INTRODUCTION: BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

Boomershine

This book is thoroughly practical and utterly impractical. It is, first of all, a series of resources for persons who want to learn how to tell Biblical stories themselves and to enable others to learn to tell Biblical stories. There are sections on learning the stories, studying the stories, telling the stories in relation to situations of need, preaching the stories, teaching the stories, and the future of Biblical storytelling. And there are a series of stories about Biblical storytelling now told by persons in ministry who have told the stories to others.

However, the book is utterly impractical because it includes theoretical and historical information that is of no immediate practical value whatsoever. This is necessary because of the unique dangers of Biblical storytelling. This tradition is uniquely subject to misuse by persons who do not understand the tradition of Biblical narrative or who are unwilling to study the stories in their original historical context. Thus, there are long sections on the original medium of Biblical narrative, the history of Biblical narrative, and on the study of Biblical narratives in their original context. My hope is that these sections of the book will provide a sound foundation and a continuing resource for the exploration of Biblical storytelling now.

This book is not about storytelling in general although the telling of other stories is interesting and of great value. Biblical storytelling is fundamentally different from other storytelling traditions as presently practiced because its primary orientation is not towards performance. It is a folk art and the intention here is to enable the people to tell the stories rather than to develop storyteller/performers.

This is a book by an experienced Biblical storyteller to other potential Biblical storytellers. It is written in the hope that others will be inspired to tell the stories and to use the resources that are available. It is written by a Biblical scholar who loves the tradition so much that he does not want to see It controlled by scholars. It is written in the hope that a revival of Biblical storytelling will once again give Biblical scholarship a vital relationship with the life of the church.

The exploration of Biblical story telling now is more than a scientific quest for the meaning of the Biblical narratives in their original historical context and a response to needs in contemporary culture. In the end, the reason to learn and to tell Biblical stories is the sheer joy of doing it. Since this work has begun, I have been surprised at the ways in which the Word of God in the stories has power to transform the lives of persons and communities. The working of these stories of God/s actions is often unnoticed. The impact of Biblical storytelling is truly like leaven or a mustard seed. But, in ways that are a source of steady wonder to me, I have both experienced for myself and observed in others that telling Biblical stories is uniquely meaningful.

And, while I have sought to understand the processes of story telling in general and of Biblical storytelling in particular, there is a deep mystery about the Biblical storytelling tradition. In fact, this sense of wonder and amazement has grown and deepened with time. The stories, like the sacraments of Holy Communion and

baptism, are a unique gift of God to the Church and, through the Church, to the world.

To tell the stories is not, therefore, a fad or a new technique to be added to the Church's bag of tricks. To tell the stories is to participate in the ongoing life of the Word of God. To have that opportunity is both an adventure and a pleasure. In the language of the beatitudes, happy are those who tell and listen to these ancient sacred tales. To tell the stories of God is a source of blessing. To tell the Biblical stories is to be a part of Israel and of the body of Christ. In my experience, Jesus Christ is as fully known and is as really present in the faithful telling and hearing of Gospel stories, as he is In the Eucharist itself. Thus, when we discuss the tradition of Biblical storytelling, we talk about something which is truly holy.

It has been surprising that I, a relatively sophisticated modern Biblical critic with a healthy dose of political cynicism and philosophical skepticism, I, of all people, have come to love to tell the Biblical stories. It is appropriate, therefore, for me to recommend this activity to others. In its childlike simplicity and apparent foolishness, Biblical storytelling is a means by which God's grace and power can become present in God's world. In the end I can only stand as a witness that this is what we as the community of Biblical storytellers then and now have seen and heard.

THE TRADITION OF BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

Mark my teaching, 0 my people,
Listen to the words I am to speak.
I will tell you a story;
I will expound the riddle of things past.
(Psalm 78:12)

The words of the Psalmist reflect the ancient invitation which lies at the source of Israel/s narrative traditions: the invitation to listen to a story. A search for the sources of the Biblical narrative tradition leads us back to storytellers telling the stories of the acts of God. From the ancient narrative of the revelation of God to Abraham to the stories of the resurrection of Jesus, the widely diverse narrative traditions of Israel originated in the oral tradition process. For periods ranging from a few decades to several centuries, these stories were remembered and told by storytellers before they were written down. In the beginning, there was a storyteller telling a story about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Biblical Storytelling Then

Hermann Gunkel, the father of form criticism, has described the context in which the stories of Genesis were recited:

> the common situation which we have to suppose is this: In the leisure of a winter evening the family sits about the hearth; the… people… listen intently

> to the beautiful old stories of the dawn of the world, which they have heard so often yet never tire of hearing repeated.[1]

This primary occasion for the transmission of Israel's traditions through storytelling is evident in Moses' instructions to the people on the night of Passover:

> And when you come to the land which the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he slew the Egyptians but spared our houses.' (Exodus 12:25-27a)

This formula – "When your children say…then you shall say" - occurs at several places in the Pentateuch (e.g., Ex. 13:6-8; Joshua 4:6-7) and reflects a primary story telling occasion in the life of Israel.

