

The Importance of Narrative in Contextualization

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Introduction

From the beginning of time humans told stories. Before narratives utilized symbols, tribal elders repeatedly told them to the children so the history would not be forgotten. In today's world, human beings still love to hear and convey stories. From biographies to fiction people gain wisdom, encouragement, and entertainment from hearing, viewing, or reading these tales. Every person on earth has a chronicle uniquely his or her own. A story shaped by the positive and negative experiences of life that create the distinctive characteristics of each individual.

James Gustafson asserts narrative sustains the moral integrity of a society and the person. It gives shape to people's ethical character and affects how they perceive other cultures (Gustafson 1988, 19-20). H. Richard Niebuhr contends story strengthens the communication between people. Plato utilized myths to illustrate his philosophy, and Jesus employed parables to illuminate the truths about the Kingdom of God (Niebuhr 1989, 23). People must convey their story. It not only explains their identity, it also reveals their comprehension of truth. Therefore, narrative must become a strong component in the contextualization process. The communication of story divulges cultural mores; exposing one's self, comprehending others, and recognizing ways of interacting and relating (Bradt 1997, 3). Human beings' deepest convictions about themselves and the universe can only be conveyed in story, and as the tale changes so does one's perception of the world (Loughlin 1996, 18).

This article will investigate narrative through the lenses of psychology by observing how postmodernism influenced the founders of Narrative therapy. It will delve into theology by considering the significance of narrative in its study of the metanarrative of the Word of God and examining how the Church, by way of Christian witness, spread the Gospel story through personal testimony and prayer. With the establishment of the value of narrative from both the

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secular and theological perspective, the importance of storytelling as a tool for contextualization will be explored.

Narrative Psychology

This physical planet limits humankind's reality. The world, for most people, revolves around family, community, and society. Stories told often recount past events good or bad, realities of the present, and goals of the future. Each individual also produces his or her unique story from his or her perceptions of shared history (Annan, Pristley, and Phillipson 2006, 22; and Loughlin 1996, 29). Some people begin to view their narrative as totally negative. They become the dilemma that destroys their life because they perceive no hope for the future. Narrative therapy basis its theory on the concept that a person shapes his or her life by "knowledges" and stories, which he or she negotiates as an individual, in family first then community. One's experiences and practices acquire meaning in the context of these accounts (Annan, Priestley, and Phillipson 2006, 22; Neimeyer 2000, 211; and Massey University 1998). Constantly in flux, a person constructs stories that define self-identity and significance in the narratives of others (Bradt 1997, 13; Navone 1990, 183). Viewing people as experts of their own lives, Narrative therapy asserts the person is not the trouble but "the problem is the problem" (Morgan 2000). Narrative therapy aids people in re-authoring their lives, guiding them towards well-being.

Narrative refers to the listening, the telling, and the retelling of stories. These narratives involve the difficulties people face. By changing the story, a person can change his or her life (Phipps and Vorster 2010, 32). God created humanity to employ mental narratives to organize, understand, and predict their experiences. Individuals shape their choices through meanings attributed to life's events. Predicaments in life can be personal, socio-cultural, psychological, biological, or a mixture of the four. On occasion others impose hindrances on the individual, but the person chooses how he or she will manage each situation (Drake 2007, 284).

Postmodernism

Narrative therapy emerges from the postmodern mind proposing that humans do not perceive the world; they interpret it (Cowley and Springen 1995). As the narrative moves from

story-teller to story-listener, it transforms through each interpretation (Klein and Boals 2010, 256-257). To comprehend Narrative therapy one must appreciate its origins in postmodernism.

Postmodernism developed as an academic study in the mid-1980s. Though difficult to define it appears in many areas of study including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashions, and technology. Postmodernism evolved in reaction to the worldview of modernity seeking to create order out of chaos. Through reason, with science as its primary form of knowledge, modern society created order through "grand narratives" which create stories a culture articulates to explain its practice and belief systems. Postmodernism argues these grand narratives only mask the disorder that exists in every society. Instead it applies "mini-narratives" that are situational, provisional, and temporary (Klages 2003).

