

Whose Story? Or, Can Narrative Theology Ever Be Evangelical?

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“Tell people a fact and you touch their minds. Tell them a story and you touch their souls.” -Hasidic Proverb

“And you shall remember the whole way the LORD your God has led you.” -Deuteronomy 8:2

Introduction

My entry into the world of orality and narrative was not a smooth one. I was raised in an evangelical home filled with books, and my college-educated parents taught me never to question the predominant theological pedagogies we learned in church every Sunday. There was, however, a strong emphasis on the performing arts in our home, particularly music from my dad and drama from my mom. Christians all from a young age, my siblings and I imbibed this dual emphasis on both evangelicalism¹ and an appeal to the

¹ David W. Bebbington defines the term “evangelical” based on four characteristics: biblicalism (the authority of Scripture), crucicentrism (the death of Christ on the cross as

imaginative. As I grew in my understanding of God and learned to communicate his word through preaching, I assumed the three-point expository sermon was the homiletic apex.² Such sermonizing was precisely what my wonderful professors taught me in seminary. Then came what was, for me, a paradigm shift.

When I was newly married and one course away from graduating with my MDiv, my advisor suggested that I take a course over Fall Break in Bible Storying. The instructor, a long-time missionary with the International Mission Board, required students to read two books prior to day one: *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* and *Truth that Sticks*.³ I immediately began applying orality and storying in my local ministry, seeing the men I counseled open up to spiritual conversation in ways they never had before. The next year, I studied for a Th.M. on how orality interacts with the evangelical doctrine of biblical inerrancy.⁴ By this point, my wife and I were on the mission field and using storying in our ministries in Romania. I then completed a Ph.D. in Intercultural Education at Biola University on the use of orality in a formal

central to the gospel message), conversionism (the need for sinners separated from God to repent from their sins and believe the gospel), and activism (the belief that all Christians ought to engage in the Great Commission task of making disciples of all nations). David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1930s to the 1980s* (London, UK: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2. I disagree with the common contention that the term “evangelical” be dropped or redefined in light of contemporary political realities. Insofar as Christian groups uphold Bebbington’s fourfold formula, the term remains a helpful qualifier to distinguish from other Christian communities like the Catholic or Orthodox Churches.

² By “three-point expository sermon,” I mean sermons that elucidate, or exposit, a text or passage of Scripture giving a single “main truth” and supporting that truth statement with specific points rooted in the text. Expository preachers often use three points in their sermons. See Ramesh Richards, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

³ International Orality Network, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Elim, NY: Lausanne, 2007); Avery T. Willis and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010).

⁴ I later adapted my unpublished ThM thesis for publication in Cameron D. Armstrong, “Contextualization, Biblical Inerrancy, and the Orality Movement,” *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics* vol. 7, no. 1 (2014): 244-304.

seminary context.⁵ I now lead a ThM/PhD program in orality missiology in the Philippines.⁶

Needless to say, I believe in the power of theologizing through narrative. I also believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. What I do not believe is that the two cannot be reconciled. The task before us is to show that such reconciliation is possible. As my parents taught me, it is possible to remain evangelical while allowing for adjustment and growth based on imaginative communication forms that touch the heart. In what follows, I argue that an evangelical narrative theology takes from and builds upon the best from both worlds—the world of traditional evangelicalism and the world of the oral-narrative nature of Scripture. After defining *narrative theology*, I address evangelical concerns and recent developments. I conclude by offering five ways scholars might construct an evangelical narrative theology.

What is Narrative Theology?

Growing out of a reaction to the unfulfilled promises of modern philosophical theology, namely that single, objective answers exist to solve theological dilemmas, theologians grew skeptical and began exploring new paths to divine understanding. Theologies *after modernity*, or *post-modernity*, emphasize instead the contextual nature of theological perspectives. Narrative theology became one of these perspectives.⁷

According to German theologian Gabriel Fackre,

⁵ Cameron D. Armstrong, “Finding Yourself in Stories: Romanian Theology Students’ Experience of Oral-Based Teaching Methods,” PhD diss, Biola University, 2020.

⁶ See <https://www.agstphil.org/orality-studies/>. The story of the formation of our program is detailed in Cameron D. Armstrong, “A Graduate Program for Orality Missiology,” *Journal of Asian Mission*, forthcoming Fall 2022.