A similar process of storytelling as a means of interpreting present worship practices is evident in the early Christian community. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, interprets the meaning of the eucharistic celebration by reciting the story:

> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (I Cor. 11:23-26)

Even though Paul told stories less frequently than the other primary contributors to the New Testament, he either recited or summarized the basic narratives of the community at several points in his letters (I Cor. 15:3-5; Romans 4; 9:6-13). And Paul's practice clearly reflects the speech of the early Christian community. Jesus himself was a storyteller. As it is reported in Mark, "he did not speak to them without a parable..."(Mark 4:34). In teaching, worship, and controversy, the early Christian community told stories. The four Gospels and Acts are the final product of a rich and varied storytelling tradition.

A further sign of the importance of story telling in Israel and early Christianity is the form of the creeds. Perhaps the earliest creed in religion of Israel is the story which was recited when the first fruits of the harvest were offered:

> And you shall make response before the Lord your God, "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard

> bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, 0 Lord, hast given me." (Deut. 26:5-l0a)

Thus, the basic confession of the people of Israel was a brief recital of their foundational story. Likewise, the earliest creed, in early Christianity was a summary story of the actions of God in the sending of the Messiah/Christ (I Cor. 15-3:5) to which Paul added the list of appearances including Christ's appearance to him:

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (I Cor. 15:3-8)

These narratives are evidence of the central role of storytelling in the thought and experience of Israel and the early Church. Through the telling of the story, the communities which produced the Bible remembered and made present the acts of God.

The clearest evidence of the popularity and importance of storytelling in Israel is the composition of the written records of the Old and New Testaments. More than half of each is narrative. As James Muilenburg has observed, "The most representative and characteristic mode of Biblical speech is narrative."[2] In the Old Testament, approximately 750 of the 1434 pages of the Hebrew Bible are narratives (including the narrative sections of Daniel, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Leviticus). Likewise the Gospels and Acts comprise 390 of the 613 pages of the Greek New Testament.

These explicit signs of the centrality of narrative in the traditions of Israel are evidence of a pervasive fact that is rarely discussed in the tradition because it was simply taken for granted: virtually all of the Biblical narrative traditions originated in storytelling events. The stories which were recorded in the Scriptures in writing were the end product of a storytelling tradition.[3] Thus, throughout the period of the formation of the Bible (approximately 1500 B.C.-I00 A.D.), storytelling was the most popular and generative form of speech in the religion of Israel and its two descendants, Judaism and Christianity.

The role of Biblical storytelling has changed radically in the eighteen centuries since the end of the New Testament era (approximately 100 A.D.). The stories of the Bible are rarely told now. The primary mode of experience of Biblical narratives in the 20th century is silent reading of a printed text. As a result, Biblical narratives are primarily studied as documents rather than heard as stories. Other Biblical forms for remembering the acts of God have continued: liturgy, hymns, and preaching. But the telling of Biblical stories has virtually ceased.

There are vestiges of Biblical storytelling which can be identified. Bible stories are still told to children. In fact, the primary association of Biblical storytelling now is with the Sunday School. The other major continuation of the storytelling tradition of Israel is the preaching of the black church. In its own distinctive manner, black storytelling preaching has continued and developed the American folk preaching tradition.[4] There is some evidence that Biblical storytelling has continued to a greater degree in the churches of Asia, Africa, and South America than in North America and Europe.[5] But, as the educational level of both persons and churches increases, the role of Biblical storytelling has tended to decrease. Thus, the most highly developed and influential tradition in the religion of Israel and early Christianity, storytelling, has largely been lost. We as a religious community have witnessed the silencing of Biblical storytelling.

A Rebirth of Biblical Storytelling

The recognition of the centrality of storytelling in the formation of Israel's experience of God inevitably raises the question of whether a rediscovery of Biblical storytelling is possible.

An underlying hope of historical criticism has been that the understanding of the meaning of the Scriptures in their original historical context may be a means by which the revelation of God can be known now. And that hope has often been realized. For example, the discovery of the centrality of eschatology in the teachings of Jesus and the early church has had a highly creative and energizing impact on twentieth century theology.6 In a similar manner, a reappropriation of Biblical story telling may make possible new dimensions of meaning in our experience of Biblical narratives.[7]

But it must be made clear at the outset that it is neither possible nor desirable to explore the recovery of Biblical storytelling by trying to go back to the original oral culture of the Biblical period. We no longer live in an oral culture and such a return, even if it were desirable, would be impossible. Storytelling was a natural part of the basically oral culture of the ancient world. People learned and passed on the stories of the tradition naturally without conscious reflection on the process. The skills of oral memory and composition were an inherent and necessary part of life. These basic patterns of oral tradition formation are present in most pre-l iterate cultures.[8] But that is no longer the case in most of the cultures in which Biblical stories would be told now.

It is equally true, however, that we all continue to live in communities in which oral modes of communication are by no means a thing of the past. We tend to think of periods of culture as exclusive alternatives. But study of the history of media makes it clear that the introduction of new media and the cultures which they generate do not cancel out the old media and the cultures associated with them. Instead a new mix of cultural styles is created. Thus, oral sub-cultures exist everywhere today. The family, the classroom, and the congregation are all predominantly oral cultures in which the primary means of communication is oral speech. Families rarely communicate in writing even when children are away at camp or college.