With enlarging globalization, the concept of identity in postmodernism consists of multiple and context-bound selves. Only through storied identity can a person bridge the divide between the modern essentialist principal of self and postmodern's illusionist identity (Frie 2011, 48). Postmodernism's conceptualization of reality includes: 1) societies construct realities; 2) language constitutes realities; 3) narrative organizes and maintains realities; and 4) essential truths do not exist (Freedman and Combs 1996, 22).

Narrative therapy incorporates the tenants of postmodernism in the following ways. First, Narrative therapy realizes people construct their own realities as they live them. Second, it views the fluidity of language as a means for change. Words or symbols alone do not carry the meaning of a dialect, it also requires context. The speaker, listener, or reader negotiates idioms dynamic meanings giving alternative insights resulting in a new reality. Third, people organize and maintain their realities with stories. Everyone wants to tell their history, which his or her birth culture determines. Culture influences the perception of importance and therefore a person narrates in contrast with the meaningless and un-storied in his or her life. The narrative therapist assists their client in retelling and reliving his or her history, facilitating an atmosphere that celebrates the client's evolving story, which cultivates and executes new narratives of his or her life. Fourth, Narrative therapy does not believe in essential truths—the same event can be interpreted differently by each individual, or in various ways by the same person. Each unique point of view can be valid depending on the circumstances. Narrative therapy guides its clients to distinguish which self in each context best supports them in the growth and development of these preferred selves (Freedman and Combs 1996, 22).

Narrative psychology maintains people find their identity through story. These combined accounts become the threads of the tapestry of a community or society. Not only does secular science assert the significance of narrative, theology also upholds its value for humanity.

Narrative Theology

Narrative theology developed in the late 20th century in response to the topical design of systematic theology. The supporters of Narrative theology determined theology should focus on faith through the narrative presentation of the Bible and Christian community. Theologian Karl Barth claimed Christian faith did not depend on “universal reason or human self-consciousness” (Loughlin 1996, 33). Only through the simply told and lived story does faith emerge. Stanley Hauerwas also challenges systematic theologians claiming, “Christian narrative theology provided by the community of faith is the most appropriate context in which to ‘do’ theology” (Heide 2009, 1). In many ways, theology becomes the second act to the biblical story. Only thorough the narrative can people make their own discoveries about faith (Carrington and Hogarth 1989, 13). Belief in God can happen through two types of narrative: the Word of God and Christian witness.

The Word of God

Many claim the Bible to be the greatest story ever told. God wanted to express direct experiences through narrative language, which he accomplished with his narrative of humanity’s journey from creation to redemption or destruction (Metz 1989, 252). Jesus utilized stories to enlighten his listeners to the truth about God, himself, and human kind. His parables brought about comprehension of the multifaceted reality of God’s Kingdom (Navone 1990, 183).

Dean Flemming gives three examples of narrative theology viewed in the Gospel accounts. He considers the biblical stories as ecclesial (addressing the needs of the Church and shape its identity), missional (providing resources for the Church’s mission), and transformational (empowering a change in behavior and creating deeper faith) (2005, 263-265). These Bible narratives provide clarity of personal and communal living.

1. Ecclesial Narratives

The Apostle Paul's letters to the churches throughout Asia Minor relate narratives of his conversations, teachings, and travels, which spoke to the needs of the Early Church and formed its character. Paul's main concern was to plant and raise healthy churches along his journeys. However, over and over again, problems of unity plagued these fledgling church bodies. The churches in Antioch, Corinth, Philippi and Thessalonica had doctrinal problems, external persecution, and internal conflict issues. The Galatia church body turned away from Paul's teaching of salvation by grace through Jesus Christ, and began following false teachers promoting justification through the law (Gal. 3-6). Paul admonished these churches to face their hardship and not yield to public pressure. He explained even in affliction one can experience unity and joy by trusting in God regardless of the situation (Sande 2004, 59; and Tellbe 1994, 120-121). These stories, carefully written down by Paul and other writers, still speak to the needs and identity of the Church today.