⁷ Some scholars label these theological perspectives in the negative, such as “critical,” “liberal,” or “post-liberal.” I prefer the term “narrative theology” since it is more positive in the sense that it describes what it is instead of what it is not.

Narrative theology is discourse about God in the setting of story. Narrative (in its narrow sense) becomes the decisive image for understanding and interpreting faith. Depiction of reality, ultimate and penultimate, in terms of plot, coherence, movement, and climax is at the center of all forms of this kind of talk about God.⁸

Narrative theology is primarily concerned with the use of story mediums to communicate who God is. Using the various pieces of story structure, narrative theology believes it is possible to know and understand God through God's word revealed to God's people.

The rub comes as narrative theologians declare that the knowledge of God cannot be fully analyzed, explained, and exhausted.⁹ To use the terms of Grant Osborne, there is a desire to drill deeper into knowing God as our hermeneutics "spiral" further into understanding the narratives of God as expressed through the communities of God.¹⁰ According to narrative theologian Roger Olson, narrative theology lies somewhere between both conservative theology's search for a single truth and liberal theology's denial of any truth at all.¹¹

Could narrative theology be a kind of middle ground? To answer this question, we must examine evangelical concerns and see if they hold up to scrutiny. To the extent that evangelical authors press for narrative theologians to come clean on their belief in the veracity and historicity of biblical

⁸ Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology: An Overview," *Interpretation* vol. 37, no. 4 (1983): 343, cited in Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 49.

⁹ See, for example, Roger E. Olson, "Narrative Theology Explained," *Patheos*, January 15, 2016, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained/>

¹⁰ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1991).

¹¹ Roger E. Olson, "Back to the Bible (Almost): Why Yale's Postliberal Theologians Deserve an Evangelical Hearing," *Christianity Today*, May 20, 1996: 31-34.

narratives, conservative warnings are entirely warranted. Yet if, in fact, these concerns are merely generalizations that fail to appeal to sources or worse, the source of Scripture itself, perhaps it is time for evangelicals to reevaluate narrative theology.

Evangelical Concerns

Evangelical theologian Millard Erickson, in his magnum opus, which is taught in theological education institutions the world over, holds that there are five components of theology for it to be Christian. These are:

1. Theology is biblical.
2. Theology is systematic.
3. Theology also relates to the issues of general culture and learning.
4. Theology must also be contemporary.
5. Theology is to be practical.¹²

Narrative theology, by definition, draws away from abstract systematizing. Indeed, narrative theology cannot be systematic.¹³ While narrative theologians may consider cultural and practical issues, skeptics note the tendency to shun systematic theology and tend to infer that a denial of Erickson's second component necessarily entails a denial of the first. Why?

¹² Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, unabridged and one-volume edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 21-22.

¹³ South African theologian John Klaasen notes that narrative theology is an attempt to make sense of the world issues that systematic theology fails to address. John Klaasen, "Practical Theology and Narrative: Contours and Markers," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* vol. 3, no. 1 (2017): 457-475. This does not mean, of course, narrative theology is unorganized. On the contrary, narrative theology strives for coherence in developing and "expositing" a biblical narrative.

According to missiologist Charles Van Engen, evangelical theologians charge narrative theologians on multiple counts of mishandling the Scriptures.¹⁴ In this section, I address two of the most widespread charges and cite from the premier “fathers” of narrative theology.

First, narrative theology, critics charge, denies authorial intent. Often scholars trace the narrative theology discussion to an article by H. Richard Niebuhr titled “The Story of our Life.”¹⁵ Niebuhr defends the premise that Christian preaching through the centuries chiefly concerns the proclamation of biblical events in story form:

The preaching of the early Christian church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience, unhistorical and super-social in character. It was primarily a recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.¹⁶

Niebuhr does not discount the historical nature of biblical events. On the contrary, it is the confession that Jesus Christ appeared to real people in human history that makes a genuine confession of belief possible. However, Niebuhr hinted in this article that differences exist between Christianity’s *external history*, meaning the historical course of events, and the *internal history* of the story of the ecclesial community.¹⁷ Although the two innately interact, making this distinction smacks of a Barthian divide between revelation and

¹⁴ Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 44-68.