Virtually all of a local pastor's work - preaching, counseling, committee meetings, teaching - is done orally. And, while reading material is used as an integral part of classroom work, a teacher or professor is primarily paid to talk to students. Thus, although we no longer live in an oral culture in which the skills related to Biblical storytelling are learned more or less naturally, oral sub-cultures do continue to exist in which the telling of Biblical stories Is both possible and meaningful.

However, even in the context of these oral sub-cultures, Biblical story telling is in no sense a return to the ways of a previous age. Rather the recital of Biblical narratives now will necessarily mean a reappropriation of the ancient tradition. We have a great deal to learn from the patterns of oral culture. Indeed, oral cultures may provide some basic models for us to explore. But the role and function of the telling of Biblical stories in our time will inevitably involve a reinterpretation and reformation of the Biblical storytelling tradition. In order for a recovery of Biblical storytelling to happen now, it will have to make sense in present ways of thinking. This rediscovery must, however, be built upon an understanding of Biblical story telling in its original oral medium.

Some Characteristics of the Original Medium

A more specific description of the character and process of storytelling will clarify the original oral medium of Biblical narrative. The following are important: sound, memorization, transmission by a combination of community tradition and individual improvisation, and a folk network of storytelling.

1) Sound - The stories were told by a storyteller who spoke. This is the first and most basic level of the medium of Biblical narrative. The meaning of the stories was inextricably related to the sound of the storyteller/s voice. Gunkel has described this factor of meaning well:[9]

> We must recall… that we are dealing with orally recited stories. Between narrator and hearer there is another link than that of words; the tone of the voice talks, the expression of the face or the gestures of the narrator. Joy and grief, love, anger, jealousy, hatred, emotion, and all the other moods of his heroes, shared by the narrator, were thus imparted to his hearers.

The difference between the sound of an expressive storyteller's voice and the black marks on a page often escapes attention in discussions of 1he meaning of Biblical narratives. But it is a difference of enormous consequence. This difference has been recognized in psychological studies of the deaf:[10]

> The importance of auditory experiences for the interpretation of reality is proven through observation of deaf children… A world without sound is a dead world: when sound is eliminated from our experience, it becomes clear how inadequate and ambiguous is the visual experience if not accompanied by auditory interpretation… Vision alone without acoustic perceptions does not provide understanding. Deaf persons are prone to paranoid interpretations of outside events.

The world of speaking and hearing is a world of Invitation and response. It is also a world in which emotional expression is natural and direct. In the original medium of the Biblical narratives, therefore, the entire connotational dimension of the stories was communicated through the living presence of the storyteller. The finely modulated expressiveness of the stories in their original medium is often lost in the medium of writing. Thus, the change in the dominant medium of Biblical narrative from sound to sight is a major rather than minor change. Biblical stories have largely been silenced and devocalized. As a result, major elements of the meaning of the stories have either been lost completely or at best minimized. Thus, a recovery of the original medium of Biblical narrative must begin with returning the stories to their original media world, namely, sound.

2) Memory - In the original medium of the Biblical narrative tradition, the stories were told from memory. One of the functions of a medium is the transmission of tradition from one time and place to another. Biblical stories now are generally transmitted by the printed page. But the transmission of Biblical narratives was originally dependent on memory. For this reason, memory was highly valued. Today, there is a widespread contempt for memorization, particularly memorization of the Scriptures. Thus, a major issue for the recovering of the Biblical storytelling tradition is a reassessment of the function and value of memory.

A primary characteristic of sound is resonance. Sound activates and causes reverberations and echoes. This characteristic of sound is closely related to the function of memory in storytelling. In order for something to resonate, there must be boundaries or retaining walls against which the sound can reflect. Resonance is inextricably related to boundaries. And, in relation to persons, the memory of sounds is connected with internalization and the reflecting back and forth of these sounds in the interior spaces of the person.

The primary phrase that is used to describe memory in the Biblical traditlon is related to the heart. We still speak of memorizing something as learning it "by heart." Thus, in the Lord's initial address to Joshua after the death of Moses, the Lord said, "This book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night… " (Joshua 1:8; also Psalm 1:2) This reflects the ancient practice of the

recital of the tradition from memory as a basic process of meditation. A similar function is reflected in Psalm 77:

> I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
> yea, I will remember thy wonders of old.
> I will meditate on all thy work,
> and muse on thy mighty deeds. (Ps. 77:11-12)

The explicit relationship to the heart is connected with memory in Psalm 119:

> I have laid up thy word in my heart,
> that I might not sin against thee.
> …I will meditate on thy precepts,
> and fix my eyes on thy ways.
> I will delight in thy statutes;
> I will not forget thy word. (Ps. 119:11,15-16)

The process that is reflected in these words is the internal repetition of remembered traditions. Two parts of the body are identified as the locations of this process: the heart and the mind. In these two primary chambers of the body, sounds can resonate. Thus, memory in the Biblical tradition is closely related to meditating and thinking about the word of the Lord.

Walter Ong describes the relationship that is established in this process well: "the Word and the interiorizing of history."[11] The function of memory is personal appropriation of the Word of God. In medieval monasticism, the term which was used to describe this aspect of meditation on God's Word was ruminatio. And, as Pierre-Ives Emery has maintained, the concept of rumination in medieval monasticism was a process for the internal absorption ("l'absorption interieure") of the Word of God.[12]

The problem of memory in the modern era has been helpfully described by Ray Hart. According to Hart, we have tended to follow Aristotle's view of memory as a wholly passive operation. For Aristotle, the memory served almost exclusively a retentive function and belonged essentially to the perceptive rather than intellective faculties of the mind. Its role was to retain and reproduce previous sense perceptions. But, for a long tradition of Christian thought stretching from Augustine to Coleridge, memory is intimately related to imagination. Memory is not wholly passive but is dependent on percipience, on endowing the things to be remembered with significance. Thus, Coleridge saw a relationship between memory and what he called, "secondary imagination." The activity of imagination is that it "loosens" the contents of memory so that they can be reappropriated and made meaningful in new ways. There is, therefore, a close relationship between memory and creativity. The centrality of memory is that once something is memorized it can be worked on by the imagination. As Hart says of Augustine's seminal understanding of memory, "Once within the retaining walls of memory, they (perceptions and intellectual contents)

become fair prey for imagination… "[13] In this understanding, therefore, memory is the central factor in image making and is at the root of creative genius.

In this context, the function of the memorization of the Scriptures can be reassessed. While retention and transmission of the tradition was one of the functions of memorization in oral culture, the character of oral memory was different than reproduction of a word for word text. In fact, there is relatively little evidence of word for word memorization prior to the introduction of writing. Once writing is introduced into an oral culture, the function of memory changes. Given the existence of an authoritative text, the role of memory becomes a reproductive task. And memory is an inferior means of transmission for exact reproduction in comparison to writing. As a result, the value of memorization declines. But in oral culture the function of memory is imaginative and highly creative.

Furthermore, memory always has the function of interiorization and appropriation for creative recreation of the tradition for each new occasion. Thus, while memorization is no longer necessary for retention of the Biblical narrative tradition, it may still be necessary for internalization and depth communication of the tradition. The function of memory in chirographic culture is the reproduction of the words on the surface of the page. In oral culture, both then and now, the function of memory is the total appropriation of the sounds of the words so that they can both resonate in the interiors of the learner and be shared In community with others.

This understanding of the role of memory has also been confirmed in the experience of those who have begun to explore Biblical story telling. The first thing that a congregation notices when someone is telling the story rather than reading it is the depth and directness of the story. Rather than the story being a series of words read from a text, it is now a living story told by one person to another. It does not come from off the page, into the eyes and out through the mouth. It comes from the mind and heart of the storyteller. As a result, the thoughts and feelings of the person are communicated directly in the
telling of the story. So also the experience of those who have memorized stories and then told them is that the internalization of the story makes it one/s own to a higher degree than any amount of textual study. Once the story is thoroughly memorized and internalized, there is a new freedom to improvise and adapt the story to new situations. The story is now no longer something in a text. It is a living, breathing creation that can be shared freely with others.

3) The Story Process - The original medium of the Biblical narrative tradition was sound and the sounds of the stories were transmitted and recreated by the interaction of memory and inspired imagination. A further dimension of the original medium of Biblical narrative was the process of its development. Form criticism has provided Biblical historical criticism with the resources to delineate that history. The stories were told orally for years. The formation of the narratives followed the basic patterns of oral tradition. Each type of oral tradition had its own particular form. The sayings and the stories of the Gospel tradition, for example, each had differing formal characteristics.[14] These forms were inextricably related with the function of

the particular type of story and the life setting or Sitz im leben in which the material was recited. The underlying plot of the story is, therefore, a period of oral tradition formation ranging from several centuries to a few decades followed by a period of literary recording and editing.

Two dimensions of the oral tradition process are of particular importance for understanding the original medium of the Biblical narrative tradition: the relationship between the individual and the community and the degree of community participation in the storytelling process. The process by which the Biblical narrative tradition was formed created a different relationship between the individual and the community. The community's stories were learned and passed on by many storytellers and each of them contributed to the tradition if in no other way than by simply repeating the story. The relationship was reciprocal and mutually supportive. The community provided the context in which the traditions were formed and transmitted to individuals. The mastery and recital of the stories by individual storytel1ers in turn nurtured and fed the community. We need to recognize the unique values of this process. In the story process, individuals became a part of the community and the community itself was to some degree formed by the telling of the stories.

The implication of the original medium of Biblical narrative is that there is unique value in the mastery of the community's traditions by individuals who can then recite them for the community. There are different kinds of creativity that can be fostered in the story process. In the process of learning and reciting the community's traditions in the distinctive ways that different persons, age groups, and cultures bring to storytelling, both the individuals and the community learn new things about each other and about their community's traditions.

