

VIII THE FUTURE OF BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

My vision of the future of Biblical storytelling is of a new appropriation of an ancient tradition. The need for this reappropriation arises out of the new time in which we live. There is a need for a new Knowledge, a new relationship to the traditions of our religion.

This need arises out of a major change in the cultural world in which we live, the development and growing power of electronic media. In every period of media change, a new form of the Word of God emerges which is in continuity with the past but is also new. The need for a new appropriation of the tradition arises out of the new demands for community formation in an electronic age. The primary forms of the tradition that have served the church so well in the past are not functional in the new medium. Put a theologian on television and you will see what I mean.

The vision is of a story network of persons around the world who have appropriated the Biblical stories and integrated them with the stories of their own personal and communal lives. A new/old pattern of learning can emerge that builds on the tradition but also constantly explores new possibilities. The reappropriation of the Biblical storytelling tradition will help to make this possible. The new needs of our situation mean that the Biblical storytelling tradition has an importance now that has not been present since the first century.

The basic model of a storytelling process is relatively simple. The stories are mastered by memory and retold as remembered sounds experienced in community. The meaning and impact of the stories in their original historical context is studied in a disciplined manner using all the resources of historical critical scholarship. The stories are internalized by the community through connecting them with personal and communal experience. And the stories are extended into the world in relation to concrete human needs through retelling of the stories.

The vision is a Biblical storytelling network in the global village formed of persons who are bound together by a common identification with the stories of God's actions in Israel and in Jesus Christ. This is the foundation for a network of global memory that can unite the memories and hopes of the various peoples of the Church. The center of this vision is, therefore, a reappropriation and extension of the original pattern of the Gospel in the modern world.

I see a vision of Biblical stories being a central part of the ministry of the church: preaching, worship, care for the sick and the dying, Christian education and theological education, social action, and evangelism. The telling of Biblical stories is a resource that has been largely forgotten but that is needed now. The power of Biblical stories may be made available to us at a time when the human race most needs to have a common story that will make it possible for all peoples to learn to live in peace.

However, only the first tentative steps in the exploration of the potential role of Biblical story telling have been taken. The contrast between the vision and the reality is extreme. The exploration has two essential dimensions: 1) an understanding of

Biblical story telling in its original context and 2) a search for ways in which Biblical story telling can be appropriately used in the radically different context of our time.

We have sketched some dimensions of the exploration of Biblical storytelling in its original on text (Chapters II - IV). However, the development of a deeper understanding of Biblical story telling in its original context will require the intensive labor of the community of Biblical scholarship. This work is essential if we are to understand the character of the Word and maintain basic continuity with its tradition. This necessarily includes a knowledge of the way by which the forms of the stories have changed and developed throughout history. As we have seen in our sketch of the history of Biblical narrative, the development of print and later of silent reading has steadily disassociated Biblical narratives from the processes of storytelling. In the modern world, the stories have primarily become the object of documentary study. As a result, the methods for studying Biblical narratives in the modern world are in radical discontinuity with the ways in which they were experienced in earlier periods. An investigation of Biblical storytelling in its original context will require, therefore, an equally radical modification of our methods of research.

The reappropriation of Biblical story telling now will involve the informed and faithful use of Biblical stories in the various aspects of the ministry of the Church. At this point, those experiments have been concentrated in worship and preaching and in education. The analyses of our present practices of worship, preaching, and education from the perspective of Biblical story telling and the stories of some of those experiments will hopefully provide a framework for further exploration.

Biblical storytelling has an important contribution to make to virtually all areas of ministry. We have concentrated here on the search for appropriate uses in worship, preaching, and education. However, there are many other areas of ministry in which Biblical storytelling has been tried. As a way of charting the future of Biblical story telling, a series of brief sketches can be drawn of the potential uses of Biblical storytelling in pastoral care, theological education, and evangelism. These sketches will include some stories.

I. Pastoral care

Biblical narratives presently have almost no role in the church's ministry of pastoral care to the sick and afflicted. In fact, the Biblical tradition in general has often been excluded from contemporary practice of hospital chaplaincy, clinical pastoral education, and pastoral counseling.

