

RESPONSE TO "PREACHING AND STORY"

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Story is in. We believe that this current emphasis will enhance the quality of preaching. But there are some risks. The writer of the above paper does not fall into these dangers, so the merit of his statement may be seen over against them. And it may be useful to consider whether what this respondent thinks are risks are really all that dangerous.

One use of story, as the author points out in section III, is as illustration. The risk at this point is trivialization: the telling of interesting stories to illustrate truths which are really quite superficial: equating good preaching with good illustrations.

This summer I heard two very able young preachers at one of our nation's most prominent "preaching centers." They had been invited to preach because they have reputations as good preachers—and they are. What dismayed me was that their sermons were merely good advice liberally sprinkled with interesting stories—much more story than substance. The congregation loved it, and the preachers did it very well. But any thoughtful listener must have known that basic needs were never wrestled with; our human condition was treated lightly. The deep resources of the Christian faith were never shared; the good news was reduced to good advice. Stories were told, but the Word was not present.

Some of us have struggled all our preaching lives with the task of finding authentic stories which embody some aspect of the Gospel. We have envied those preachers who seem to do this with ease—and often with class. We have run the risk of being "heavy," because we could not reduce the Gospel to a series of success stories. Whatever our skills or limitations in the use of illustrations, the truth to be bodied forth must be as deep as human experience and as profound as the Gospel.

The current discussion of story, of course, goes beyond mere interest in finding illustrations, and the preceding paper deals helpfully with these concerns. But it is precisely this deeper understanding, plus the misgivings just expressed, that suggests the more serious risk in our fascination with story.

We may try to make story do more than story can really do. Some of the discussions of story, even some of the quotations cited in the

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paper, point to this. They are frequently brilliant and imaginative, but sometimes ponderous and perhaps over-reaching in their claims on behalf of narrative.

There may be some things that story cannot do. The proponents of story may recognize this, but they run the risk of implying that the Gospel can be fully articulated in narrative. The Gospel can indeed be told as story, but it raises further questions which cannot be answered simply by more stories.

When we have told our story, the question remains whether it is true. Is our story real or make-believe? Is it truth or illusion? When I tell the story of Adam and Eve, what am I really to believe about God, myself, Creation, Fall? And the stories of Jesus—are they myth or history? What is the reality embodied in Christmas, Easter? Crucifixion and Resurrection? These are beautiful stories indeed. But what do they mean? Every non-theist or humanist who happens to hear such stories will ask—has asked—such questions. Every church member who has been shaken by some claims of biblical criticism will ask the same. Indeed, the questions are rooted not simply in skepticism but in our need to know, to ground our belief in reality.

We can't answer these questions by retelling the stories. Somewhere in our preaching/teaching there must be serious wrestling with our basic human needs, substantive interpretation of God's response to these needs.

The Gospel required preaching that is both story and interpretation, both biography and disclosure of the hidden presuppositions which underlie that biography. Experience and faith are always in interaction, each shaping and modifying the other. So preaching is a sharing of experience and a witness to faith; a narration and a confession.

Some studies of the parables point to this. It is easy to make too great a claim for this form of narration. The whole Christian Gospel is not communicated in the parables of Jesus. Moreover, the records indicate that the parables were not always understood. Even his parables required explanation, and indeed they required the sermons and epistles of his followers.

It is surely true that the most eloquent and moving communication of the Christian faith is your own witness, your sharing of your own experience, the telling of your own story. But the Gospel is event and meaning; the Christian life is experience and faith; authentic preaching is story and interpretation—and invitation.

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