The second aspect of the story process that needs clarification is the character of the story network. Oral tradition research has shown that the transmission of tradition is often the task of selected individuals who are honored for their role. It is possible that such individuals were also present in Israel and early Christianity. Thus, the Yahwist and John may well have had an honored role in their communities. But there is no explicit evidence of a class or defined group of storytellers in Israel nor in early Christianity who alone told the stories. Tradition history analysis of the Pentateuch and of the Gospels indicates that there were editors who collected the traditions and ordered them in highly creative ways. But the basic character of the Biblical narrative tradition suggests that storytelling in Israel was a truly folk tradition in which everyone participated. The admonitions attributed to Moses and Joshua that every father tell the stories of the acts of God to his children are a clear indication that Biblical story telling was in no sense limited to a highly trained group. Rather each person was expected to know and to tell the basic stories.

This suggests that the reappropriation of the original medium of Biblical narrative cannot be done by encouraging only Biblical scholars or ordained clergy to tell the stories. The character of the original medium suggests that we need to explore the development of a Biblical story telling network in which the stories are

learned and told by the people of the communities: young and old, educated and uneducated, men and women, clergy and laity.

Thus, an examination of the original medium of Biblical narrative suggests that there were major factors of meaning in the original medium that have been either lost or obscured by the medium in which we predominantly experience Biblical narratives. These differences provide us with some hints about the potential values in a recovery of Biblical storytelling.

An analogy from music may be helpful. The cantatas of Bach for example, were originally composed to be heard. The original medium was sound and the cantatas were only performed after an extensive period of group preparation. Bach/s compositions were printed and can now be studied as documents. The music is now available in the medium of print rather than the original medium of a performance by a choir and organ. Our present pattern of experiencing Biblical narratives is as if we were to primarily study Bach's scores and talk about them without ever performing or listening to his music. Just as experiencing Bach's St. Matthew Passion by only reading the score would be a poor substitute to hearing the music for most of us, so also to primarily study the texts of the Biblical narratives without telling them is to limit our experience of the narratives to a secondary and derivative medium. Thus, a recovery of Biblical storytelling may have some of the same values as Mendrlssohn's performance of the St. Matthew Passion after more than a century in which it only existed as a manuscript.

Biblical Storytelling and Contemporary Culture

One reason for exploring Biblical story telling now is the possibility that there are factors of meaning that are inextricably related to the original medium of Biblical narrative. The development of a Biblical storytelling network in which a variety of persons would tell the stories from memory is a first step towards such an exploration. But, as we have noted earlier, the recovery of an ancient tradition has the possibility of being an exercise in antiquarianism. In order for Biblical story telling to be truly meaningful, it will need to make sense in relation to the culture of today.

Biblical Storytelling and the Story telling Movement

The lead story in Time, a weekly news magazine (August, 1981), was a report about the First Annual North Atlantic Festival of Storytelling held in the Opera House in Rockport, Maine. Over four hundred persons gathered for two days of storytelling. Storytellers from all over the country told stories to an enthral1ed audience who, according to the reporter, Melvin Maddocks, were rediscovering the joys of this ancient art. This festival was one of several storytelling festivals which have sprung up during the past two years in various major cities around the United States including New York, St. Louis, and Albuquerque. The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) has held an annual storytelling festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee since 1973. The rebirth of story telling is a growing phenomenon that has recently exploded upon the American cultural

scene. Suddenly, out of the blur, the art of storytelling has been reborn. As Maddocks observed, "It would be too much of a storyteller's exaggeration to suggest that in the middle of an electronic giant's blink - presto! - the art of the storyteller is about to recapture the castle."[15] But there is more explicit storytelling going on now across the country than has happened for generations.

Just down the road in Bangor, Maine, the Maine Chapter of the Network of Biblical Storytellers (McNOBS) held the first annual Faith Storytelling Festival at the First Baptist Church on 14 May, 1982. Approximately 60 persons gathered for a day of storytelling primarily of Biblical stories. Paul Neff told about Adam and Eve which Ken Parker followed with the story about Elijah and the widow. Gil Bartholomew told and sang the tale of the resurrection of Lazarus and Clay Woodbury related John's account of Jesus' resurrection. There were also some stories that grew out of the Biblical storytelling tradition. Gary Vencill told the story of "The Peddlar of Ballaghadereen" and Art Kuehn told of his experiences on a recent trip to Israel. The stories went on all afternoon and well into the night as the people relived together some major events in over 3000 years of our experience as a faith community. The goal and the impact of the festival are summarized well by the group's brochure:[16]

> Both the purpose and the process of Biblical narrative engage the experience of the listener, linking the listener with experiences in the story. In this way the healing and transforming power of sacred tales are released. Our hope is that telling Biblical stories will enable the hearer to feel the rhythm of God's Word in the hearer's very bones and to sense the fire of the Spirit being kindled in the hearer's very life.

Just as the storytellers of Israel and early Christianity told the unique stories of the actions of God in the context of the story telling culture of the age in which they lived, so also we can tell these stories in the context of the story telling culture of our day. It is fully appropriate that people of faith should tell the stories of God.

Telling My Story

The storytelling movement is, however, a relatively small and isolated phenomenon in comparison to the multi-faceted culture of personal storytelling. Both inside and outside the Church, the opportunities to "tell my story" are many. And, when one looks at contemporary culture with storytelling glasses, it is everywhere.

The most widespread network of personal story telling is counseling. From the professional practice of psychiatry to the development of pastoral counseling, counseling depends heavily on enabling persons to tell their story. This movement is the outgrowth of the epoch-making research of Freud, Jung, and Adler who discovered the unconscious psyche and developed psychoanalysis as a means of understanding it. Dreams, childhood experiences long forgotten, present traumatic events have all become the subjects of storytelling in counseling. The practice of counseling varies widely but a common element in virtually all counseling is the provision of a supportive context in which people can tell their story. The experience

of this network has been that this process is often therapeutic and persons are often able to identify and resolve emotional and psychological conflicts once they understand the unconscious memories that are shaping their behavior and feelings.

Growing out of this movement, a number of other processes have been developed for enabling persons to identify and tell their stories either to themselves or to a group. Transactional analysis, T groups, sensitivity training, Marriage Encounter, Ira Progoff's journal workshops - all of these group processes are also based on the telling and exploration of personal stories. Thus, storytelling has become highly personalized and telling personal stories has proven to be something that people both enjoy and find beneficial.

Another dimension of personal storytelling has been the development of oral history projects. These projects record the life stories of a wide range of persons: politicians and major leaders, the elderly, ghetto youth, immigrants, etc. A classic instance of the fruits of oral history is All God's Dangers,
the stories of Nate Shaw, the son of a slave who became an independent farmer in Alabama during the early twentieth century.[17] Columbia University now has a large collection of oral histories which have been produced by a wide range of groups.[18]

And finally, there is the growth of genealogical research and the fascination with the stories of families. Since the writing and televised dramatization of Alex Haley's Roots, interest in learning and telling the tales of our predecessors has increased. The rediscovery of these more corporate elements of "my story" has resulted in the widespread development of family histories.

The Church also has a long and rich tradition of personal storytelling. The Methodist class meeting was a supportive group in which people were encouraged to share their personal life journey with God. The prayer meeting and the testimony continue in many contexts to be meaningful forms for telling "my
story." And new forms of personal story telling continue to emerge. In a recent booklet entitled, Lifestory Conversations Roy Fairchild has explored the making of connections between personal life stories and "The Story" as a means of evangelism. He describes the process of discovering this connection:[19]

> Familiar church activities frequently are concerned with telling and not with listening. When the Good News is considered a package of information to be hurled like a ball at the hearer, we perceive the listener's responsibility as simply to catch it. But the Good News is dynamic, moving, shaping; a living word, it must be intertwined and meshed with our stories--our triumphs, our disappointments, our loves and hates, our doubts and hopes--in order to be active in our lives.

The process of connecting my story with the Biblical story is, therefore, a process of listening. The strangeness of the Biblical stories and the difficulty in making those connections with my story is sometimes initially frustrating but, in the end, it can be a source of new perspective. As Robert McAfee Brown has written:[20]

> If the story is too dissimilar to my own, so that I can get no grip on it, find no point of contact between it and myself, I will become…frustrated with attempts to understand it and… give up in despair. On the other hand, if the story is too similar to my own, so that it is introducing nothing new… unexpected, I will give up again…in boredom. It must stretch me, pull me beyond where I now am, open some new door of my mind and heart.

The essential step in an exploration of the relationship between Biblical storytelling and my story is to discover the points of identification.

Once that identification has taken place, the telling of Biblical stories is a logical extension of personal storytelling. The Biblical narratives record the oral history of the spiritual family from which all Christians are descendants. We are all sons and daughters of Abraham, descendants of the people of Israel who were delivered out of Egypt and part of the family of Jesus whom he called his brothers, sisters, and mothers. To tell the Biblical stories is at least to tell the stories of our ancestors. And, for each person who has identified with these narratives, to tell the Biblical stories is to tell "my story." Telling the stories can also open the possibility of that discovery for others.

A story of a very small but highly significant experience may help to clarify the potential connection between this stream of contemporary experience and Biblical storytelling. This story was told by Paul Neff:

> I was chaplain for the day at the hospital in Brooklyn, Maine. I entered the room of a small boy. It was shortly before Christmas. The little boy was drawing.
>
> "Hello," I said, "my name is Rev. Neff." No response. The little boy keeps drawing.
>
> "I'm the chaplain for the day, and I thought you might like someone to talk to for a bit." No answer. The little boy continues drawing.
>
> "I hear you're a Pentecostal. Do you go to church very often?"
>
> "Sometimes." The little boy goes on drawing. "How would you like me to tell you a story?"
>
> "Okay." The little boy keeps on drawing.
>
> And so I began to tell him Luke's story of Jesus' birth. Hardly had I gotten started when the little boy put down his drawing pencil and began to look at me. About half way through the story, I noticed that tears had begun to roll down his cheeks.
>
> When I finished, I asked him, "Why are you crying?" "It must have been awful lonely for the baby there in the manger."
>
> "Its awful lonely for you here, too, isn't it?" I said. And so began our conversation.

Thus, discovering a connection between "my story" and the Biblical story can provide a new context for experience. In that discovery both the similarities and the

differences of the Biblical story and "my story" can be meaningful and potentially redemptive. And the gift of the story by a supportive person establishes the possibility of that discovery.

The Media Revolution and Christianity

Seen in the context of the history of media, we live at a very significant time in the life of the church. For the first time since the early formation of Christianity as a distinct religion apart from Judaism, the Church now seeks to carry out its mission in a world in which a medium other than writing is the dominant and most advanced medium of mass communication. Chrlstianity's canonical literature was developed in a culture that was still strongly oral. The authors of the New Testament themselves were shaped by the forms and styles of oral culture. But the world in which they lived and worked was going through a transition from oral to written media. As a result, the literature of the Church took a radically different form. Forms and styles of communication that were more appropriate to the culture of writing became dominant, such as theology and allegory.

Prior to the twentieth century, the only changes in the dominant medium of mass communication were changes in the manner in which writing was distributed and perceived. The development of the printing press made possible mass distribution of the Scriptures. And the evolution of silent reading advanced the study of the Scriptures as documentary sources for the construction of Biblical history and theology. Thus, Biblical study now involves the examination of the Biblical texts with the aid of numerous written sources and reference works. Biblical scholarship is primarily done through the publication of books and articles. This is equally true of other areas of theological scholarship. And, in the Church, the dominant means of communication within the denominations are printed magazines and educational curricula. Thus, the printing press remains the dominant means of mass communication in the maintenance and mission of the Church.

But the culture in which the Church works today Is no longer dominated by the medium of print. Electronic media are now the most powerful and advanced means of mass communication. With the development of the telephone, the telegraph, radio, television, motion pictures, and now computers, reading and writing are no longer the only means of communicating with an audience larger than those who can hear one speaker's voice. One person's face and voice can now be broadcast instantly all over the world and billions of people can perceive and understand what is being said.

The effects of this change are increasingly being felt in the Church. The development of the electronic church has meant that persons and groups who have moved aggressively into television have a growing power in influencing both religious and political life. The efforts of the so-called "mainline" denominations to communicate the Gospel have remained effective at the local level where oral patterns of communication have remained dominant. But those efforts are

increasingly weak and ineffective at the regional, national, and international levels where electronic communication is essential.

As a result, the mainstream of orthodox Christianity has increasingly seen television as an enemy. And there is good reason for this hostility because of the discontinuity that exists between the Church's traditions of communication and the styles of communication that communicate effectively in electronic media. The styles of thought and communication that have been developed in the medium of writing are often too slow and heavy for television. Thus, the discussion programs on theological or Biblical issues have generally been boring. The problem is not necessarily the inherent quality of the content. The same content that is of major importance in writing can often be ponderous on television. Thus, the orthodox Church's heavy the communication world of writing is at the heart of its difficulties in developing effective styles of communication in electronic media.

Furthermore, forms of speech that were characteristic of the oral culture of earlier periods in the Church's life have proven to be extremely effective in television. Thus, the revival sermons of Billy Graham, Oral Roberts and a broad group of evangelists have been successful in TV. The testimony as a form of personal story telling has been transformed from a relatively old time feature of Wednesday night prayer meetings in rural churches into the primary element for a whole series of Christian TV talk shows such as "The 700 Club" and "The PTL Club." As a result, forms and styles of Christian thought that have been rejected by the mainstream of the Church as regressive and inappropriate have proven to be effective on TV while the forms and styles that have been progressive and forward looking have not worked.

The problem for the major denominations of the orthodox Church is, therefore, to discover a means of faithfully presenting and interpreting the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a manner that will be meaningful in the electronic media of our age. Marshall McLuhan and other media analysts have suggested that the forms and styles of communication that will be Increasingly dominant in electronic media will be those of tribal villages. That Is, the basic styles of oral culture are likely to be more meaningful than the styles that have been developed in the cultures of writing. And this hypothesis is being confirmed. Television is dominated by the materials of oral culture: music, drama, and storytelling.

In fact, a frequent form of speech on television is storytelling. Many of the most successful programs on television are a series of stories. The news programs are a series of short stories told by a variety of interesting storytellers. The news magazine programs such as "60 Minutes" are longer stories, generally three 15-20 minute narratives per program. The various talk shows, Johnny Carson's "Tonight" show, Dick Cavett's interview program, and Phil Donahue's audience interaction series are all programs in which guests are encouraged to tell a wide variety of personal and comic stories.

A logical extension of this recognition is, therefore, that the orthodox denominations need to explore the presentation and interpretation of its story telling traditions in electronic media. The most important storytelling traditions in Christianity are the Biblical storytelling traditions. One of the ironies of the present programming of the electronic church is that almost everyone talks about the Bible but no one does it. Apart from a few quotations of individual verses, the words of the Bible itself are rarely presented. Even readings from the Scriptures are usually quite short and serve primarily as a pretext for the sermon. The Biblical stories themselves are potentially a primary source of material for television ministry. Furthermore, a deep grounding in the story traditions of the Scriptures may provide a context within which a wide range of stories from the subsequent experience of the Church can be identified and told. Thus, another reason why Biblical storytelling makes sense now is that we live in a new media age in which the Biblical storytelling tradition has a potentially vital role to play in the communication and interpretation of the Gospel.

