

Dr. Davey Naugle  
Friday Symposium

Dallas Baptist University  
February 5, 1999

**NARRATIVE AND LIFE:  
THE CENTRAL ROLE OF STORIES IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE**

*"Then we must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We'll select their stories whenever they are fine and beautiful and reject them when they aren't. And we'll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the ones we have selected, since they will shape their children's souls with stories much more than they will shape their bodies by handling them."*

—Plato, *Republic* 377c

The power of stories to shape consciousness and affect action has been recognized since time immemorial. No one in antiquity saw this more clearly than Plato. Having completed his discourse about the kinds of stories that would inspire honor in the guardians of his ideal state, Plato states at the outset of Book 3 in the *Republic* that stories that imparted a fear of death in future civil servants were to be rigorously censored.

Such, then, I said, are the kinds of stories that I think future guardians should and should not hear about the gods from childhood on, if they are to honor the gods and their parents and not take their friendship with one another lightly. . . .

What if they are to be courageous as well? Shouldn't they be told stories that will make them least afraid of death? Or do you think that anyone ever becomes courageous if he's possessed by this fear?

No, I certainly don't. . . .

Then we must supervise such stories and those who tell them, and ask them not to disparage the life in Hades in this unconditional way, but rather to praise it, since what they now say is neither true nor beneficial to future warriors.<sup>1</sup>

Plato knew well that the kinds of stories that the future guardians of his ideal commonwealth would encounter in their education would be determinative for life. As meaningful arrangements of reality-shaping characters, plots, and ideas,

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 60-1.

narratives would be extremely influential both cognitively and morally. Because of their power to mold consciousness and conduct, Plato knew that the content of the guardians' early training had to be carefully planned and supervised. The Athenian philosopher's recognition of the remarkable power of stories and the consequent need for pedagogical supervision has been expressed well by contemporary fairy tale expert Bruno Bettelheim.

Plato—who may have understood better what forms the mind of man than do some of our contemporaries who want their children exposed only to 'real' people and everyday events—knew what intellectual experiences make for true humanity. He suggested that the future citizens of his ideal republic begin their literary education with the telling of myths, rather than with mere facts or so-called rational teachings. Even Aristotle, master of pure reason, said: 'The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.'"<sup>2</sup>

Indeed Aristotle did say this, for he, who conceived of humans as rational animals and believed that the highest form of happiness was to be found in philosophic contemplation, nevertheless recognized the innate attractiveness and power of stories in human life. As he pointed out in the *Poetics* (chapter 2), the origin of poetry and story-telling can be traced to the phenomenon of *imitation* as something deeply rooted in human nature. Imitation is natural to human beings from childhood, and, as experience shows, it is normal for them to delight in works of imitation even if what is imitated is painful. Learning by means of imitation brings the greatest possible pleasure.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, from an Aristotelian perspective, poetry

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<sup>2</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1977), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. and notes Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 4-5 (2.1-2.2).

or story-telling as an imitative and joy-producing art is one of the most significant, soul-shaping forces to prevail upon humanity.<sup>4</sup>

In moving from the classical to the Christian era, the power of narrative in human life was recognized and profoundly articulated by St. Augustine in his book *De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Teaching)*.<sup>5</sup> In this work, Augustine's chief aim is the cultivation of love for God through a knowledge of the stories of Scripture which speak of Him and His works of creation and redemption. When it comes to the Bible as the textual means to this spiritual end, two goals are upper most in Augustine's mind: how to understand it exegetically and how to proclaim it rhetorically, that is, the development of skills in the arts of hermeneutics and