The potential role of Biblical storytelling in ministry to the sick and afflicted is great. The Biblical stories are a readily available common language by which the Christian community can interpret its continuation of Jesus' ministry to the sick and afflicted. And the stories are a primary means by which afflicted persons can experience the presence of God in their situation. Three patterns have recurred in the use of Biblical stories in pastoral care and can be highlighted: 1) the formation of

an oral tradition network of support; 2) the internalization of the story; 3) frequent repetition.

The formation of an oral tradition support network - For a person who is sick or afflicted, the stories of God's care in the history of Israel and especially in Jesus' ministry are a direct way in which the person can experience God's care now. The stories counteract the frequent experience of affliction as being in some sense caused by God. These stories have greatest meaning when told by persons who are part of a support network.

This story of Biblical storytelling in pastoral care comes from Rev. Mal Bertram, pastor of The Community Church (UCC) in Syosset, New York.

Marie is a white, middle-age woman who in pastoral counseling acknowledged that she was an agoraphobic (fear of spaces). This phobia resulted in the inability to drive, extreme reluctance to leave the confines of her home, and reliance upon tranquilizers. The phobia had serious effects on her social life requiring deceit and lying as to why she was unable to go places or accept invitations for such common things as a coffee klatch. And it created growing stress on herself and her family.

The Pastor suggested the formation of a healing team drawn from a list of persons Marie felt had a depth of faith from which she could draw, not necessarily friends. Six persons were chosen. Discussion of the phobia, its impact on Marie's life and the introduction of Matthew 14.22-33 (Jesus walking on the water) followed. The use of space in the story, fear, and the word "courage" were studied and these elements of the story were used as the basis for personal identification with the story by each team member. The story was learned by all the members. The story quickly became Marie's story.

We agreed that each of the team members would be available on a continual basis as a resource to Marie, in person or by phone, for her to contact when she needed to hear the story. She also was able to tell herself the story. In the course of learning the story, discussion was held around such questions as "When have I been most fearful? perplexed? puzzled? not believing what I was seeing or experiencing?"

While each member of the team related to these questions and to the story, Marie integrated her experiences of fear with each area of discussion.

Slowly Marie began to venture out of the house, drive greater distances, and to reduce her dependence on tranquilizers. She began to challenge her fear with faith. This happened within three months after the group began meeting.

The high point of the healing team's life was a coincidental invitation by the spouse of a healing team member to have a social event on a houseboat.

Recognizing that this event could be filled with threat for Marie, he first withdrew the invitation apologetically. But Marie insisted, "I would like to try it." The coincidence of the houseboat, Marie's fear and the Biblical story was readily apparent to everyone. Plans were made for all to arrive at the houseboat for the retelling of the story. After the telling of the story, all ten of us embraced Marie and said to her: "Courage! Don't be afraid! I am with you!" The day was a great success and it ended with a full awareness that Marie had broken the limits imposed by her phobia. She is now 85-90% cured of the phobia, rarely uses tranquilizers, and has been able to face life and its challenges as a more whole human being.

Recent experience has indicated that making audiotapes is often an effective means of providing support for a person. In several instances, support groups or pastors have made tapes of Biblical stories, sometimes with music either from the worship service or from records. These tapes have been left with the person to play whenever he or she may choose. This has proven to be extremely helpful to persons especially during the long nights in the hospital or during periods of pain.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the telling of the story is in no sense the repetition of a magical formula that will in some sense heal the person. Instead, the story is told as a means of making a past action of God present in the hope that it may reveal new dimensions of the present situation. The experience has been that persons will often make their own connections with the story in ways that are surprising but fully appropriate regardless of whether or not the experience turns out as hoped. A second story from Mal Bertram shows this clearly.