2. Missional Narratives

The whole Bible is a missional narrative. Charles Van Engen states, "Mission is at the very heart of the gospel and the life of the church. Mission is not one of the many tasks the church is called upon to do. It is of the very essence of the church itself" (1996, 11). It seems inconceivable the Church could ignore the mandate to "go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15).¹ Nevertheless, going beyond one's "comfort zone" to evangelize always disturbed the ease of the Church (Van Engen 1996, 9). The Scripture reveals a missional God who continues to seek lost humanity; therefore, the True Church must be a people who move from the Gospel to mission (Anderson 1993, 114). Missions and the Bible so entwine that one cannot survive without the other, and the biblical narrative approach breaks down all barriers to human comprehension (Van Engen 1996, 37).

Narrative theology, from an evangelical perspective, creatively affirms the mission of God (Van Engen 1996, 44). From Genesis through Revelation the biblical story focuses on a God who seeks his lost creation. Mission derives from the very nature of God. *Missio Dei* doctrine concludes God the Father sent the Son, the Son sent the Holy Spirit, and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sends the Church to seek the lost (Bosch 1995). As one reads the narrative accounts of the Old and New Testaments, the *missio Dei* emerges. Genesis declares God's

Kingdom will be established to bless all nations through the promised seed. Judges and Ruth anticipate the Gentiles entrance into the Kingdom. Psalms celebrates that redeemed people from all nations will complete the *missio Dei*. Old Testament prophets proclaimed the rule of God would encompass the whole earth. In the New Testament, the story of Jesus personifies the Old Testament *missio Dei*. The Gospels announce the Kingdom come through Jesus Christ, which will bless all nations. Jesus then places the *missio Dei* on the shoulders of the apostles (York 2001, 51-75). This missional story continues through the lives of each member of today's Global Church.

3. Transformational Narratives

For the Church to fulfill the mission of God, each member must be transformed from death to life through the story of the cross (Anderson 1993, 57). Transformation means right and just relationships with God and others (Myers 1999, 4). It concentrates on changing communities to reflect the values of the Kingdom of God (Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnel 2005, 329; Samuel and Sugden 1999, xii). The process of transformation continues throughout a believer's lifetime, as God molds them, changing their inner lives through the reading of his stories thus empowering a changed behavior and an ever-increasing faith (Bosch 1995, 1; Creps 2006, 3; and Flemming 2005, 263-265). All through the Old and New Testaments, particularly the narratives of Jesus, God turns the assumptions and expectations of humanity upside-down, bringing about *imago Dei* (Van Yperen 2002, 38; and Yong 2001, 61). The accounts of Jesus' healing miracles produced signs of hope and acts of renewal and transformation (Oxford Consultation 1999, 432-433). The stories are powerful, insightful, and life changing.

Not only does change happen to the individual and community, believers must open their hearts and become agents of transformation (Lingenfelter 1996, 9-10; McNeal 2000, xi; and Yong 2005, 91-97). Luke used narrative theology, calling for conversion through his stories of God's pursuit of the lost through the Church (Flemming 2005, 53). The Holy Spirit empowers the Church to reach out and seek the unbeliever to bring about individual and social alteration. The 1990 Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics articulates, "The gospel is the most significant force for social transformation and the Church is one of the most effective grassroots organizations in the world" (Consultation Report 1999, 397). God's missional narrative brings about "unexpected surprises, radical changes, new directions, almost

unbelievable transformation in the midst of human life; persona, social and structural" (Van Engen 1996, 28). The Kingdom of God stakes its claim every time a disciple touches the world through proclamation, testimony, or a "cup of water."

Christian Witness

The Early Church did not preach doctrine or theology; it just declared the events of Christ's life and ministry and gave personal witness of changed life and community (Niebuhr 1989, 21). This Christian narrative allows the hearer to so relate to the biblical account that he or she longs to become part of the story (Root 1989, 266). The Church continues to be built by people sharing the gospel story in different cultural and social contexts (Fraser 1989, 55). As Jesus' narrative continues through the lives of his believers, all life-stories intertwine (Loughlin 1996, 29). God weaves the narrative threads of personal testimony and prayer into a beautiful Christian tapestry.