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps such reflections were the cause of Aristotle's distinction between theory and praxis, or *theoria* and *phronesis*, to be specific. While unencumbered, theoretical reason (*theoria*) could guarantee the outcome and trustworthiness of its scientific and philosophical investigations, practical or ethical reason (*phronesis*) was affected by subjective, contextual, and perhaps narrational factors. Personal history and experience—one's story in other words—as well as habituation in the virtues (or the lack thereof), affected the ethical agent's ability to arrive at and skillfully apply moral knowledge to ethical situations. For this reason, he made his famous qualification about the conditional nature of ethical knowledge: "Our discussion will be adequate if its degree of clarity fits the subject-matter; for we should not seek the same degree of exactness in all sorts of arguments alike, any more than in the products of different crafts. . . . Since these, then, are the sorts of things we argue from and about [the fine, just, and good], it will be satisfactory if we can indicate the truth roughly and in outline; since [that is to say] we argue from and about what holds good usually [but not universally], it will be satisfactory if we can draw conclusions of the same sort. Each of our claims, then, ought to be accepted in the same way [as claiming to hold good usually], since the educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows; for apparently it is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician as to accept [merely] persuasive arguments from a mathematician" [Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 3-4; 1.3].

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Teaching Christianity-De Doctrina Christiana*, intro., trans., notes Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 11 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996), 106 (1.1).

homiletics. “There are two things,” Augustine writes, “which all treatment of the scriptures is aiming at: a way to discover what needs to be understood, and a way to put across to others what has been understood.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, he proceeds in the first three books of this volume to deal with the first goal of biblical interpretation. In the fourth book, he undertakes a discussion on rhetoric or preaching. The final end of the interpretation and proclamation of scripture is *caritas*—the love of God for His own sake and humanity for God’s sake in fulfillment of the first and second greatest commandments.<sup>7</sup> Nestled in this Augustinian treatise is a clear and cogent recognition of the efficacy of stories as instruments of either truth or falsehood, and their immense power to form human minds, order human life, and determine human destiny for either good or ill. For Augustine the consummate issue of life resided in a being called “God” and the narratives about Him in the book of holy Scripture. When these stories were rightly understood, persuasively proclaimed, and willingly embraced, they became the ultimate source of truth and the supreme beatitude.

Thus the wisdom of the ages, going all the way back to Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine, would suggest that much of life in terms of its thought, action, and destiny is a function of the weightiness of stories. We human beings, so it would seem, are story-tellers—*homo narrans*—so much so that our lives are formed and informed by the stories, myths, and folktales we tell ourselves and to each other.<sup>8</sup>

Though an effort was made by modernist exterminators to rid *homo narrans* of their balkanizing stories in order to replace them with unifying scientific

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22: 37-39, NASB).

<sup>8</sup> Linda Dégh, “The Approach to Worldview in Folk Narrative Study,” *Western Folklore* 53 (July 1994): 245.

knowledge, such an effort has proven to be shortsighted and futile. Enlightenment denarrativization is completely at odds with the universal recognition of the storied aspects of human existence evident at all times and in all places. Even though the concept of story has been in eclipse as a basic category for thinking about human existence throughout the modern period (for about the past three hundred years), in these postmodern times, the idea of the narrative quality of human existence has been making an astonishing come back.

Perhaps more than any other, contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued persuasively for the recovery of a narrative-based understanding of human existence. In his celebrated *After Virtue* (1981),<sup>9</sup> he suggests that a morally ordered human life is possible only to the extent that it is conceived, unified, and evaluated as a whole. Hence, he seeks to recover a concept of an integrated human existence grounded in the integrity of a narrative which links birth, life, and death, beginning, middle and end, into a singular, coherent story rooted in community. MacIntyre believes that it is natural to think of the self in the narrative mode, and that all human conversations and actions are best understood as “enacted narratives.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, what human beings think, say, and do emerge out of the basic stories that inform their lives. Narrative, not free-floating, independent action, is the most fundamental category. Overarching stories are necessary to make sense of the world as well as one’s own life and social context. As MacIntyre puts it, “there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic

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<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 204-25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things.”<sup>11</sup> These various thoughts culminate for MacIntyre into an important proposal about the necessity of narrative as the context in which a virtuous life can be cultivated.

A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question “What am I to do” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”<sup>12</sup>

For MacIntyre, then, human life is dominated by story. Narrative identity determines how one lives and conducts oneself in the world. One is oriented to life in the world by the power of stories to shape consciousness and direct behavior. The roles which people play, how they understand themselves and others, how the world itself is structured and operates are entirely a function of the narrative plots that reign in human lives and communities.<sup>13</sup>

A similar thesis can also be seen in recent thought about myths and fairy tales. Psychiatrist Rollo May, for example, argues that myth, which he compares to the hidden framework of a house, is the very structure that imparts meaning and significance to life and thereby holds it together.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> L. Gregory Jones, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Narrative, Community, and the Moral Life,” *Modern Theology* 4 (1987): 53-69, suggests that MacIntyre identifies several uses of narrative and argues that (1) comprehensible human action is narrative in form, (2) human life has a basically narrative shape, (3) persons are essentially story-telling creatures, (4) people establish their lives and arguments in narrative histories and communities, (5) traditions consist and are continued by means of narrative histories, and (6) epistemic progress, as in Kuhnian science, is characterized by the construction and reconstruction of narratives with greater interpretative power.

A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Whether the meaning of existence is only what we put into life by our own individual fortitude. . . or whether there is a meaning we need to discover. . . , the result is the same: myths are our way of finding this meaning and significance. Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it.<sup>14</sup>

Analogously, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, whom we mentioned earlier, has argued that fairy tales are the crucial means by which children fashion and refashion their worlds. This is true largely because such tales are essentially concerned with basic worldview questions and answers: “The child asks himself: ‘Who am I? Where did I come from? How did the world come into being? Who created man and all the animals? What is the purpose of life?’”<sup>15</sup> Bettelheim is convinced that children ponder these questions, not philosophically, but in a child-like way as they pertain to the specific boy or girl, and his or her individual well being.

He [the child] worries not whether there is justice for individual man, but whether *he* will be treated justly. He wonders who or what projects him into adversity, and what can prevent this from happening to him. Are there benevolent powers in addition to his parents? Are his parents benevolent powers? How should he form himself, and why? Is there hope for him, though he may have done wrong? Why has all this happened to him? What will it mean for his future?<sup>16</sup>

For Bettelheim, then, fairy tales provide the answers to these pressing questions—questions which children become aware of only as they are exposed to

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<sup>14</sup> Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., A Delta Book, 1991), 15. For further exploration of the role of myth in human life, see Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

these stories, and follow their plots all the way through. The answers given by fairy tales fit the nature of children and serve to form their childlike outlook on the world.<sup>17</sup>

These reflections on several classical (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine) and contemporary thinkers (MacIntyre, May, Bettelheim) help to confirm the thesis of this paper, namely the connection between life and narrative, and the central role of stories in human experience. Stories are a universal phenomenon and a most basic mode of human life. They are not just literary devices employed to illustrate or entertain, nor are they to be conceived as the uneducated person's cheap epistemological substitute for a rigorous, scientific explanation of reality. Rather, they are a much deeper matter and lie at the heart of things. Because of their content and human interest, people respond to stories naturally and enthusiastically. They are capable of capturing attention, gripping the imagination, prompting thoughtfulness, and engendering action. As Plato said, stories are soul-shaping forces that determine the course and destiny of life. The narrative condition of human existence seems to be permanently fixed.<sup>18</sup>

Given this rather remarkable human reality, what happens when an individual, a group of people, or an entire civilization finds itself without a presupposed, foundational story serving as the basis of life? What would it be like to live in an unnarrated, and in an apparently unnarratable world? Can we conceive of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 45. "The fairy tale proceeds in a manner which conforms to the way a child thinks and experiences the world; this is why the fairy tale is so convincing to him. He can gain much better solace from a fairy tale than he can from an effort to comfort him based on adult reasoning and viewpoints. A child trusts what the fairy story tells, because its world view accords with his own."

<sup>18</sup> Some of the ideas in this paragraph are in part derived from N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 32-8.

the conditions of a culture that has lost its narrative bearings? Perhaps the answer to these questions is this: such a world be like the one we now have.

According to some, our world has lost its story.<sup>19</sup> For centuries, we had one. It was rooted in the narrative of the Jewish-Christian Scriptures which Augustine wanted to be so clearly explained and effectively communicated. It was the story of the Bible, indeed, the story of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His story as the cosmic author and universal novelist is, as one has put it, “the greatest story ever told.” It begins with the creation of a very good world by a loving God. A conflict emerges when those creatures, whom He created to be His image and likeness, revolted in sin and declared their independence. The denouement comes in the fulfillment of the ancient promises of redemption achieved by the incarnation, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection of the same God who made all things well in the beginning. The story ends in hope because those who have embraced this good news in sincere faith will live eternally in communion with God, enjoying the glory of a newly created heaven and earth. This is the story by which the West has lived for the better part of its history. There is no doubt about where it has come from or what it has provided spiritually and intellectually. Countless individuals throughout the centuries have embraced it and made it their narrative home, using it to make sense of the cosmos and human life within it.

But the fact of the matter is that our world has lost this story. Just as there is no doubt about where the West got its story, so there is no doubt about how it has lost it. The answer is found in the era known as the Enlightenment. The intellectual architects of the Enlightenment attempted to create a new world, indeed a new story, yet without a universal Storyteller. They wanted a narrative in which human

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<sup>19</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story,” *First Things* (October 1993). Republished in Gregory Wolfe, ed. *The New Religious Humanists: A Reader* (New York: The Free Press), 135-49.

beings, and not God, were the chief actors. They wanted a thoroughly secular civilization.

However, the modernist project, on all accounts, has not only failed but failed miserably. Why? Robert Jenson offers this succinct explanation that focuses on the loss of story.

It is, after the fact, obvious that it had to [fail]: if there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line. Neither you nor I nor all of us together can so shape the world that it can make narrative sense; if God does not invent the world's story, then it has none, then the world has no narrative of its own. If there is no God, . . . there is no narratable world.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, if there is no longer any comprehensive narrative given to us from God in which to live, move, and establish our very being, then it is up to each one of us to create our own narrative reference point. But the problem is this: human consciousness is too weak a flame to create a story substantial enough to enlighten the whole of existence in a meaningful way. Thus in the resulting darkness, we find ourselves on the precipice, staring into the abyss of nihilism.

No one has understood this better than the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, famous for announcing to the Western world that God was dead. By this declaration, of course, he did not mean that God was once alive, and had died. Rather, he meant that the *myth* of God's existence—the story by which the Western world had lived for nineteen long centuries—had passed from the scene. He not only informed us about this catastrophic cultural fact, but he also, more than any other, spelled out what the consequences of this loss of a cosmic Author would be. For Nietzsche, the category of story made a coherent and stable life possible. In his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, he stressed the necessity and power of myth which he described “as a concentrated image of the world”<sup>21</sup> As he puts it, “But without myth

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 141

every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement.”<sup>22</sup> The Western world, however, has been bent upon the destruction of its biblical myth—a “mythoclasm”<sup>23</sup>—engendered by an intoxication with scientism, technologism, economism, and a thorough-going secularism. Postmodern man, “untutored by myth,” Nietzsche asserts, is famished and in search of any and every mythological morsel on which to feed himself, as the frenzied activities and compulsions of contemporary life indicate. Listen carefully to the substance of the following quotation from Nietzsche’s pen as it poignantly describes the desperation of the intellectually and spiritually starving denizens of our current culture.

And now the mythless man stands eternally hungry, surrounded by all past ages, and digs and grubs for roots, even if he has to dig for them among the remotest antiquities. The tremendous historical need of our unsatisfied modern culture, the assembling around one of countless other cultures, the consuming desire for knowledge—what does all this point to, if not to the loss of myth, the loss of the mythical home, the mythical maternal womb?<sup>24</sup>

Nietzsche perceives that the “feverish and uncanny excitement” of postmodern culture—its incessant pace, its quest for exotic traditions, its passion for knowledge—must be interpreted as nothing other than a hunger for myth, “the greedy seizing and snatching at food by a hungry man.”<sup>25</sup> No matter how much it devours sensually, materialistically, or egotistically, a storyless world and mythless

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<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. and commentary Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1967), 135 [§ 23 in *The Birth of Tragedy*].

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> This term is from Jerome S. Bruner, “Myth and Identity,” in *Myth and Mythmaking*, ed. Henry A. Murray (New York: George Braziller, 1960), 285, quoted in May, *The Cry for Myth*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

culture cannot and never will be satiated. Instead, it will be characterized by cultural chaos, political disorder, social conflict, and moral disintegration. Indeed, it will be like our chaotic world. I would like to mention two features that I believe illustrate the fact that our world has lost its story.

First is the dissolution of the arts and the creation of what Os Guinness has called an “idiot culture.”<sup>26</sup> In the post world war II era, a new genre of theater was added to classical tragedy and comedy: the theater of the absurd. This avant garde dramatic medium, most clearly embodied in the work of Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, *Breath*, *End Game*), prominently displays an absence of narrative coherence in its long sequences of events (or its absence of any events at all) that lack any turning points or resolutions. The music of John Cage, sometimes composed by flipping coins, (*60 Seconds of Silence*) fits within this absurdist genre as well. The films and flustered character of Woody Allen embody the quintessential postmodern man adrift in a rudderless world with no compass to guide him. There is surely a connection between the loss of a coherent narrative and the work of Andy Warhol who was “infatuated with the ephemera of American commercial culture and intent upon capturing its fixation on repetition and glut.”<sup>27</sup> The list could go on and on. Think of such things as the lack of quality in prime time TV, tabloid talk shows, aspects of rock and country music, MTV, Fox Television, Washington, D. C., and unconstrained violence and sexuality in films. Indeed, as Hans Rookmaker has demonstrated, modern art as such is indicative of the death of our culture, and the death of our culture may be traced directly to the loss of our story.<sup>28</sup> We lack any

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<sup>26</sup> Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What To Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 69ff.

<sup>27</sup>James B. Twitchell, *Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 44.

kind of moral framework or meaning system that can sustain the human spirit and serve as a guide to life. The present condition of the arts and the makeup of our idiot culture are indicators of the absence of any coherent, life-sustaining narrative.

A second manifestation of how the world has lost its story is found in the fact and presence of a virtually unlimited multitude of soul-less, empty selves. This condition of vacuity has been aptly described in the opening stanza of T. S. Eliot's haunting poem *The Hollow Men*.

We are the hollow men  
 We are the stuffed men  
 Leaning together  
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
 Our dried voices, when  
 We whisper together  
 Are quiet and meaningless  
 As wind in dry grass . . . .

Shape without form, shade without color,  
 Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed  
 With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
 Remember us—if at all—not as lost  
 Violent souls, but only  
 As the hallow men  
 The stuffed men.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, psychologists have identified an epidemic of such hollow individuals in contemporary culture, describing them as inordinately individualistic, narcissistic, infantile, passive, hedonistic, shallow, and unusually hurried and busy.<sup>30</sup> In

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<sup>28</sup> Hans Rookmaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936), 79.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Cushman, "Why the Self is Empty," *American Psychologist* 45 (May 1990). These characteristics are from J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your*

reference to this final trait, someone once said that “activity can become an anesthetic to dull the pain of an empty life.”<sup>31</sup> Empty, soul-less selves are all around us. They are manifested in jean and perfume commercials. They tend to show up frequently in leading roles in television sit coms. Such individuals are not only a tragedy to themselves, but a danger to society and the church, and in the final analysis, must be controlled, as in the days of Rome, with bread and circuses (or in our day, with “professional” wrestling and rollerjam!).

What, then, can be done to ameliorate the conditions brought on by the fact that the world has lost its story? What responsibility does the Christian church have in this matter? I will make two brief suggestions by way of conclusion.

First, we must recover the narrative structure of the Bible. I am convinced that God is a story-telling God, and that He has designed ourselves as human beings to be the producers of and responders to stories. Indeed, while a variety of literary types are to be found in the pages of Scripture, its primary genre is that of narrative. In its dramatic chronicle of the glory of creation, the tragedy of the fall, and the love story of redemption lies its incalculable power. It is a story that rings true to human experience. It describes the way things really are. It provides a narrative home in which to abide. It is capable of infusing depth into the inner person. It engenders a holistic, unified approach to life. It supplies the basis for hope, not only for the individual believer, but for the culture in which the believer resides. It is powerful enough to ground a civilization which it once did. Hence, we must rediscover the fullness of the Biblical story, understand its meaning, and proclaim it with power. It is the whole story of Scripture, in place of biblical bits and pieces, that

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*Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 88-92.

<sup>31</sup> Source unknown.

has served to transfigure the life of the believer, providing deeper roots, broader horizons, and new and exciting perspectives on the sum-total of Christian and human experience.

Second, we must learn to place our Christian moralizing in the overall context of the biblical narrative. Two things seem to characterize today's evangelical church. One, a superabundance of impassioned moral and spiritual exhortation, and two, a failure on the part of those believers so addressed to respond to such ardently delivered imperatives. It seems, as one of my colleagues is fond of saying, that we tend to use the Bible as a "club" to beat the saints into obedience. Now while from time to time we may need a good clubbing, I would like to propose yet another, less violent means: encouraging believers to a life of faithfulness and obedience based on their prior allegiance to the Biblical narrative. Philosopher Iris Murdoch has wisely observed that "at the crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over."<sup>32</sup> In other words, our specific moral decisions are really made far in advance of our actual choices because of the power and influence of a set of previously held attitudes and values. This means that our narrative framework or meaning system to which we have antecedently entrusted ourselves is determinative for all our subsequent behavior. As Alasdair MacIntyre has shown, it is devotion to a particular story and its requirements that is key to action. In his words, "I can only answer the question "What am I to do" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"<sup>33</sup> Hence, to enhance "response-ability" among the people of God, forego abstract, contextless moralizing. Rather, remind believers of the content and significance of the biblical narrative

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<sup>32</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

which they have embraced and its decisive role in ordering their lives. Encourage them, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has done, to read the Scriptures in such a way so as to get caught up in the narrative so that the elements of God's story becomes the substance of their own.

Consecutive reading of Biblical books forces everyone who wants to hear to put himself, or to allow himself to be found, where God has acted once and for all for the salvation of men. We become part of what once took place for our salvation. . . . It is not that God is the spectator and sharer of our present life, howsoever important that is; but rather that we are the reverent listeners and participants in God's action in the sacred story, the history of Christ on earth. And only in so far as we are *there*, is God with us today also.<sup>34</sup>

This kind of connection to the sacred story engenders obedience, for it is the power of the narrative that gives meaning and force to the commandments. In this manner, the moral decisions in the life of sincere Christian believers will be determined far in advance of the actual choice, culminating in a life in which the weight and power of the biblical narrative supplies the motive for faithful obedience.

Perhaps these two steps—the recovery of the narrative structure of the Bible, and the contextualization of the moral requirements of the Christian life—will enable us to see the important, yet neglected connection between narrative and life. It is the only hope for a civilization that has lost its story.

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<sup>34</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*, trans. and intro. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1954), 53-4.



