

Doctrine as a Scripting Agent: *Re-Interpeting the World around Us*

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My teens were able to tell me all sorts of ways that a person could live an abundant life as portrayed by media (money, relaxing and shopping, lots of friends with the latest styles, etc.). Then I asked them to describe what an abundant life lived in the way of Jesus would be like. All I got back were blank stares.

After a little bit, I rephrased the question. “What does it mean to follow Jesus?” Then came many Sunday school answers: *believing in Jesus, forgiveness of sins, etc.* So I decided to ask another question: “What would it mean to be a follower of Lindsay Lohan?” Immediately came all kinds of answers about lifestyle, habits, dieting practices, etc. Then I dramatically hushed everyone and asked, “What’s wrong with this conversation?” One of my freshmen proclaimed, “We know more about Lindsay Lohan than Jesus!”

There it was. I was glad that one of my teens got there before I had to say it. It made a much more profound impact coming from her than from me.

Now I don’t think this line of thinking is isolated to my own teenagers or even to most Christians. We know far more about the idols of our society than we do about Jesus. We do a much better job of following these idols than we do of following Jesus. Indeed, this was a priceless moment.

Marketing Messages

We’re constantly inundated and indoctrinated by all sorts of messages and narratives. Marketing gurus estimate that the average American encounters 16,000 advertising messages each day. Each seeks to lay claim to our lives—in both practices and beliefs. Inside these narratives lie teachings and assumptions about life. Essentially, each message posits a certain doctrinal claim on our lives, giving us belief systems by which to understand and construct reality.

The church also seeks to help students believe—believe in God, believe in the church, believe in themselves. Often we feel helpless and ill-prepared for such a task. Not only are our students formed and pressured by culture—the busyness, the stress, the lack of time, the need to perform, etc.—but we also feel ourselves as leaders being formed and pressured by it, as well.

In the midst of all of that clutter, our church doctrines sometimes seem rather flat. A doctrine of salvation, for instance, might feel dreamy at best when placed in the context of other seemingly more urgent issues of the moment. We’re unsure of how to grapple with some sort of salvation doctrine that’s all-encompassing to our worldview and behavior patterns. We ultimately opt for a flimsy doctrine of salvation that’s essentially fire insurance for the afterlife rather than taking on the bold task of allowing God’s grace to change our current rhythms, practices, and beliefs—to bring about salvation in the present not only for ourselves but also for those around us. That will only happen when we allow Scripture and its doctrines to “script” our life stories.

What does it mean to immerse ourselves in the story and teachings of the faith? How can we help our students reframe their lives around the doctrines of Christianity?

Labels, Labels, Labels

Recently our young people explored the power of labels and language in the scripting of our lives and how these ideas interact with the Gospel. They found that multiple ideas, products, and actions script us every moment. Each script speaks a language seeking to be seen as fresh and exciting, wanting desperately to control our lives.

One way we're scripted is through labels and branding. Marketing efforts use branding to tell us what our priorities in life should be. We become obsessed with obtaining certain possessions, particular homes, specific neighborhoods, distinct schools, noteworthy jobs, or a special way of life. Most of us remember being labeled geeks, losers, preps, jocks, etc. in our middle and high schools. My students testified to how they've both labeled and been labeled by society. They also shared how they've experienced both the perks of positive branding and the hurt and pain of negative branding.

Providing Language

Students can feel the tug of culture—and often a different tug from their faith communities. We need to immerse our students in the narrative of Christian doctrines, allowing the language of Christianity to begin rescripting and reframing the meaning of existence. We must immerse our youth in the Scriptures so that they can be shaped and scripted by the mind of Christ rather than by the mind of the advertising industry.

Most people had given up on Josh. Adults saw him living a rebellious lifestyle, and most of the time he looked as if he wanted to kill himself. For him, ideas of faith, discipleship, servanthood, community, or worship of God were completely irrelevant. To Josh, Christianity was just a way for people to feel better about themselves, so all he could see were fake, plastic people. However, over the past few months—culminating in a inner-city mission experience that put him into various conversations and situations with homeless men, women, and children—his experience with God, faith, and church shifted.