Personal Testimony Narratives

Individual transformation happens in community as believers tell their redemption stories (Miller and Yamamori 2007, 127). People hear the testimonies of others and relate emotionally. Much like group therapy, the Church assists its members, through their shared narratives, to move toward psychological well-being. The Christian community provides "universality"² where shared testimonies overcome loneliness, validates experiences, and aids self-esteem. It also imparts "altruism"³ where Christ followers help each other to develop coping and interpersonal skills. Through story, people "instill hope"⁴ in others proclaiming God's faithfulness in times of trouble. Human beings need to belong, so the Church provides "cohesiveness"⁵ which facilitates spiritual development. Believers become a family; therefore their members receive "corrective recapitulation of the primary family experience."⁶ As people tell their stories, "self understanding and interpersonal learning"⁷ happen and they achieve greater self-awareness and identity. Many times, personal testimony brings about "catharsis,"⁸ relief from emotional sorrow by conveying emotions (Cox 1995, 315-316; Du 2012; and Yalom and Leszcz 2005, 1-19). God employs the medium of personal narrative to assist people to become more emotionally and spiritually well.

Prayer Narratives

The biblical story recounts the significance of prayer in the believer's life. The forms of prayer include: adoration, thanksgiving, confession, submission, commitment, and petition. Yet simply put, prayer is language addressed to God (Spear 2002, 4). Prayer expresses one's responsibility for his or her life story. John Navone affirms, "Prayer, the dialogue in our ongoing life story, of our relationship with the other, expresses our reciprocity with the divine Love that is creating our true life story and self. Love of God creates and sustains and unites life stories, summoning them to their ultimate fulfillment and goodness" (1990, 203). Prayer unites people in telling a common narrative to God. It also provides hope when individuals tell stories of the Father's faithfulness.

Human prayer moves the hand of God (John 15:7). The Bible directs its readers to pray for the nations. People should pray for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to witness to others (Mark 16:15); for harvest laborers to gather the lost and dying human souls (Luke 10:2); and for Jesus' return to usher God's Kingdom to earth (Matt. 6:9-10). Restored relationship with God continues to be the biblical theme. Prayer and personal witness allow human beings to participate in the Trinity's grand narrative.

Narrative and Contextualization

Conservative theology classifies contextualization simply as communicating through decoding and encoding (Vanhooser 2006, 100). David Hesselgrave goes farther by defining contextualization as communicating into another cultural group the "message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revaluation, especially as it is put forth in the teaching of the Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts" (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989, 200). Christians have the obligation to cross cultural boundaries and communicate the Good News because of the incarnation of Christ (Flemming 2005, 21). This can happen with one's next-door neighbor or moving to another country; either way, the imperative to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19) applies to all believers. To accomplish this task one must use narrative because it triggers the memory, becoming the key picture for comprehending and interpreting faith (LaPoorta 1999, 155).

The postmodern views of Narrative therapy and theology should be applied to contextualization. The comprehension that people construct their own reality as they live them; their need to organize the world with narrative; and the importance of language; assist cross-cultural agents to properly translate the Word of God and give contextually correct Christian witness. This section will investigate contextualization through these three narrative lenses.

Narrative Contextualization of Personal Reality

Narrative, basic to human life, moves beyond culture and roots itself in nature (Drake 2007, 285; and Loughlin 1996, 64). People dream, day-dream, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate, and love in story (Barbara Hardy in Williams 2007, 305). Through the narrative lens one can witness the character and power of any given person or society (Annan, Priestley, and Phillipson 2006, 22).

Culture often expresses its personality with narrative. These arch-type, non-linear stories give identity to human experiences, which often liberates the soul (LaPoorta 1999, 155; and Healey and Sybertz 1996, 28). Cultures can also utilize histories to indirectly provide guidance, avoid impoliteness, and disarm conflict (Carrington and Hogarth 1989, 14). David Drake (2007, 285) claims individual stories are part of the larger narrative of culture, which answers the human questions of: who am I?, to whom do I belong?, what is my role and purpose here?, why are things the way they are and why do I do what I do?, and how do I decide what is right and what is important?

1. Who Am I?

The sense of identity emerges from the story of self (Insead and Barbulescu 2010, 135). It is, "the internalized and evolving story that results from a person's selective appropriation of the past, present, and future" (Insead and Barbulescu 2010, 135). Gerard Loughin claims, "the sense of self arises from memory and anticipation, from combining chronicle and scenario into a single story. It is the narrative form of consciousness which allows for the holding together of a determined past and an indeterminate future in the present moment" (1996, 65). This sense of self depends on an interpretation of personal history within a societal context (Stroup 1997, 111).