Norm was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Over a -period of several months he physically deteriorated to a point where he was no longer able to move his legs. One afternoon the Pastor told Norm and his wife the story of the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). The Pastor returned to suggest that Norm and Barbara learn the story in order to tell it to each other. The Pastor and the couple discussed the meaning and background of the story. Unexpectedly within three days, Norm died. He had just begun to learn the story. At the funeral the Pastor stood aside from the lectern and told the story of the paralytic. As he did, his eyes met the eyes of Norm's wife and a look of strength and comfort immediately came across her face because she knew the story. While she did not have time to learn it, she and her husband had shared it. The story became a source of faith for her as she faced the reality of her husband's premature death.

Mal's sharing the story in this situation provided a unique kind of support. The meaning which the story came to have for both Norm and his wife was radically different than the story itself. Nevertheless, the story had deep meaning for them. And, as these stories reveal, persons like Mal Bertram who can appropriately tell Biblical stories to persons in pain or stress can become the means by which God's care for persons who are suffering and dying becomes present.

2) Internalization of a range of stories - The primary danger in the use of Biblical stories in pastoral care is magic. The expectation can develop that the telling of the story will result in an immediate and miraculous healing. In effect, this uses of the stories is an effort to control and manipulate God. It is, therefore, essential to establish at the beginning that the stories have been given to us as a source of memory about God/s care for us. But the particular way in which God may choose to be present in any situation may not be exactly what we hope.

One of the sources of this problem is an overidentification with one story in which an essentially allegorical connection is made with the story: e.g., "I am the paralytic..." or "I, like Jesus, am being crucified..." It is often helpful, therefore, for a person to learn a range of stories. Thus, for a dying person to learn a healing story, the story of Gethsemane or the crucifixion, and a resurrection story is a good idea. When a range of Biblical stories is told from a variety of perspectives, the process of identification tends to sort itself out in ways that are generally helpful. People figure out that telling the story of Jesus' healing of the paralytic to someone whose legs are crushed does not mean that the person will actually walk again. But there may be a whole series of ways in which God may be able to enable the person to get up and figuratively walk again.

Repetition as a means of building a story world

Remembering the stories of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection in the midst of the struggle with affliction is a source of hope and help. The healing that takes place is by no means always a graphic and immediate release from affliction. Often the stories only change the perspective and the feelings associated with an affliction. Repeating the stories to oneself reinforces an experience of the world that is more joyful, caring, and accepting than the world in which we ordinarily live. In the Kingdom of God, the afflicted are fully accepted and cared for as loved ones on whom God's favor rests regardless of their condition. Thus, there is a close connection between repetition and reinforcement.

The value of repetition cannot be understood in relation to every day life. Its greatest value is in times of the greatest pain and stress. When the ordinary coping mechanisms are gone, the foundation stone on which continuing life is built is memory. The experience of persons in concentration camps, long-term isolation, and extreme pain is similar. The primary things that can penetrate through the stress or pain to consciousness are things that have been deeply memorized and can, therefore, be remembered without thinking.

In extreme pain, the demand to think eliminates the possibility of meaning. Every resource of thinking is consumed by the demands of survival in the moment. Reading, reflecting, or other forms of abstraction are simply not possible. In those times, the repetition of memories of God's presence in the past is literally a source of life. The value of the repetition is directly proportional to the degree to which it can be done involuntarily. So-called mindless repetition may be precisely the primary source of contact with God and the sources of life. For persons who either have not

previously experienced such pain or stress, such repetition may appear immature, babbling nonsense, or even crazy. But, for the person who is afflicted, it can be a source of life. The testimony of persons who have memorized and repeated the 23rd Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, and the other prayers of faith reveals the importance of this process. Deep memorization and repetition can be a means of being in touch with God who loves and cares for us especially when we are afflicted.

Rev. Ken Padgett is a ministerial member of the South Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church. While he was a student at United, he was suffering from an intensely painful back condition. As a result of this condition, he had to ask for extensions in his course with me on the Synoptics. I recommended that he use the course as an opportunity to explore the resources of the stories for himself. This is his report about his experience.

Pain was my constant companion. As a result of scoliosis, my spine had grown curved, and discs had been compressed and forced out of alignment. I felt very frustrated and depressed most of the time. Trying to keep up with seminary work while juggling two churches and a family in the midst of pain only added to my anxiety. Pain pills got me through my days and nights.

When I became acquainted, through a seminary course with Dr. Tom Boomershine, with the idea of memorizing passages of Scripture to offer aid and comfort, I was skeptical. I honestly did not believe that such a thing could make a difference in the kind of pain with which I lived. Because of course requirements, though, I began to memorize passages.

When I came to Mark 5:25-35 (the woman with a flow of blood), it was as if I was reading the story of the woman with the flow of blood for the first time. That was my story! It seemed to speak to me in a way that said to me that God really was near and honestly did care about the pain I was suffering. I memorized that story, and when the pain became practically unbearable, I would find myself saying, "There was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years..." There was no magic in it. The pain did not suddenly go away. But, as I recited that passage to myself, it became for me a sort of prayer. I knew as I spoke those words to myself that God was near and that God was involved. I experienced the love of God in those moments in a way which was completely new to me.

A friend knew the importance the passage came to have for me, and when she sensed that I needed it, she would tell me the story again. Hearing it from someone else in that way only reinforced the power that the story had for me.

Surgery eventually took away the pain in my back, but the power of the story remains. Whenever I become depressed or lonely, or when I feel physically ill, I begin again, "There was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years..." and the comfort is still there. The power of God is there for me.

About six months after the spinal fusion for my back, I began to experience terrible headaches and dizziness, weakness, and lack of balance. Specialists told me that everything indicated I had a brain tumor. Brain tumor! I had two small sons; I was just starting in full-time ministry. I thought the problems were all in the past. I was angry and frightened at the prospect of what a brain tumor could mean. As I struggled with that, I happened to attend a retreat as a part of the Conference Continuing Education program, at which Tom Boomershire was the leader.

As he had been the one who had introduced me to the whole idea of the healing power of the Scriptures and knew what had happened previously, I shared with him what was going on in my life at that moment. After talking for a while when the session had broken up, he and the same friend who had helped so much with my back went with me to a separate room and told me two stories: first the woman with the flow of blood, which had already been established as "mine," and then the resurrection story from Mark. For the first time, I heard that story as a personal one. I heard the message of hope and resurrection for me which was a part of it. I felt such peace as I cannot describe. I learned the account myself, and in the days which followed, that story became my strength.

The tumor turned out to be hepatitis resulting from a blood transfusion at the time of my surgery. But the lesson I learned from that experience is one I would not trade for anything. Through the resurrection narrative, God spoke to me in an indescribably compelling way to say, "It's all right. Faith in Jesus Christ really does make all the difference in a life." Those two stories, in a very real sense, saved my life. I needed desperately to hear the message of God which came across loud and clear when I made those accounts my own.

The use of Biblical storytelling in pastoral care is only in its beginning stages. Extensive research and experimentation are needed in order to discover the most appropriate ways in which the stories can be used as part of a broader process of care. However, our experience is that telling a Biblical story, allowing a person to react to it in freedom, enabling the person to learn the story, and building a story network of support can be a means of God's grace in times of affliction and stress.

II. Theological Education

A media analysis of theological education reveals a fundamental anomaly: seminaries train ministers to function in the largely oral world of a local church by requiring them to develop skills in the media world of writing. The primary criteria for graduation are the ability to read books and to produce written examinations and papers of acceptable levels of excellence. In this sense, the library, where people read and write books in silence, is the place most characteristic of the media world of the seminary. One can graduate from most seminaries without demonstrating any competence in oral communication whatsoever.

The seminary media world is radically discontinuous with the media world of the local church. The congregation is almost wholly an oral culture. Virtually all communication between a minister and a congregation is oral. The local church newsletter is the only regular occasion of written communication. But everything else - the leadership of worship and preaching, pastoral care, church leadership and organization through committees, teaching - all of these primary functions of ministry are done orally. In contrast to the seminary media world, a minister's effectiveness in a local church is determined by his ability to communicate orally.