In order to prepare my students for the mission experience, we plunged into theology, specifically the idea of redemption. Soon Josh, along with other students in our ministry, began to see how the Old Testament prophets and Jesus' words in the New Testament painted a very different picture about life. Our once rebellious student was able to put flesh to these words through his mission trip experience. Interestingly, he continues to articulate this experience through theologically rich language. He continues to come back to the doctrine of redemption in order to understand his encounter.

Without the language and script that this doctrine provided, Josh would have to turn to the narratives, doctrines, and scripts provided to him by society in order to interpret his experiences. Rather than seeing something fake or plastic like before, he was able to see a concrete story of hope—to see how his story and the life of a homeless family were brought together through the person of Jesus Christ.

Reinterpretation

We want to allow God's language to reinterpret the smaller languages of society; we see this in the Gospels. When the widow puts her mite into the collection, Jesus reinterprets what it means to live out the gospel. He turns the typical notions that humanity has about the world, life, and God on their heads. As we pay attention to the life of Jesus, we see him walking among labeled people—adulterers, tax collectors, Samaritans, Zealots, Pharisees, eunuchs, etc.—seeing past the brands and extending love as he re-scripts each individual. In doing so, Jesus transforms how people see themselves, bringing healing, redemption, and salvation.

Our young people are beginning the process of discovering and shaping their identities, as well. As they're exposed to Scripture and its doctrines, they're exposed to the person of Jesus Christ—and they begin to be branded and labeled anew.

My youth group has been exploring these ideas using the book of James. One week we looked at the concepts of poverty and success as played out in the narratives of society versus the narrative of the gospel. As our students poured their thoughts into the conversation, they developed new questions and new understandings of how the gospel narrative should be lived out in their lives. What they discovered is that embodying the message of Christ can only happen in the midst of the other stories of society. The message of Jesus brings hope and vision because it sees the world differently.

Bringing Scripture to Life

It's essential that the church and its youth leaders help students understand doctrine not as an abstract concept but as a tool for seeing life and the world differently. This can often seem like a daunting task, especially if the doctrines are complex and distant. However, once the connection is made between a concept like redemption and the teenage desire to be known, we give our students new eyes to see the world and their place within it.

Recently, I had our students engage the story of Noah and the flood. Rather than giving them the childhood version of the story, I had them wrestle with global Katrina-like suffering that the story implies, the idea of an angry God, and the messiness of redemption and faith in a man like Noah who finds God's favor and yet drinks away the remainder of his life. More importantly, I had them examine all of these through the lens of redemption and asked at the end, "Was God able to redeem the world by starting over with Noah?" The students had various opinions from one extreme to the other. Ultimately, they were able to see more clearly that God continues to put faith in humanity—and that God continues to suffer over and over.

Such a realization placed them in a remarkable position of seeing God, self, and life very differently. Some students began to make applications to their current realities and see that life might not be about success, but about finding ways to suffer with others—and that by doing so they could participate in God's redemptive work. What they all understood at the end of the conversation was that God has a deep desire to interact with us, suffer with us, enter into our pain, and that God is asking us to enter into the suffering around us.

The Word Still Becomes Flesh

As youth leaders we often haven't connected with doctrine in this way. It has become a place of contention instead of a place for conception. We must allow these doctrines to be made flesh in our lives—allow them to script, brand, and reframe our very existence. Only then will we be able to help our teenagers do the same.

To do this we must reorient our ideas about doctrine around practice. For example, the spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, and spiritual directors are in vogue, especially in the youth ministry world; yet we haven't fully made the connection between the doctrinal beliefs in our minds and the spiritual practices that enrich our hearts. Practices provide a structure and a language for the soul. The Christian practices run against many of the rhythms and practices of culture. As a result, they naturally lead to theological questioning, forcing us to deal with the angst and tensions that result. Both ancient and contemporary Christian practices script us and slowly shift our beliefs about self, others, and God.