A person comes to recognize him or herself from the open-ended stories conveyed by society, self-narration, or others (Frie 2011, 48; and Insead and Barbulescu 2010, 138). This

narrative becomes the portal through which a person enters the world and with his or her experiences it develops relevancy (Clandinin et al. 2010, 82). One must have ownership of his or her story by possessing the ability to alter his or her perspective of self. Identity remains fluid throughout a person's lifetime as he or she constantly engage in "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revisiting" his or her distinctiveness (Insead and Barbulescu 2010, 137). However, the more stable the self-narrative, the stronger the self-esteem (Frie 2011, 49-50).

Throughout the biblical story, God confirms humanity's identity. Each person is a child and heir of God (1 John 3:1-2; Rom. 8:17). This character must be presented contextually before it can be grasped. Cross-cultural agents, for example, must comprehend if the sense of self resides in the individual or in the collective. As missionaries learn the narratives of both the group and the individual, the biblical account can be contextually presented. Then conversion, the collision between personal identity stories and the biblical chronicle, happens (Stroup 1997, 91).

2. To whom do I Belong?

A person not only needs to identify his or her self but also his or her position in a family and community. The first stories children desire to hear concern their parents and siblings and their place in that family system. As they grow older, narratives provide a sense of space, giving knowledge on how to navigate personal relationships and community (Drake 2007, 285). Society does not constitute one ideal or correct path; it comprises subjective realities at any moment in time (Annan, Priestley, and Phillipson 2006, 21). These realities change not only with the individual perspective but also within time and context. A person relates narratives of their identity by referring to existing social stories and cultural norms (Insead and Barbulescu 2010). Relationships reflect the self each human being perceives.

People in most cultures comprehend the significance of family and community. Hence, contextualization in this area should be uncomplicated. The Bible stresses that those who believe in Jesus Christ become part of the family of God, each unique in the formation and function of the body (Eph. 2:11-22). The Old Testament relates the stories of families and communities (e.g. Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Israel). The New Testament tells the narrative of Jesus' family, his friendship with his disciples, and his relationship with the many

families he lived with and ministered to during his short life. These narratives stress the importance of becoming part of the community of faith and finding one's identity in each culturally unique church body (Elmer 2006, 38). Good contextualization, guided by the Holy Spirit, will reveal God's truth, which will transform the individual, family, and society (Flemming 2005, 303-305).

3. What is My Role and Purpose Here?

Human existence becomes meaningful with story (Parry and Doan 1994, 45). Narrative supplies purpose to life by providing a framework for understanding past events and giving the ability to plan future actions. They aid people in recognizing opportunities during times of upheaval (Drake 2007, 286). The dance between story and performance is both "personal and collective in nature" (Drake 2007, 284). One's story becomes embedded in a larger historical or communal structure (Frie 2011, 49). Sometimes a person distorts his or her experience to conform to his or her expectations of self. Events not considered consistent with one's opinion of self will be left out of his or her narration (Drake 2007, 284).

Human beings in every culture crave to be part of something larger than themselves. Scripture reveals humanity's participation in God's overarching story. The narratives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Peter, and Paul must be contextualized so each culturally distinct person can visualize how God can take a nobody and provide him or her purpose and the ability to accomplish great things. Believers must relate their stories of how God gave them a purpose to do "immeasurable more than all" they could "ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within" (Eph. 3:20). God wants all his creation to find a role and purpose in him.

4. Why are Things the Way They are and Why do I do What I do?

Stories provide links of communication between people, helping them comprehend themselves and their world. How one expresses his or her story often determines his or her actions. Important behavioral elements are validated through self-narratives, which form transitional bridges crossing gaps between old and new identity roles (Drake 2007, 284; and Insead and Barbulescu 2010, 137). Traditional stories develop community characteristics, cohesion, continuity, and innovation (Schreiter 2008, 105). They facilitate enhancement of a person's life and personality.