The disjuncture between the media worlds of the seminary and the local church is greatest in the traditional disciplines: Biblical studies, church history, and theology. As the relative emphasis of the seminary curriculum has shifted away from these disciplines to the practical disciplines, the dominant response in these fields has been to reemphasize the traditional academic virtues: reading books, writing papers and examinations, doing library research. As a result, the disjuncture between the disciplines of the Christian tradition and the practice of ministry has widened. Because of this disjuncture between the worlds of study and practice, these disciplines, as presently taught, are truly impractical.

Since the character of the local church as an oral culture cannot change, the only way in which this problem can be addressed is to change the study of the disciplines. In church history and theology, the traditions of debate and oral combat have high potential. And in Biblical study, a good place to begin is Biblical storytelling. The study of the Bible as oral literature makes sense in training pastors who will predominantly interpret the literature orally rather than in writing.

Dr. Gilbert Bartholomew, adjunct professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, and I have been actively exploring the integration of Biblical storytelling into the study of the New Testament in theological education. We require that students memorize significant portions of the Gospels during a course and develop their abilities to tell the stories. A storytelling workshop is an integral part of most courses. Exegesis papers are focused on Biblical narratives as oral narratives. We have also sought to discover ways in which the students can experience the Gospels as stories. Several courses on Mark or John have ended with a communal retelling of the entire Gospel. Students are encouraged to tell stories to each other during the course itself in preparation for this final recital. And, of course, the professors frequently tell Biblical stories themselves.

We have found that requiring students to use Biblical storytelling in their ministerial involvements is an important dimension of studying the Gospels as oral tradition. Many of the stories in this book have been adapted from student reports on course projects in Biblical storytelling.

Student evaluations reflect the values of Biblical storytelling. Here is an evaluation from last term:

Storytelling enabled me to experience the Gospel. It gave me a vehicle to reach the depths of others that are often closed. I can now talk about God without being didactic, "preachy," or threatening. Although the stories can become threatening as people experience them, they open doors previously closed. Memorizing the story forces you to work closely with a passage and to more clearly understand it as you actually integrate it into your own life.

The evidence from our experience has been overwhelming that the inclusion of Biblical storytelling in theological education has helped to deepen the relationship between the study of the Scriptures in seminary and the interpretation of the Scriptures in ministry. Thus, the development of Biblical storytelling in theological education as well as in higher education in general is another potential aspect of the future of Biblical storytelling.

III. Evangelism

One possible implication of the character of the Gospels is that early Christians proclaimed the Gospel to persons outside the community of faith through telling the stories of the Gospels. Evangelism is, therefore, another area of potential exploration of Biblical storytelling in the ministry of the church.

Rev. Clay Woodbury is the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Bangor, Maine and is a member of the Network of Biblical Storytellers. Clay has developed an approach to the use of Biblical stories that resulted in a significant evangelical outreach on the part of his "mainline" church.

In a series of study groups, the people of his congregation went through the process of reading and listening to a wide range of Biblical stories and selecting the stories with which they identified most deeply. They explored those stories together and then found ways to share the stories with others. They would simply share the story, ask the person to share any responses they had, and pursue any conversation that developed. The listening was then a mutual listening to a story that had meaning for a person. Clay's name for the story of what happened for one member of the group is: "And Cathy told Chris a Bible story. "

Three study groups were formed as a part of my Doctor of Ministry demonstration project for New York Theological Seminary. The project focused on church boards, Sunday morning worship services and three small study groups.

Study Group I consisted of five couples. Their ages ranged from 30-50 years old. All had joined the church some time during the previous nine years and had children living at home. These couples represented business, management, home making, government, education and medicine.

In session two, the group reported their impressions from having read the assignment, the Acts of the Apostles. One member reported: "The friends of

Jesus told stories about Jesus to people wherever they found them." After everyone shared their impressions of Acts, they told stories from their own lives that illustrated their understanding of what it meant to be a part of the Body of Christ. Cathy talked about a support system of people who cared for her family including their young son Derek, who had special needs, took a lot of medication, and required constant care and attention. Even after Derek unexpectedly died, people continued to care for them and to support them.