NOTES

1 Herman Gunkel, The Legends of Genesis (Chicago, 1901r, p. 41.

2 James Muilenburg, The Way of Israel (New York, 1961), p. 24.

3 For further discussion of this conclusion of form critical research, see Martin Dibelius, From Tradition to Gospel (New York, 1935) and Hermann Gunkel, The Legends of Genesis for the most complete summary of form criticism, see Klaus Koch, The Growth of the Biblical Tradition (London, 1969).

4 See Bruce Rosenberg, The Art of the American Folk Preacher (New York, 1970), 13-16; also see Joseph R. Washington, Jr. Black Religion (Boston, 1966); E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America (New York, 1964); see particularly Henry H. Mitchell, Black Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

5 See, for example, Godfrey E. Phillips, The Old Testament in the World Church (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942), esp. pp. 88, 112-113, 121-123 concerning the use of the stories in Africa, 136-137 concerning the stories in India. I have received a letter from Rev. S. Suviseshamuthu, Director of Christian Arts and Communications Service in Madras, India describing the use of the Katha tradition for the proclamation of the Gospel which is very widely used in southern India. To quote Rev. Suviseshamuthu's letter: "It is called Kathakalakshebam. It is story telling with songs interspersed. This is the most popular and often used method in this tradition. The Story Teller may be accompanied by one who plays Harmonium (Indian version of the Organ), Violin and drums. The Story Teller may himself play the Violin sometimes. He holds two pieces of wood with a ring to insert the wood in his fingers and beats them to give the rhythm. The narration in the story is sometimes presented with a kind of a melodious chanting." (personal letter dated 28 January, 1982). In personal conversation with Jerry Rabbu, a Malaysian Methodist pastor and former district superintendent, and Solomon Avotri, a pastor from Ghana both of whom are students here at United (Dayton, Ohio), both told of the present practice in which both of them had been involved of telling Biblical stories in villages (Ghana) or long houses (Malaysia). The general pattern is that a team of persons will visit a village and, in the evening, the people of the village will gather. As a way of interpreting Christianity to them, they tell stories, particularly the stories of Jesus.

6 For the most explicit development of a contemporary theology in light of the eschatological center of New Testament thought, see Jurgen Moltmann, A Theology of Hope (New York, Harper & Row,
19..); also Ray C. Petry, Christian Eschatology and Social Thought (New York, Abingdon: 1956).

7 The original role of narrative recital in Israel and the early Church has spawned several major developments in contemporary theology: David H. Kelsey has related the uses of Scripture as recital in the theologies of G. Ernest Wright and Karl Barth in

The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), Chapter III, "Recital and Presence," pp. 32-55; also see H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1941), Chapter II. "The Story of Our Life," pp. 43-90. Another major development growing out of this realization has been the exploration of theology as narrative; Lonnie D. Kliever has provided an excellent summary of the work of John Dunne, James McClendon, and Sallie McFague on story as a form for theology in The Shattered Spectrum (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). The most comprehensive study of this movement in contemporary theology is: George W. Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

8 For the most comprehensive summary of the characteristics of oral poetry and oral culture, see Ruth Finnegan, Oral Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

9 Gunkel, p. 62.

10 Clemens E. Benda, "Language, Consciousness and Problems of Existential Analysis (Daseinsanalyses), American Journal of Psychotherapy 14/2 (April, 1960), p. 262; cited by Amos Wilder in The Language of the Gospel (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 19.

11 Walter Ong, The Presence of the Word, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 176.

12 Pierre-Yves Emery, "Meditatio - Ruminatio," in Collectonea Cisterciensia, 39 (April, 1977), p. 1.

13 Ray Hart, Unfinished Man and the Imagination (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), p. 205.

14 Both Bultmann and Dibelius make this most fundamental distinction between the types of materials in the Synoptic tradition. See Martin Dibelius, From Tradition to Gospel, pp. 133-177 for the sayings and pp. 37-132 for the stories; also Rudolf Bultmann, The History of the Synoptic Tradition (Oxford:
Blackwell, 1963), pp. 11-208 for the sayings traditions and pp. 209-321 for the narratives.

15 Melvin Maddocks, "In Maine: Storytellers Cast Their Ancient Spell ," Time (Aug 3, 1981), p. 6.

16 Unprinted brochure of Maine Chapter: Network of Biblical Storytellers, p. 2.

17 Nate Shaw, All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw, compiled and edited by Theodore Rosengarten (New YorK: Knopf, 1974).

18 The Oral History Collection of Columbia University, ed. by Elizabeth B. Mason and Louis M. Starr (New York: Oral History Research Office, 1979); also see the

booklets published by the Community Documentation Workshop of the Preservation Youth Project at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, 10th St. and 2nd Ave., New York, New York 10003: Minnie Fisher, Born One Year Before the 20th Century: An Oral History (New York: Community Documentation Workshop, 1976) and Blending into the Life (New York: Community Documentation Workshop, 1976).

19 Roy W. Fairchild, Lifestory Conversations (New York, The Program Agency, UPUSA, 1977), p. 10.

20 Robert McAfee Brown "My Story and The Story," in Theology Today, July 1975, p. 167.