancient education. Far more emphasis was given to word for word memorization and to the exact reproduction of the sounds of the story as recorded in the book. Of course, given the character of ancient manuscripts, the memorization of a text was a virtual necessity in order to be able to read it aloud.

The reappropriation of Biblical storytelling in education today will necessarily involve the rediscovery of the importance of memorization. Storytelling as an art form depends on the direct human interaction that is possible only when the story can be told from memory. There are two stages to the learning of Biblical stories from memory. The first is to identify the structure of the story and to memorize its basic formulas. Repetition of the sounds of the story can then be associated with that structure. It cannot be over-emphasized how important it is to treat the story as episodes or "chunks" of story rather than as individual words.

In storytelling, the educational goal is that the students of whatever age learn the story so that they can, in turn, tell it to someone else. The educational process with any particular Biblical story needs to progress from a first stage in which the teacher tells the story to a second stage in which the students learn to tell the story themselves. This can be done by a variety of techniques including the physical manipulation of figures on a piece of cloth or felt, drawing pictures of the story, or making a diorama. As a general rule, however, role playing is not helpful for learning to tell stories because a storyteller has to present all the characters. The story can be learned in short segments or told in a variety of forms. But, at some point, each person has to pass through the often frightening experience of telling the story to someone else from memory. It is often best for this to happen first in pairs

in which two people can work together on enabling each other to learn the story. Having developed some confidence, each person can tell it to the group. The development of the skills and the confidence to do this can take anywhere from two hours to several years.

Storytelling in Electronic Media

Once a person or group has developed the basic knowledge and skills of Biblical storytelling through the educational methods of oral culture, it can be immediately adapted to the new forms and styles of electronic culture.

We live in the midst of a media revolution, the most significant media shift since the development of print, but the transmission and interpretation of the Bible in electronic media has only begun. Nevertheless, the experience of both telling the stories and hearing them told by persons known to us is a primary learning experience. There is nothing that kids of all ages like more than hearing a good recording of themselves. And, in contrast to theological discourse, Biblical storytelling is immediately compatible with electronic media.

A basic process is for the teacher to make an audio tape of the stories that are being learned to pass out copies which each student can play at home. It is important that the story be interspersed with music; e.g., upbeat jazz, instrumental rock, or classical music. Once students have experienced their teacher telling the stories on audio or videotape, the next stage is for them to make their own electronic form of the tradition. This involves their telling the story from memory perhaps with different students telling different parts of the story (no dramatization, please). Music is always helpful and the identification of the music they want to use is an important part of the process.

The final stage is for copies of the tape to be sent either to grandparents, other members of the family, or younger/older persons in the church. They can also be taken to persons who are hospitalized, confined at home, or in prison. But, at some point, it is essential that the stories that they record are distributed. Only in this way is the ancient oral tradition network continued in the new media of our age. If a video tape can be made, it can be played for the congregation, either outside the sanctuary after a service of worship or in small groups. My experience with all age groups has been that they are both amazed at the impact of their storytelling and excited about the educational process that enabled them to do it.

Eventually, this is the educational process that will produce the skilled and informed students who will be able to communicate the Biblical tradition effectively in the medium of television. Rather than approaching television as a mass medium that can only be used by network stars, we need to think of television as a person-to-person medium that is thoroughly compatible with the basic traditions of the Christian religion and that can be used in a variety of ways in the local church.

In summary, a basic theory of Christian education for our time is to see the media shift of our age as an opportunity for the reappropriation of basic educational methods of our past. As Marshall McLuhan maintained, there is a growing interest in the forms of tribal culture as electronic communication increasingly makes us a world tribe; from rock and roll bands in Shea Stadium to storytelling conventions in Tennessee, the styles of the tribe are re-emerging in our culture. In the Biblical tradition, we have a splendid record of the educational processes of the tribes in which the Judeo-Christian tradition was born. And what

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we learn from their experience as storytellers can be reappropriated and used directly in the electronic media of the 20th century.

Dr. Boomershine is Assistant Professor of New Testament at the United Theological Seminary, a Graduate Professional School of the United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio.