Narrative Preaching: Stories to Base our Lives On

Sharlene Swartz

1. Preaching today: turning wine into water?

An animated Michael Green strode out onto the stage and yelled: “We have made biblical preaching dull. It’s a major achievement to make the greatest message the world has ever known dull. Jesus turned water into wine. We turn wine into water and that’s an even greater miracle.”¹ I was too afraid to turn around. Had he realised that he was speaking to biblical preachers like Roy Clements, John Stott, and Luis Palau? Someone responded with an “Amen!” An uneasy silence descended upon the auditorium. Later discussion concurred with Green’s statement. As evangelicals, and even as Baptists, we stand accused of proclaiming homiletically correct, yet dry-as-dust, technical, Protestant scholasticism in the pulpit.

When I first heard Jim Rayburn’s now famous first principle of ministry to teenagers, “It’s a sin to bore kids with the gospel,”² I thought it was a little strong, perhaps even overstated. But it was these two statements by Rayburn and Green, as well as a great deal of experience in watching countless people (even the committed leaders) nod off in the congregation and hearing the repeated gripe from teenagers, “But it’s so boring and the preacher guy goes on for ages,” that made me wonder where our preaching is headed.

My study in narrative criticism has helped me to come to some interesting conclusions. The first is that it is the task of the preacher to keep the audience’s attention. It is not a sign of spirituality to stay awake during preaching that may only be described as water rather than wine. And while the word which we preach “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,”³ we are not fulfilling our task of proclaiming the evangelion if no one is listening. Besides, most people will want to hear good news if it is genuinely good news. So “What’s to be done?” we may well lament. A simplistic answer is to say, “Tell stories!” But there is more to story telling than meets the eye. In order to be true to the text, a great deal of work needs to go into our story telling.
2. Narrative criticism

In brief, narrative criticism functions as a tool of literary criticism which treats the text as it stands. In contrast to historical criticism which attempts to use the text as a window through which to gain an insight into the culture behind the story, narrative criticism recognises that the text is the message. And while there is of course an implied author and an implied reader (which we attempt to locate in the course of our preparation), the text is sufficient in itself to warrant independent study. The text is a mirror which upon reflection has a story to tell.

The fact that there are many different genres in the Bible is no new discovery, but the application of the insights of narrative criticism is a new discipline, one which “involves a self-conscious reading of the Bible in a way that it has not usually been read.”4 The reader is an integral part of the story. Of course when the reader is given such a prominent role in determining the message of the text, and especially in the message of the biblical text, general rules must be followed. The Bible is not merely a collection of fictitious stories. It claims to be an authoritative account of God’s revelation of himself to humankind, so it does matter how the reader interprets the biblical narrative. As preachers it must be our aim to assist the reader in this pursuit.

3. A case for narrative preaching

The advantage of stories over an abstract discussion of ideas is obvious. Stories which involve people touch the imagination, memory and will, while abstract ideas merely float in the mind. In the arena of contemporary narrative preaching there are both good and bad stories. Bad stories confuse and obstruct their message through complicated structures and characters too far removed from life, or are merely paraphrases which do not realise their potential for contextualisation.

Often the first question preachers ask is, Should our preaching offer a theological explanation or simply retell the story? The answer lies in the fact that the gospel story itself is capable of showing its relationship with our life stories now. A story is quite capable of offering a theological explanation, without it being stated in propositional form. David Bartlett speaks for his generation and some today: “I demurred from the strongly propositional preaching I had often heard, preaching that sometimes seemed to squeeze ambiguous and multifaceted texts into ‘points’ that were all too clear and to twist narratives into arguments.”5 Jesus always used stories to teach people.6 So retelling the story is the answer, but it is neither a simple nor easy endeavour.

3.1 Historical research and propositional formulations are merely preliminary

Before we throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water, it must be noted that when a case is being made for a relatively new mode of preaching, we need to be a little disparaging of our usual mode, albeit for emphasis. This is Macky’s argument:

It does not mean that we stop asking the historical question of what lies behind this text that will help us to understand it better. It just means we will see history as preliminary. We won’t stop asking the theological question either: How does this text relate to our systems of theology and ethics? It just means that we will see that our theological systems are not adequate to express the full depth and power of biblical stories and symbols. Thus we will go beyond the theological-philosophical approach because it is too rational, too idea orientated, and so does not adequately express the deeper reality the text means to communicate.

Recently many scholars have spoken of the fusion of the two methods, or a multi-disciplinary approach to the text, by which they mean giving equal weight to the historical context of the text (historical and grammatical exegesis) and the contemporary context (narrative criticism) of the interpreter. Similarly, Hans Frei pointed out how the Enlightenment’s drive to reduce theology to general rational concepts has left us a legacy of disregard for the narrative quality of the biblical text.
3.2 Contemporary narratives have and will continue to appear

Biblical narrative has been the alleged basis for many contemporary narratives that have appeared in the past century. Most of these have gained great popularity, without being accurate interpretations of the biblical narrative. When these popular interpretations appear and blatantly contradict the biblical text, the reaction from the Christian public is seismic. Yet many Christians are unable to articulate why and how they are discordant with the biblical text, or why such an interpretation is unacceptable (given that there are four interpretations of the life of Christ in the Bible). One reason for this is that most twentieth-century Christians are the product of the philosophical-rational speculative theology of the Enlightenment and its legacy. Perhaps the cataclysmic response would be reduced to a minor tremor if Christians were fed equal doses of good narrative preaching. Another result might be that we would attract more people to the message, and we would have created a generation of narrative-literate Christians, less bewildered by films such as Jesus of Montreal, Jesus Christ Superstar, and The Last Temptation of Christ.

3.3 Narrative preaching is based in life

Narrative preaching has the potential for grounding the biblical text in human reality to a far greater extent than much systematic or propositional preaching. Alister McGrath concurs when he says that "often, systematic theology creates the impression that God has presented us with a set of ideas, as if revelation were some kind of data bank." Narrative preaching, on the other hand, "affirms that God meets us in history and speaks to us as one who has been involved in history ... have you ever noticed that the Bible tells stories about God and his dealings with us, just as much as it makes doctrinal or theological statements about him?"

Bartlett convincingly summarises the case for narrative preaching:

Story preaching at its best, for instance, is grounded in the conviction that biblical narratives help us discover the plots of our own lives and the plots God may be opening and intending for us ... [it] allows the relationship between Scripture and our world to be somewhat more conversational.

And conversation is precisely what twentieth-century audiences need if God's word is to be heard in our time, in our lives.

4. The twentieth-century audience

Each one of us preaches in different contexts, but most of us have post-modern people in our congregations or sphere of influence. In popular terms, the post-modern has grown up in a critical world where all is challenged: both content and methodology. But how has the post-modern person been shaped: as a product of seventeenth-century rationalism that scorns supernaturalism; eighteenth-century enlightenment that questions the entire fabric of revealed religion; and nineteenth-century existentialism that seeks gratification in instant answers.

Today there are few, if any, gives. Things are relative. Truth is what you decide it is; people are autonomous, independent, free-thinkers, and isolated. Rationalism is a legacy and yet while the post-modern looks for scientific and empirical evidences, the paranormal and supernatural are no longer unbelievable. Currently, a plethora of options abound and all are given equal footing. Our knowledge "banks" are doubling every ten years and the continuous stream of new theories make authoritative sources a rare phenomenon. Tomorrow brings inevitable change and what is written in stone today may just as well have been written on water. If there must be a source of authority, it must be yourself. Existential thought promotes the philosophy that ultimately, only you can have any authority in your life.

In the midst of these philosophical currents people are still searching for meaning. Often they refuse to enter a church to hear a sermon, yet the quest for peace with God is evident amidst the angst and existentialism of a world about to move into the twenty-first century. Jesus' question in Mark's gospel, "Who do people say that I am?" assumes staggering new dimensions in the twentieth century! And it is precisely good narrative preaching (from within and without the pulpit) that will answer this question for post-modern people.

5. Hermeneutics in the pulpit

When we come to the exegetical task, various assumptions are made. These include our belief that Scripture is meant for ordinary people;
the Holy Spirit illumines the meaning of Scripture for the believer; and the purpose of Scripture is to lead people not to an intellectual apprehension of truth but to elicit a conscious submission to the word of God.

As evangelicals we often neglect the fact that Scripture was written in a specific cultural, historical, and linguistic background. Finding the *Sitz im Leben* and then building a bridge between then and now is essential. The text must speak out of its original context into today’s context. When grammatico-historical exegesis takes place and provides good historical background it often founders on the bridge connecting the past with the present context.

In order to challenge a post-modern audience we must contextualise the message of Scripture, that is, we must give both the ancient context and the context of the modern reader serious consideration. We enter the hermeneutical circle: a dynamic interplay between the interpreter’s historical situation (world and life view); Scripture (the text must be allowed to speak for itself); and theology (not merely repeated propositional statements or formulations, but rather the merging of the text with its historical context).

We begin by analysing our current context and asking what are the issues raised by our situation. We then come to Scripture with the question: *What does God say through his word regarding this particular problem?* We need to remember that the way we formulate our questions will depend, on our world and life view. As the answers of Scripture come to light, the initial questions which arose in our concrete situation may have to be reformulated to reflect the biblical perspective more adequately. The context of theology, therefore, includes not only answers to specific questions raised by the situation but also questions which the text itself poses to the situation. Thus the possibility is opened for changes in our world and life view and consequently for a more adequate understanding and appropriation of the biblical message.

In summary then, before we preach with a narrative or alternative model, we need to understand the background of the text. We need to employ the tools of historical criticism, for without them we do not even know how to read the story. …We cannot translate the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek words into English without the philological and comparative research that lies behind our translations. We cannot retell even the most palpably narrative portions of Scripture, like the parable of the Good Samaritan, if we have no idea of the relationship of Jews to Samaritans in the first century. It does make a difference for the way we tell or retell the story of the Prodigal Son whether, in taking his share of his father’s estate, the son was following a practice typical of younger sons heading off for the diaspora or was impiously wishing his father dead. While critics may give us different evidence on some of these historical questions, their evidence does make a difference in how we preach. We cannot be faithful to the text as literature without attending to the history behind the text.

In addition Bartlett continues to remind us:

> It does make a difference in interpreting the texts whether the people to whom they were addressed were primarily outcasts or modestly upwardly mobile, or some of each. The texts by themselves do not tell us that. … All this is to say that while preaching can profit immensely from the literary and imaginative construal of biblical texts, we still have to do our historical-critical homework.

We need to contextualise the application of the message for today’s audience which “can only be the result of a new, open ended reading of scripture with a hermeneutic in which gospel and situation become mutually engaged in a dialogue whose purpose is to place the church under the lordship of Jesus Christ” (emphasis mine). We need to pay attention to both historical background and contemporary context for “while we do want to be imaginative, we do not want to be ignorant.”

But the task ahead of us is narrative exegesis — an untravelled road for many.

6. Narrative exegesis: a suggested paradigm

What is narrative preaching? It is the gospel story retold in such a way that it connects with the hearers and helps them to discover how the gospel story impacts upon their individual story. This preaching then continues to show each individual how their story contributes
to the story of the believing community. This noble goal has not exempted narrative preaching from criticism. *Callus in campans* is a charge often levied at narrative preaching. Just as the cock of the weather vane blows with the wind of the moment, so too may narrative preaching. Hence the need for guidelines to govern our narrative exegesis. What follows are ten principles which ought to be applied to the gospel text to ensure good narrative preaching.

6.1 A commitment to the canon (or the authority of Scripture)

Whether the narrative is set in first-century Palestine or in the twenty-first century it should reflect the theology of the canon. It does not matter whether Jesus was bearded or clean shaven, slight or hefty but it is of concern whether his followers were practising homosexuals and philanderers. How do we distinguish between the essential and *adaphora?* How do we make this assessment objectively? We simply keep asking of our narrative, *What in the text or in the canon leads to such an interpretation?* If there is no substantial biblical evidence for our interpretation, then the work is disqualified as being an interpretation of the biblical text. This is a far more objective criterion and assessment than mere emotional reaction.

6.2 Technical structure

Our preliminary work in narrative exegesis aims at ensuring that genre, plot, general themes and developments of the narrative itself, the biblical book within which the story is contained, and the entire canon are understood before we begin to construct a contemporary narrative.

Leland Reyken suggests asking these preliminary questions:

- What are the meanings in the poet’s concrete images, metaphors, and allusions? (These are often inaccessible without the insights of historical research.)
- What feelings are communicated by hyperbole, images, and exclamations?

According to Keegan, the measure of a good narrative is that “it tantalises, teases, challenges, upsets, makes the audience think, forces it to come inside the story and involve itself with it if it is to understand.” The biblical narrative achieves this with its audience. Our contemporary narrative should do the same. As Jesus walked through the market-place and strolled through the countryside he often drew attention to a feature of everyday life and said, “You have heard it said, now I say to you.” Our narratives should walk through the lives of people today. We should “translate” the books, films, news bulletins, educational, social, and political crises of our day and say, “You have heard it said, but Jesus says to you, for today.”

6.3 Use fictitious elements carefully

Weaving fictitious elements into the narrative is permissible because we are merely retelling the gospel story in the subjunctive. If Jesus walked the streets of Seapoint or Soweto; Umtata or Umhlanga this is what he would say. This is how he would challenge us to live. And we certainly have enough in the gospel story to cross the bridge from first-century Palestine into our contemporary world. There is a *caevus* however: avoid provocative speculation especially in areas of theological controversy. While it may be appropriate to describe Jesus’ morning routine as including brushing his teeth and shaving or naming Andrew as one of the disciples who wondered where food to feed the five thousand would come from (the text merely says “the disciples,” without naming any), it would be inadmissible to say that Jesus was unaware of his deity until his baptism or to allege that he was indifferent to the needs of the sick and poor.

Goldingay maintains that “the factuality of the gospel is crucial to it being a story we can base our lives on. The historical ‘having happened-ness’ of the biblical story matters.” He is absolutely correct in this statement, yet not all narratives must be true in order to convey truth. What about narratives which include in them stories based on the gospel narratives? How much of these stories into
which the gospel account is woven must be true, namely, must have actually happened? Must the medium be true in order to make the message true? Surely not. Both myth and fable relate truth, although the events themselves may be fictitious. This argument only holds as long as the exegete is committed to the first principle in this suggested paradigm, namely canonical authority.

Gerd Theissen in his narrative exegetical work, The Shadow of the Galilean, explains his method and the parameters of using fictitious elements when he says:

Of course Pilate never had the conversations I attribute to him. But the background to his actions which emerges from this conversation is the one that I analyse in my lectures on the New Testament environment. The subject-matter of history is not only individual events but also typical conflicts and structures. They are the “rules of the game” which my fictitious narrative follows. If I may for a moment use our technical academic language, I would say that the presupposition of “narrative exegesis,” which is what narrative like my book is now called — is the step from historical events to structural history. The basic structure of narrative exegesis consists of historical reconstructions of patterns of behaviour, conflicts and tensions, and its superstructure consists of fictitious events in which historical source material is worked over in a poetic way. This definition of narrative exegesis is rather too pretentious for my taste. But you know that things have to be put in a complicated way if they are to be taken seriously in the academic world [emphasis mine].

6.4 Anachronisms are acceptable

Theissen places a real character by the name of Bannus as a contemporary of John the Baptist although historically John the Baptist preceded Bannus. Theissen found it useful (and audiences too) to learn more about the situation of John the Baptist through a contemporary. Theissen has Bannus describe John the Baptist’s task as a friend on location. The story becomes personal although it is a fictional construction. The point must be made, however, that fictional narrative woven into the gospel or biblical narrative does not imply that the biblical narrative is fictitious. It is merely a homiletical tool, much like an illustration — many of which are fictitious or “urban legends” at best.

6.5 A social norm or custom transferred to a biblical character is acceptable

We know, for example, that twelve year old Jewish boys were customarily initiated into the adult community. We may therefore legitimately weave into our narrative Jesus’ rite of passage, even if there is no explicit account of its occurrence in the text. Extra-biblical sources should be validated, however, by the academic community even though they are not authoritative. For instance, quoting spurious works with equal authority as say Josephus, is unacceptable scholarly and exegetical practice.

6.6 Allow the story itself to challenge hearers

Narrative does not need to state a theme or a challenge in propositional form because it is inferred from the entire story. You may need to assist the audience by articulating the challenge but should resist the temptation to tack on a moral. It is the essence of bad story telling. Even a child can answer the question, “What do we learn from the story of the Good Samaritan?” without a lesson or moral being added. Narratives ought to be preached as stories that grip the imagination, elicit response, allow people to identify, and even challenge them to enter into the story.

6.7 Invite the audience to hear the story in different ways

Sanders, in his work on canonical criticism, draws our attention to the fact that a text may be read constitutively (in support of its audience/reader) or prophetically (in judgement of its audience/reader). For example, parents experiencing difficulties with a wayward child might read the account of the Prodigal Son constitutively, if they have been told they have done their best. On the other hand, if they are invited to see the Father’s unconditional love and read the text prophetically, they might realise that they can never do enough and must daily look for their child’s return. Similarly, whether one identifies with the Samaritan or the Levite, the Pharisee
or the tax-collector, the woman caught in adultery or a member of the crowd baying for her blood, all elicit different responses to the text. Goldingay summarises both sides of the argument when he says:

The view that narratives have different meanings in different contexts for different audiences offers openness and scope to interpreters, but it does threaten arbitrariness and relativism. ... An emphasis on objective meaning can admittedly conversely be an ideological concern designed to support the status quo and can be self-deceived regarding its own subjectivity. But to abandon it may be to submit oneself to something just as ideological.30

Audiences contribute to the identification of meaning but their contributions are subject to the meaning of the text and do not create it. Inviting audiences to read the text in different ways may be risky, but the benefits far outweigh the dangers — in fact, inviting the audience to hear the story in different ways gives opportunity for the Holy Spirit to challenge and change lives.

6.8 Know your audience’s circumstances

Each one of the gospel writers had a specific purpose in mind when he constructed his respective account. We too should have a thorough and clear purpose in mind, namely, to allow the text to speak to our audience (and ourselves). That requires a passionate familiarity with the circumstances of our intended audience. A useful tool that ensures you are thoroughly contextual and identify with your hearers is to place yourself into the story and relate it in the first person. The audience will immediately recognise that it was impossible for you to have been there, but the story will resonate far more easily with their lives.

6.9 Leave gaps in the story

Often in our preaching we cover every possible angle of a narrative and squeeze every ounce of meaning out of the text. This is unnecessary and in fact prevents people from entering into the story. Kurz says that “a narrative that has too few gaps is boringly obvious,” whereas, “gaps, deliberate ambiguity and reticence invite readers to fill in the narrative with their imagination.”31 John Goldingay explains the use and presence of gaps in the biblical texts when he says

One of the ways in which stories do things to an audience is by leaving questions and ambiguities for their audience to answer or to resolve. We have to recognize and accept the presence of such ambiguity in texts rather than work on the assumption that if only we had all the right information, everything would be clear. Sometimes authors do not make themselves clear, either by accident or on purpose. Whichever is the case, ambiguity is then a fact to be acknowledged and made the most of. It can be creatively provocative, evidently part of God’s purpose. Traditional biblical interpretation has difficulty tolerating ambiguity and openness.32

Leaving gaps (a feature in the biblical text) allows the audience to reflect and apply — without being told what to apply. The “open spaces” also communicate some of the paradoxes (or antinomies) and gaps in our creaturely understanding of our faith — an issue too often glossed over in the pulpit. This stance allows our preaching to be more ecumenical, in other words, the how of creation and predestination is a gap; the why of suffering is a gap; and the definitive mode of church government is a gap.

Let us be satisfied with gaps as well. The narrative should honour those debates which are open ended instead of adopting the “philosopher’s assumption that clarity and precision are the marks of truth. The biblical writers, however, saw that truth is a person, a profound mystery. So they alluded to it by means of stories, poems and symbols.”32 The historical critics have looked for exactness when in fact the authors have chosen vagueness. Let us be brave enough to do likewise.

6.10 Avoid “hermeneutical anarchy”

To avoid “hermeneutical anarchy” (believing my interpretation to be valid on my own authority) Stanley Fish proposed a theory of interpretive communities. This approach, while not insisting on one
single meaning, provides parameters within which meaning may be determined. "Within an interpretive community, then, readings may be recognised as being in or out of accord with the accepted strategy." Test your story against Scripture (you should already have done so by now). A further step requires the testing of your story with the "interpretive community" — church leaders, colleagues, and respected biblical scholars.

7. The Shadow of the Galilean: a case study in narrative exegesis

In 1987 the English translation of Gerd Theissen's book Der Schatten des Galiläers appeared in English as The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form. This work was a serious, scholarly, yet eminently readable attempt at narrative exegesis. In The Shadow of the Galilean the world of Jesus is described by Andreas, a Jew who has been incarcerated by the Roman authorities. In order to secure his release he agrees to spy for the Romans — first, on John the Baptist and then, on Jesus — to determine whether either of them pose a threat to Roman rule.

The book is about Jesus yet he never appears as a character in the book. Andreas never meets Jesus but in his travelling around Galilee often visits places and speaks to the people who have encountered Jesus. He makes his own analysis and then reports to the Roman authorities, yet his report is not his own conviction. Andreas attempts to portray Jesus as an innocent poet and philosopher. Instead he sees Jesus as a prophet and the reader may deduce from his reluctance to provide the Romans with an accurate report, that Andreas has come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Near the end of the book Andreas arrives in Jerusalem in time to witness the crucifixion from a distance. It is only here that he catches a glimpse of Jesus hanging on the cross and finally stands in "the shadow of the Galilean."

Theissen's writing style is subtle, non-prescriptive, graphic, and captivating. He leaves gaps and engages his audience at every turn. Familiar passages of Scripture are paraphrased, turned into dialogue, questioned, and interpreted (or at least Theissen's interpretation set forward). At one point in the story Theissen comments on his method: "My narrative exegesis here turns into narrative hermeneutics. In other words, I am concerned not only with the signifi-
cance which was once attached to Easter faith but with the meaning that we could see in it today."

Theissen draws his sources from both the biblical record and extra-biblical material. In addition, he weaves elements of fiction into the tale. Barabbas becomes a close friend of Andreas and the world of the Zealots is opened. Chuzu (mentioned briefly in Acts) is married to Johanna, a rich supporter of Jesus and friend of Andreas. The story is masterful. Between each chapter Theissen responds to questions from a colleague (whom we later learn is fictitious) in which he provides a rationale for his method, provides sources for his extra-biblical material, and argues other possible routes he may have taken in composing his narrative. The result is a scholarly yet readable Christology, readily accessible to both scholar and lay person alike in under one hundred and sixty pages, excluding notes and explanation of his methodology.

Notes
2. Jim Rayburn was the founder of Young Life International in the USA in 1946.
3. 2 Tim. 3:16 — New International Version.
9. These include such books as: Death of the Messiah by Raymond Brown in 1987; Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography by John Dominic Crossan (member of the Jesus Seminar group) in 1994; Jesus, the Man by Barbara Thierry in 1992; The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis in the 1960s; The Gospel According to Jesus Christ by Jose Saramago in 1992 and Live from Golgotha by Gore Vidal in 1993. Also films such as King of Kings by Cecil B. De Mille in 1927; The Day of Triumph in 1954; Godspell by Steven Schwartz in 1975; Jesus: The Greatest Story Ever Told; Jesus of Nazareth by Franco Zeffirelli; Jesus Christ Superstar by Webber and Rice; The Last Temptation of Christ; Jesus of Montreal in 1989 and The Life of Brian in 1988.
13. There is of course much debate as to which comes first: analylife or exposition of Scripture.
14. C. Padilla in D. McKim, Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 306-7. This set relies heavily on Padilla’s article and is a summary of it.
19. The latest offering from Gore Vidal makes just these claims an parody of modern religion (Live from Golgotha [London: Ab 1992]).
22. As portrayed in The Last Temptation of Christ.
23. As portrayed in Jesus Christ Superstar.
28. See J. Sanders, for a discussion on Canonical Criticism, (From Story to Sacred Text [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987]).