¹⁵ Gary L. Comstock, “Two Types of Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 55, no. 4 (1987): 687. Niebuhr’s article is reproduced in full in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 21-44. Is there no primary source for the article?

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ “External history is the medium in which internal history exists and comes to life.” *Ibid.*, 44.

the natural world. Theology thus became, for many narrative theologians in the line of Neibuhr, a process of *performance* of Christian norms to formulate a Christian identity that may or may not originate in the biblical text.¹⁸

These thoughts were developed most prominently through the work of theologians of the Yale School, particularly Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.¹⁹ While the two differ widely in theological method, both agreed that theology arising out of narrative and narrative criticism leads to a Christian character formation rooted in the narrative character of the Christian gospel. Their point is not proving the Bible's historicity. Their point is ensuring the believer's transformation.

All well and good, evangelicals respond, yet what is the genesis of theology? If the jumping off point is merely connecting the transformation story of a community, albeit a Christian community, to a biblical narrative, that is insufficient exegesis. Authorial intent is not given the seat of honor it deserves. Thus, if this significant rule of conservative hermeneutics is denied, narrative theology fails to take the Bible seriously.²⁰

Second, evangelicals accuse narrative theologians of downplaying the transcendent God, focusing instead on the stories of immanent Christian

¹⁸ See, for example, David F. Ford, "System, Story, Performance: A Proposal about the Role of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology," in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 191-215. More recently, Kevin J. Vanhoozer expanded this idea of theology as doctrinal performance via speech-act theory in his influential *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

¹⁹ Especially influential are Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CO: Yale Univ., 1980) and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984).

²⁰ See John Frame's review of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* in John M. Frame, "Review of Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*," *The Presbyterian Journal* vol. 43 (1985): 11-12. Frame applauds Lindbeck's upholding of the importance of doctrine yet decries as "liberal" Lindbeck's emphasis on doctrinal language as symbols for Christian communities.

communities. Theology, it is said, becomes the story of a religious group (or groups) more than the story of God.²¹

Like all forms of theology, narrative theology moves from the experiences of biblical characters and principles to the practical outworking in the life of the Church. Grenz and Olson argue that this must be so for theology to be called such. They write, “The genius of narrative theology lies in its assertion that faith entails the joining of our personal stories with the transcendent/immanent story of a religious community and ultimately with the grand narrative of the divine action in the world.”²²

Narrative theology, then, links our personal stories as part of God’s community with the metanarrative of the Scriptures. This ongoing task is by no means heretical until it begins labeling such links *revelation*. While few narrative theologians are willing to go this far, evangelicals often suspect such equivocation. One example that flirts with this idea is David Ford’s explanation of Christian worship as neither attention to doctrinal truths nor a soul’s inner communication with God. Instead, Ford says, Christian worship is a “social meal- and word-centered communication informed by the key events of the Christian story.”²³ Thus, narrative theologians are said to favor progressive experience over and above revealed truth by relying more on the conclusions of literary criticism about the Bible than on the fact that God says the Bible is his Word.²⁴

²¹ See, for example, John Frame, “Narrative Theology,” The Gospel Coalition, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/narrative-theology/>

²² Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 272.

²³ David F. Ford, “System, Story, Performance,” 201.

²⁴ “Theology is our best human attempt to understand the biblical drama-story and that includes developing canonical-linguistic models (complex metaphors, doctrines) that express its meaning for the church’s belief and life. But a theologian cannot do that properly unless he or she is ‘living the story’ together with a community of faith shaped by the story.” Roger E. Olson, “Narrative Theology Explained,” Patheos, January 15, 2016, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained/>

These two evangelical charges, denial of authorial intent in interpretation and focusing more on progressive communal experience than the revealed, transcendent God, cause many bristling debates. Yet they are and should be well-noted. Distinguishing between a mystical *biblical-spiritual history* and *external-natural history* will not do, since Christianity's central claim is that the supernatural truly entered the natural. To quote the evangelical titan Carl F. H. Henry,

Representations of biblical history by many narrative theologians leave one with the uneasy sense that their commendable reservations about the historical method are correlated with a view that important aspects of biblical history belong to a different historical category than the history that contemporary historians investigate . . . Evangelical theism insists that God reveals himself in external history and nature, and supremely in redemptive history.²⁵

Evangelical calls are poignant, then, for narrative theologians to choose whether they believe biblical narratives are genuinely historical. Waffling has no place in Christian preaching and discipleship. Sooner or later, we must choose sides.²⁶

²⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 11-12; cited in Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 63.