Culture by its very definition creates patterns of shared and learned behavior (Grunlan and Mayers 1979, 39; and Luzbetak 1970, 117). Anthropologists define enculturation as the absorbing of appropriate manners of one's birth society and acculturation as the education of proper conduct of one's host culture (Grunlan and Mayers 1979, 72). Missionaries struggle with acculturation. Most often, people do not comprehend the "why" of their customs. For the missionary, not understanding the "why" of the story causes emotional dissidence (Insead and Barbulescu 2010, 138). Cross-cultural workers must know the "whys" of the new culture to competently display contextually correct actions. Each worldview provides a scale to evaluate right and wrong conduct (Dempster 1991, 24-39). Correct behavior in one culture may not be acceptable in another. Almost all cultures have "heroes," persons dead or alive, real or imaginary who possess prized characteristics and become a cultural model for behavior. Communities ostracize individuals who deviate from acceptable social norms and consider them abnormal (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005, 6-10). People tend to judge cultural practices quickly (usually less than five seconds) and from these experiences, or stereotypical narratives heard from others, their actions follow (Elmer 2006, 48). Human nature desires to interpret and evaluate other cultures based on one's home customs, resulting in ethnocentrism (Grunlan and Mayers 1979, 24; Kraft 1991, 151; and Nida 1954, 5). Missionaries must be sensitive to this tendency and resist formulating cultural judgments, allowing themselves space to become part of the new cultural story.

Scripture explains the natural behavior of humanity and how redeemed human beings should act. People perform poorly as a result of sin (1 John 2:16). The Apostle Paul lists for the Galatian church sinful activities, warning them that those who behave as such will not inherit the Kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21). Believers must allow the example of Christ's sacrificial servanthood to be their behavioral guide. Jesus' story empowers his followers to constantly change their conduct as they progress into deeper and deeper faith (Flemming 2005, 263-5). To truly contextualize human behavior, one must regularly consider the difference between biblical and social conduct. Each national church must examine their cultural deeds in light of scriptural actions. As each member of the worldwide Church conforms his or her character into Christ likeness, the world will not only hear the story but also witness its transformational power.

5. How do I Decide What is Right and What is Important?

Narrative provides a sense of meaning to life so one can make critical choices and find fulfillment (Drake 2007, 285). Many cultures view the world as a metanarrative (i.e. a story about the meaning of reality). Each individual wants to make correct choices so that his or her account fits into the larger picture (Bauckham 2003, 4). People have difficulty grasping the possibilities of new stories when they have so many coexisting self-narratives (Drake 2007, 284). People craft new anecdotes reinterpreting favorite often-repeated storylines, creating diverse narrative versions for various audiences (Insead and Barbulescu 2010, 144). A person repeats and changes the account, discovering unexpected direction to continue his or her ever-evolving story.

All cultures contain a religious element supplying assistance for their member's social and psychological needs. Religion provides security and direction (Grunlan and Mayers 1979, 220). Its rituals make stressful situations bearable, nurture a sense of belonging to community and God, and provide a coherent worldview narrative (Tan 2000, 172). Nevertheless, the way of Christ is not religion; it is the only approach to God (John 14:6). Don Richardson claims God put "redemptive analogies" in all religions and cultures that will contextualize biblical truths (1974). Cross-cultural workers must discover these analogies and apply them, producing contextually applicable significance to the Gospel narratives in order that the lost will find their true value and direction in Christ.

Humanity's universal questions of being, place in community, behavior, decision-making, and life direction can only be answered in contextualized narratives of personal identity. Allowing the Gospel story to speak to these matters in a competent cross-cultural manner will determine its acceptance in a society. Story not only assists in comprehending self, it also develops human order.

Narrative Contextualization of Human Order

Narrative allows a person to organize his or her life (Stephen Crites in Hauerwas and Jones 1989, 65). It sustains a sense of order, coherence, and continuity across time and space, and provides a sense of temporality bringing together past, present, and future (Drake 2007, 285). The strength of narrative lies in its flexibility. Narrative, unlike science, can "bear

ambiguity, doubt, contradiction, mystery, and enigma. Story can tolerate the obscure, the imprecise, the suspect, the indeterminate” (Bradt 1997, 108). Even in chaos, a story can bring about order.

Through storytelling, each person interacts with the other providing a dynamic interplay between speaker and listener. People start as listeners, learning about themselves, the world, and God through the chronicles parents and community tell, learning their place in the order of family and community relationships (Navone 1990, 183). Storying, as a way of knowing, happens in relationship and is constantly reordered, changed, and recontextualized within the exchange of the teller and hearer. Each person learns new aspects about his or herself as the shared story evolves (Bradt 1997, 15). Yet many times people desire disorder, surprise, and change. They want to do more than the status quo and narratives allow them to develop new scenarios (Drake 2007, 284).

Good cultural analyses for contextualization must be holistic and address the forces that shape cultural identity (Schreiter 2008, 43-44). Charles Kraft argues that during contextualization, Westerners focus more on cultural structures (i.e. customs, ideas, patterns, structures, language, material objects, ceremonies, ideas, and beliefs) than on people and lose sight of its most dynamic aspect (Kraft 2005, 11). To share culture, one must disclose his or her interpretation of his or her social order with others (MacIntyre 1989, 139). This can be difficult because a person often does not understand the reasons behind his or her social rules. However, as people dialogue they come to understand each other’s past, learn to work together in the present, and dream for their future.

The missional Church must communicate the relational heart of God by forming relationships through narrative (Kraft 2005, 3-14). Missional theologizing requires theology to be context sensitive and experience-near. Through the understanding of Scripture and culture, believers present the story of Jesus Christ in culturally specific ways (Priest 2006, 189). Self-theologizing is also necessary for global contextualization because it considers the Gospel should be storied in all worldviews, so that the individual’s sense of order can be addressed (Whiteman 2006, 60). People need to know their past, present, and future as it relates to the biblical narrative. Interestingly, hermeneutics not only means “rules of interpretation” but also “reading from one’s lived experiences” (Vanhoozer 2006, 94). As good contextualization happens, each

believer's life will testify to the reality of the biblical story, compelling others to enter into the "here and not yet" Kingdom of God.

Story contains the elements necessary for good contextualization. It helps establish human identity. Relational narratives maintain personal and social order. Yet, to appreciate a good story, one must be able to use language.

Narrative Contextualization of Language

"Language is culture" (Song 1999, 28) and all people groups have a well-developed dialect (Goodenough 1983, 146). The most characteristic feature of human behavior is language (Nida 1954, 17). Not genetically inherited, a person acquires culture through absorbing the abstract ideas and symbolic behavior through vernacular (Luzbetak 1970, 81). By age five, most native speakers have mastered grammar and word order. They also understand the complicated vernacular of nonverbal communication (Grunlan and Mayers 1979, 89). Each person within a community speaks the idiom uniquely. Only human beings create language, and with this medium they archive history and these stories bring about societal coherence through time (Crites 1989, 65).

Words are not unchanging symbols that have exact correlations in all languages, they only aid in representing the culture to which they belong (Nida 1954, 17). To be contextual, one must put him or herself into the other's "shoes" and view the world from their perspective and tongue (Freedman and Combs 1996, 44). Language acquisition can be one of the primary stressors in a cross-cultural person's life (Flaskerud and Uman 1996, 124). Absorbing the verbal and non-verbal communication of another idiom requires personal involvement, time, effort, and energy (Neumann 2004, 36). To the inexperienced ear any unknown vernacular sounds like an indistinguishable, fast jumble of noise. As one learns the dialect, the sounds become an understandable pattern. However, to effectively study a language one must become culturally immersed, listen, and be willing to speak like a child (Nida 1954, 222-223).

Language possesses both a personal and communal property. People build communities around not only different idioms but also different nuances or variations of a particular dialect. Jargon fosters relationships, and gives kinship identity to each individual (McNeal 2000, 73-4; and Song 1999, 27). Vernaculars determine the way people think about events and how they

story them (Annan, Priestley, and Phillipson 2006, 22). God disturbed the unity of humanity when he confused their tongue at the Tower of Babel, causing them to scatter over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:1-9). With the coming of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit unifies the Church by overcoming the barrier of dialect with the “language of the heart” or speaking in tongues (Cox 1995, 120). Tongue speech not only merges horizontal relationships, it also deepens the vertical relationship through communication between the finite and the infinite (Miller and Yamamori 2007, 2).