In preparation for session three, Cathy read the Gospel of Matthew. She identified with the story of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) and later selected this as her story to learn and to tell. At the initial reading, Cathy was angry at the owner of the vineyard and thought that he was unfair. She said, "I had to keep in mind the meaning and not the details of the story." The anger continued as she learned the story word for word. Her husband, Gary, commented: "When she told me the story, it made me angry." Cathy explained her story selection when she told the group, "I chose this story for the hope that I heard in the telling of it, that God's love is there for the receiving if we're willing to receive it...the onus is on us."

Cathy learned and told the story to the group. The next assignment was to tell your story to someone outside your own personal family and also outside the church family. Each person who listened to the various stories was asked to share their responses to the story and then to pursue any conversation that ensued.

At session six, Cathy reported on her storytelling experience: "I told my story to Chris with whom I have worked for three years. I felt comfortable with her. We have shared a lot. I have told her about this group. She has responded with interest about the group and our church. When I told her about the different assignments we had for each week, Chris said, "Oh, that sounds like fun!" Then I told her my story about the workers in the vineyard. Her responses included: "You Know, that's a very interesting story."; "It didn't seem very fair to the workers."; and "That's a good description of the Kingdom of God." She said that she had never heard that story before. She just listened. I was amazed.

After a few more comments on the story we went on and had a fantastic discussion about faith! She really has no formal background in faith but is a real fine person. She feels alone and wants to be involved in a church. She has been drawn to it. We had a very interesting, comfortable discussion. She was concerned about not having any church background and feared that she would feel ignorant if she came. We were certainly closer at the end of the discussion. What a relief it was to have had this discussion. We'd been hedging around this for quite a while. The story was an icebreaker, an excuse to talk about important concerns. It felt good to do something like this that I don't think I would have done otherwise."

Through the storytelling, Cathy and Chris reached a deeper level of communication in their relationship. At a later time, Chris indicated that she had been thinking about religion but hadn't had anyone else to talk to. She felt comfortable with Cathy and the storytelling had given her a chance to talk about some important things.

Cathy told Chris the Bible story in March. In December, Chris attended her first worship service at the First Baptist Church. It was the 11:30 P.M. Candlelight Christmas Eve Service. She really liked it. Occasionally, after this first experience, Chris attended Sunday morning worship alone. Then she began to stay for coffee fellowship and to sit in on the adult seminar called "Sermon Talk Back," which was a time to reflect on the service, scripture and sermon and to talk about how these might relate to your own life. This was often a time of rich sharing.

In early spring, the minister visited with Chris and her husband, Bill, in their home. They spoke about their concerns and the life of the church family. Southeast Asian refugee resettlement was a concern for Chris. What was this Church doing about it? The minister put them in touch with John, the Mission Board chairman. Both Chris and Bill became significantly involved with the ad hoc committee coordinating the church efforts to sponsor a family from Laos. On October 19, Chris and Bill dedicated their new daughter, Stephanie, and themselves to God during the morning worship. On October 29, both of them were on hand at the airport to welcome the Laotian refugee family. Chris formally joined the Mission Board and later became chairwoman. Bill became a Deacon. In August of the following year, Chris and Bill requested and experienced adult baptism during a moving morning worship service.

That fall, Chris joined a Thursday evening Bible Study on the Gospel of John. She began telling Biblical stories as well as her own story of how faith had made a significant difference in the quality of her life. The next spring, Bill and Cathy served on the program committee for what became the first annual Faith Storytelling Festival here in Bangor. Cathy coordinated the delicious buffet and Bill prepared and told six short stories from the early history of the First Baptist Church of Bangor, Maine.

Clay told me that he gave copies of this story, which I had asked him to write, to Cathy and Chris for their information and approval. They had never fully consciously realized all that had happened as a result of Cathy telling the story to Chris. And when they saw each other from across the sanctuary the following Sunday morning, they ran across the sanctuary and embraced each other with tears and great joy.

This is a story about Biblical storytelling in the life of a local church that has sought to make the stories a deep and vital part of their life as a community. And the stories about the generative energy that has been set in motion by the telling of the stories of the acts of God could be multiplied many times over. Biblical storytelling is

a natural and non-manipulative tradition of sharing the faith that reaches out to those outside the community. When allowed to interact freely with the life stories of persons in the context of disciplined study, Biblical stories have high potential for enabling the persons of the church to carry out their mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the world.