So we must immerse ourselves and our students in both the tenets of the faith and in real life. Real life is the place of hurts, pain, passions, joy, and hope. When these are attached to

doctrines of atonement, incarnation, or eschatology, Christianity is no longer a religion for students to give a passive nod to, but an ideology to give life for.

Exploring the doctrine of eschatology, we can help our students understand the lamenting and visioning that a prophet like Isaiah used to see the state of the world, picture its future, and recast a vision for changing it. Then we can connect this doctrine with students' lives. They're perceptive and can provide meaningful reflection on the current state of their lives and the world situation. They're able to see the way the world is currently being scripted and the probable future of a world on these tracks. At the same time, we must help our students conceive of a new world—a Kingdom of God world—where reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace exist. Then we can help our students join in the *missio dei* for creating such a future by giving them practices—disciplines that form their life patterns and rhythms—that will script their lives around such a doctrine.

Christian Practices

My congregation chooses one Christian practice to intentionally engage in and explore each year. The current practice we're living together is Sabbath. Rather than programming our practice or holding our people to some rigid, legalistic form, we work at it more playfully—mentioning it subtly in sermons, in our publications, and in casual conversations—hoping that our people will find their own ways of practicing it. Not surprisingly, they find all sorts of ways to practice Sabbath as individuals, as small groups, and as a community of faith.

We recently started a discussion on ecclesiology through this practice—what does it mean to be church in this stressed-out world? We're searching for ways to decrease the amount of activities and programs that we provide, make the current programs simpler, and enjoy life together more. And this is not a reaction to slower giving or slashed budget lines; it's a reimagining of ecclesiology because of the tension that the Christian practice of Sabbath made us face in our 24/7/365 world.

I helped my students engage this practice by leading a series about play and recreation in our lives through various Scripture sections from the prophets, sayings from saints and church fathers and mothers, and ideas found in our contemporary world. We played with the imagery Jesus used about having to become as a little child to truly get God. My students were intrigued by this and we continued to discuss the implications of a rather playful God. It's been amazing watching our students question the expectations of time, work, and stress in our world as a result. Through this practice, they're engaging the idea of vocation and *missio dei*.

This practice has become more than just resting. It's scripting and indoctrinating them according to the mind of Christ. At home, they're having more meaningful conversations with their parents about school, career, and the direction of their lives. Rather than orienting themselves around a well-paying career, many of them are beginning to search for careers that will help them serve in redemptive areas.

Glimpses of Re-Scripting

I'm attempting to immerse my students into these practices connected with doctrine. Some days I succeed; other days I fail. But I'm attempting to allow Christian doctrines to script the lives of my students in effective ways in the midst of so many competing messages. Over the past months, I see moments where this scripting is showing up in their lives. There's a moment where one of my female student leaders engages a homeless man about the violence that homeless people receive and she comes back to our group and wonders aloud about what salvation might look like for this man; another student considers giving up video games in favor of that time spent in service to God; a comment that shoots to the heart of the

doctrine of creation; a glimpse where my students are outside at night praying for the city all in silence and then commenting afterwards about the silent nature of God's redeeming work in the world. These are the moments where I know a connection has been made between doctrine and reality—where it's becoming the script for their lives.

As we immerse our students in Scripture and its doctrines, our lives are being re-scripted (script-ured) by God. Jesus went through life reinterpreting the events around him in light of a Kingdom perspective, and he invites us—and our students—to do the same thing. In doing so, forgiveness and grace overcome the consumerist, self-seeking values and scripting that so often holds us and our society captive.

We get the magnificent privilege of walking alongside young people on an incredible journey—one that calls us to pay attention to ourselves, the people around us, and the ideas shaping our society. A journey that calls us to understand how stories, narratives, brands, labels, and scripts affect our world. A journey that calls us to change our world, slowly, as we see the Gospel narrative “script-ure” us and those around us.

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