Language must be learned to communicate the Word of God contextually, there is no shortcut (Nida 1954, 223). Cross-cultural agents must commit to the long-term acculturation process. They should recognize not only the idiom, but also the verbal and non-verbal nuances of that culture’s communication. Missionaries ought to diligently study biblical culture and language so they can become the bridge that spans the two cultures. Narrative, through vernacular, communicates in a way that touches the human heart. God entered earth as a baby and learned a language and culture to communicate the greatest story humanity will ever hear.

Conclusion

According to Charles Van Engen, “the narrative of Scripture is the story of God’s Trinitarian mission...it bridges and integrates both propositional, left brain language about God and experiential, right-brain language about God so that being, knowing, and doing come together in real life” (1996, 65-67). Narrative is one of the few mediums that can speak to both sides of the human brain. Hence, story should be considered one of the preeminent tools a person can employ to contextualize the Gospel.

Secular psychology understands the importance of story. The fathers of Narrative therapy recognized the power of narrative in people’s lives. Narrative therapy is one of the few contextualized therapies because the story crosses cultural boundaries. Through Narrative therapy, countless people changed their negative narratives and started to retell their lives in positive and healthy ways.

Postmodernism contends humanity can only interpret the world they perceive. Each listener will decipher a story differently because of the lenses of his or her experience, family, and societal culture. These realities change over time and the narratives never become fixed. Language, which carries the message of the account, is also dynamic and constantly in flux.

Human beings draw on these constantly altering tales to organize and maintain the reality of their lives. Postmodernism perceives contextualization to be necessary to appreciate reality. Truth can only be understood in contextually relevant ways.

Theologians also argue the essentiality of story. Narrative Theology recognized how the Bible and Christian community presented faith through the narrative. God revealed his plan for humanity through a storybook, the Bible. This metanarrative uses the smaller Old and New Testament stories to expose the overarching narrative of salvation. These chronicles provide clarity of how people should live both personally and as a society. They speak to the mandate of the Church to reach out with compassion to its neighbor and with the Gospel. The contextualized narratives help the transformational process as individuals become conformed to the image of God.

As people tell their redemption story in their cultural context, transformation happens. The Christian community provides a safe environment for people to share testimonies that build self-esteem and instill hope. People become part of God's narrative as they pray for themselves, their community, and the nations. The Word claims human prayer moves the hand of God, allowing people to participate in his metanarrative. As they pray, each in their contextual way, their stories will flow together becoming sweet smelling incense offered to the Father of all (Ps. 141:2).

Contextualization, like narrative, implements decoding and encoding to relay a message in a way the listener can comprehend. Postmodernism declares human beings construct their own reality as they live their story. Self-perception, moral behavior, place in community, decision-making and life direction are found in contextualized narrative. People organize their world with narrative. They obtain personal and social order through storied relationships. All humans utilize language to communicate their story to the world around them. More than just sounds and symbols, verbal and non-verbal communication relate a culturally correct account that people can recognize and associate with.

Missionaries must use contextualization to relate the Gospel story in culturally relevant ways. Narrative remains the best method for contextualization. Every culture exercises some form of story to communicate. People think, dream, and communicate through anecdotes. They come to value themselves and their place in community. Through story a society maintains its uniqueness and culture. Through narrative God communicated his redemption plan. Without

legend there would be no songs, poetry, art, books, movies, life. Narrative and contextualization must move hand in hand so that human beings from “every tribe and language and people and nation” will be singing a new song around the throne of God (Rev.5:9).

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¹ All Scripture quoted from New International Version Translation.

² Psychological term meaning shared experiences among clients.

³ Psychological term meaning all members of a group are able to help each other.

⁴ Psychological term meaning that long time members of a group maintain hope while new members are still struggling.

⁵ Psychological term meaning the human need to belong in groups where personal development and interpersonal relationships occur. Cohesiveness brings about belonging, acceptance, and validation to the counseling process.

⁶ Psychological term meaning people unconsciously identify other members in a group as their own immediate family.

⁷ Psychological term meaning people may achieve higher levels of self-awareness through interactions.

⁸ Psychological term meaning people experience relief from emotional distress by expressing emotion.