²⁶ Keven Vanhoozer portrays the discussion a different way. Using the Catholic concept of the "seven deadly sins," Vanhoozer says that the sin of modernism was Pride in the absolute ability of human reason and ingenuity. The sin of postmodernism that embodies much of narrative theology proposals, however, is Sloth, due to their refusal to commit to anything. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ., 2003), 23-24.

Redeeming Narrative Theology

While narrative theology presents real dangers, it also presents opportunities. In this section, I present five opportunities for evangelical theology to learn from narrative theology. In this way, theology may take both the Bible and narrative seriously so that narrative theology can be redeemed.

First, narrative appeals to modern readers. The sharing of stories, especially spiritual stories, ignites emotion. Stories inspire, challenge, embolden, model, sadden, encourage, discourage, clarify, humanize, and question. In short, stories generate empathy.

Narrative theologians are quick to point to the ethical nature of stories.²⁷ Stories instill a community's values into their members. Commenting on the formative essence of narrative for the Church, Grenz and Olson note, "[Narrative theology] rightly calls theology and ethics to consider the role of the Christian community in the formation of believers as people of character."²⁸

Second, narrative is often misunderstood in theological discourse. This is especially true in Christian preaching. Even though preachers know the vast majority of Scripture is narrative,²⁹ most preachers are trained in analytic exegesis that dissects a biblical passage and pulls out a single "big idea."³⁰ Yet,

²⁷ See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, revised and updated ed. (New York, NY: Basic, 2011). Alter's work is an excellent example of how studying the Old Testament using literary theory can bring out helpful insights that enhance interpretation, without detracting from historical-grammatical hermeneutics, leading to new ethical insights.

²⁸ Grenz and Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 360.

²⁹ Tom Steffen, "Pedagogical Conversions: From Propositions to Story and Symbol," *Missiology* vol. 38 (2010): 150.

³⁰ This was certainly the case in the Bible Exposition class I took, which leaned heavily on Ramesh Richard's *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

as theologian Albert Mohler notes, such exegesis works well for a passage from Romans but less so for the book of Jonah.³¹

The result is that either the biblical narratives are not preached at all, which is less likely, or that they could be preached in ways uncharacteristic of the narrative genre, which is more likely. What if a biblical story has more than one main point? Should preachers struggle to condense them into one? The problem then becomes that the preacher may be more faithful to his hermeneutic presuppositions than to the biblical narrative he is preaching.³²

Third, narrative makes biblical characters more real. Little value comes from understanding the heart of a biblical story if it turns out that the characters in that story are merely prototypes propping up a narrative's (or a sermon's) main theological principle. Failing to regard biblical characters as real people with real lives and perspectives quite literally drains the lifeblood from them. For example, in a rush to systematize our understanding of the divine-human nature of Christ, Christians may skip over the wonder Jesus' Jewish friends felt by having a front-row seat to his healing and creating power.

Taking seriously the thoughts, words, and actions of all the characters in a biblical story will lead to diverse theological paths we would do well to follow. Such *character theology* assists Christian teachers and preachers in connecting with audiences who may not prefer more linear, abstract approaches.³³

³¹ R. Albert Mohler, "The Gospel in Biblical Narrative," Truth for Life, May 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21n6Qww8ZA8>.

³² Perhaps even deeper, preachers do not consider narrative to be theology, considering it instead jumbled and messy. Writes Charles Van Engen, "The narrative of Scripture intends to be theology – it intends to point to and signify the reality of God." Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 54. I would caveat it further with the claim that the narrative of Scripture is theology – it *does* point to and signify the reality of God.