Biblical Storytelling and the Local Church

The local church is the primary place in which the network of Biblical storytelling can be developed. And Biblical stories have a contribution to make to all of the programs of a local congregation. In worship, education, pastoral care, social action, and evangelism Biblical storytelling is a potential resource for the congregation. In fact, the development of Biblical storytelling in a range of programs within a local church is energizing because of the mutual reinforcement that takes place.

Enabling the ministry of the laity is one reason for the potential power of Biblical storytelling in the local church. Storytelling is a language of the people. Most people can tell stories well. Biblical storytelling can provide a solid foundation within the Christian tradition for the sharing of both individual and communal experience. Biblical stories are common stories with which all people can identify regardless of their age, race, social class, or ethnic identity. No other element of the Christian tradition has this potential. And, with practice and training, Biblical storytelling is something that lay people can do well.

Thus, in all areas of the life of the local church, a coordinated program of Biblical storytelling has the potential to equip the members of the Church to minister to each other and to those outside the community. The ways in which this can be done effectively and faithfully are only beginning to be explored. But a study of the history of Biblical narrative reveals that the potential is present.

Biblical Storytelling and Electronic Media

A major reason for the potential of Biblical storytelling now is the development of electronic media. This is the first time in the life of the Church since approximately the first century in which a medium other than writing has been the dominant medium of mass communication in the culture. This means that the Church's ministry of the Word faces a radically new situation.

In every previous period of media change, the Church has reorganized its means for communicating the Word of God. This has involved a reinterpretation of the Word in forms that are compatible with the new medium and that maintain the essential integrity of the Word. In this age, the forms of the Word of God in oral, written, and electronic media will need to be reorganized and woven into a new pattern.

As the history of Biblical narrative reveals, the primary systems of interpretation for most of Christian history have been determined by the medium of writing. However, the forms of Christian communication that are characteristic of the cultures of writing-the doctrinal essay, the allegorical narrative, systematic theology-are generally incompatible with electronic media and do not communicate effectively. Thus, theological discussions have done poorly on television. But the forms of communication that have been developed in oral culture-the sermon, the revival, the song, the testimony-have proven to be quite effective on television.

This experience suggests that oral forms of communication will be of primary importance for this new period. Since narrative is the most important oral form of the Word of God, the recovery of the original medium of Biblical narrative, storytelling, may be a foundation for the development of the Church's ministry of the Word in the future. Biblical storytelling is theoretically, therefore, a highly compatible form of Christian thought and communication for the age of electronic media. Future projections based on the experience of earlier media transitions would be that the importance of storytelling will increase as the forms of communication are increasingly influenced by electronic media.

This in no way suggests that writing and its ways of thinking will disappear or become unimportant. Previous media transitions show that earlier media are reintegrated into new patterns of interrelationship. Thus, the projection of the potential centrality of Biblical storytelling in the future involves scenarios of new combinations of media relationships.

Thus, Christian education curriculum in the future may involve a television program viewed by families at home in which parents learn to tell Biblical stories to their children in combination with televised and printed materials that are used in Sunday School classes. Pastoral care may be a combination of personal support, audio or video programming made specifically for afflicted persons, and devotional literature. Theological education may be conducted by a combination of interactive computer communication, televised lectures, books, and personal interaction in small groups. But, in all of these projections, Biblical storytelling has a potentially central role because of its unique character and role in the Christian tradition.

The vision of the future may be shrouded in mystery. But the future of Biblical storytelling is full of promise. It is impossible to know what form the reappropriation of the Biblical narrative tradition will take in the future. But the promise is that this new age holds wonderful possibilities for the ways in which persons from the global village can sit around an electronic fire together and tell the stories of the acts of God in Israel and in Jesus Christ. And whatever we do will be an anticipation of that great banquet in the Kingdom of God when all of the saints will sit down together and tell the stories of the Bible once more.