³³ "Character theology" is developed in Tom Steffen and William Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 164-195. Using this model, I wrote an advent devotional a few years ago to bring out honor-shame realities. See Cameron D. Armstrong,

Fourth, narrative fits the overall biblical story. One stream in which narrative theology has greatly aided the Church is the recovery of thinking of the Bible as a Grand Narrative. This approach is called *biblical theology*, and it has led to helpful discoveries. Christians are taught that, even though the Bible was written by over 40 authors in a span of 1,500 years on several continents, the Bible is one story of a good God who redeems his fallen people. Various parts, or movements, are proposed for this metanarrative. I learned to retell the Grand Story in terms of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Yet beyond the terms we use, the reality that the Bible is intended to be understood as a unified story in which we may all find our place is helpful on multiple fronts, including missionaries doing the hard work of contextualization.³⁴

Fifth, narrative provides a less abrasive apologetic. Narrative is essential in soteriology, the study of salvation, because salvation stories “presume the sufficient conditions of a narrative: two states and an event that transforms the first into the second.”³⁵ In other words, Christians use narrative in explaining not only their own salvation stories, but also the overarching story of the gospel. As Christians tell the story of their lives before Christ, how they met Christ, and the redeemed life since that time, others imagine what it might mean to live such a story. This is especially helpful in interreligious encounters.³⁶

“Advent Devotional: Honor, Shame, and the First Christmas,” Honorshame.com, <https://honorshame.com/advent-devotional-honor-shame-and-the-first-christmas/>

³⁴ Consider, for example, the use of biblical theology among Filipino tribal Christians to counter heretical evangelists. “Tribals Reaching Tribals: A Conversation with Steve and Jen Hagen,” *Orality and the Mission of God* podcast, September 12, 2022, <https://anchor.fm/oralityandthemissionofgod/episodes/Tribals-Reaching-Tribals-A-Conversation-with-Steve-and-Jen-Hagen-e1nn0n4?fbclid=IwAR1ie1llswGpbD4fVA58FRMsRZCQg5R5pB96cZBHutqMJgtVV-fw4TCyoyY>

³⁵ Michael Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” in Hauerwas and Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?*, 263-264.

³⁶ Drawing from Hans Frei’s identification of five types of Christian dialogue with world religions, Malaysian theologian Kang-San Tan advances that dialoguing with religious narratives helps non-Western Christians synthesize their worldview among non-Christian

Sharing how our stories dovetail into the biblical story is nothing new, as the Apostle Paul frequently used such an approach in the Book of Acts. Yet an overemphasis on systematically proving abstract statements in our evangelism strategies (God is holy, you are a sinner, etc.), can lead to fear whenever the topic of evangelism arises. Christians fear they are not fully trained in apologetics and doctrine to counter the lies of the enemy. Explanation through stories, however, may deflate those fears.³⁷

The Best of Both Worlds?

This article has introduced basic concepts and definitions of narrative theology. Arising out of a postmodern reaction to propositional thought that reduced rich narratives to abstract statements, theologians began to trace and intersect the narrational schemes of biblical stories and their own stories. Evangelical suspicion of a de-emphasis on the historicity of biblical narratives in favor of some sort of ahistorical, spiritual horizon is rightly warranted. That is a dangerous path that is often circular and leads nowhere except apostasy.

Yet a focus on the narrative structure of Scripture, both the individual narratives and the Grand Narrative of the whole, can also lead to a robust biblical theology. Understanding the unfolding plan of God (biblical theology) becomes richer through an informed evangelical narrative theology.

majority cultures in a way that traditional Western systematic theologies often do not. Tan writes, “Evangelicals rooted in a Western epistemology seem good at analyzing but not very good at synthesis; good at splitting fine doctrinal hairs, but not very good at allowing new shoots to grow into indigenous Christianity within the parameters of orthodoxy.” Kang-San Tan, “Hans Frei’s Typology of Theology for Religious Encounters in Asian Contexts,” 279-295, in *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2019), 290.

³⁷ “Storytelling evangelism” within community is the thrust of Sam Chan’s *Effective Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News About Jesus More Believable* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018). For the use of story in apologetics, see Josh Chatraw, *Telling A Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).

As a result, Christians not only begin to locate how biblical narratives fit in the overall canon, but they also begin viewing their own stories as part of God's Story. On an even more personal level, Christians empathize with biblical characters, reliving their perspectives in ways that fortify their faith and spur them forward in the Christian journey. And if that kind of genuine Christian living becomes the result of our teaching, we may rest assured that the God who walked alongside the characters of the Bible will walk alongside our disciples also.

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