

interact



christian growth ministries

PREACHING with STORY

by Kel Willis

My grandchildren love it when I tell them a story. 'Is he safe? What will happen to Blinky Bill now, Grandpa? Please tell us a bit more!' There's nothing like stories to engage people. Even those who've grown up with electronic media all their lives still love them. In the last edition we spoke of how important it is to capture people's attention in the first 30 seconds of our sermons, and we all know how easy it is to lose them if we don't continue to engage. Most of us don't have the ability to keep people with us on just an intellectual level for more than a third of the sermon and need to find other ways to engage them, such as asking questions or using punchy quotes. Whilst these are helpful, I believe that those who don't develop the ability to tell the Bible story in engaging ways are at a serious disadvantage as preachers.

Some believe that the more biblical truth they convey in any given sermon, the more will stick but this is not so if people haven't connected with it. The use of stories is not only clearly biblical, but is also culturally relevant to our Australian audiences, many of whom now come from ethnic backgrounds with rich story telling traditions. In addition, most people sitting in our churches are conditioned by the hours of television they watch with a commercial break every seven minutes or so. Preachers who don't accommodate this can lose their audience and often not even be aware of it! That's one reason Jesus used stories, for they not only engage the intellect but also the emotions, giving further impetus to response and action.

Just to make it clear, I am not advocating the use of story *over* expository preaching; all preaching should be expository in that we should always explain Bible truth. Rather, I am calling for an injection of more *connection* into our preaching, having seen too many congregations, after a Sunday service, feeling as if they have endured a lecture which has been heavy on explanation and exposition, and very light on application and connection.

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Furthermore, stories should not be seen as just an entertainment tool for shallow minds! I have come across some who consider that their use somehow 'waters down the Word of God'. They consequently see their role as nothing more than simply *presenting* the Word, considering it to be the Holy Spirit's role to connect. Whilst there's an element of truth in this, even Jesus saw the need to connect with heart as well as mind, in other words, with the whole person. His preaching was not just an intellectual exercise!

Our Lord Jesus himself was a great model of how to capture and hold an audience. Matthew 13:34 tells us that 'Jesus spoke all of these things to the crowd in parables;

Jesus' preaching was not just an intellectual exercise!

he did not say anything to them without parables.' But Jesus always had clear objective in his stories; they were not merely for the entertainment of the crowd, or an opportunity to have a mental 'get up and stretch'. Questions of life and death and values and behaviour were embodied in his stories, like that of the rich farmer in Luke 12, and the arrogant self-righteousness of the religious leaders of the day was clearly exposed in his story of the two men who went up to pray in Luke 18. In

fact Luke introduces his account with this: 'To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.' Almost all the recorded teaching of Jesus involved stories of different kinds, some to make clear his message, and others to intrigue and provoke thought, because the people were not yet ready to hear.

Story is also very useful for creating context as we introduce our sermon. The more people understand the background and circumstances of the passage we are expounding, the more powerful will be its message. This is especially relevant when expounding Paul's epistles. They are all written in the context of his journey and experiences as he walked with God, sharing the gospel and seeing churches established. People really respond to the circumstances of Paul's writing, many of the letters being written from his prison cell. It helps when establishing the context to describe this setting and maybe supply dialogue: the small stone room with prison bars, perhaps a rough bed and chair; noises of prisoners being beaten; the problem with his eyes that required someone to write his letters for him; his lack of privacy, always having at least two guards in the cell with him; the courage and commitment of those who helped and supported him.

What prompted the letters? All of these things add weight to the message of his epistles. What we are doing is creating context and setting the mood for the truths expounded in Paul's letters.

Another aspect of storytelling is the more personal one. In his preaching and sharing, Paul consistently included his own journey, actually engaging his audience by drawing them into his personal encounters with God. This is so not only in Acts, but also in his epistles. I have noted over the years that preachers who do this have a captive audience.

We as Christian leaders, like Paul, also have a story to share, not only of our conversion, but of our ongoing journey: our day by day engagement with God, our opportunities to share with the lost, dealing with people's issues, and the failures, blessings and encouragements in our daily experience with God. What is it about our preaching that people most identify with? It will almost always be their belief that what we are sharing is a reality in our own experience. Effective preachers are willing to be vulnerable to their congregations. Share your story, the ups as well as the downs. Sometimes the really difficult things become a testimony to the reality of God's grace and enabling, and an opportunity to affirm the reality of our walk with him. In my experience, the most difficult times in life have turned out to be the most enriching! Most of us at some point will confront what seem to be insurmountable difficulties: family issues, personal failure, life-threatening illnesses. How we deal with these and how open we are with the process

will not only help in engaging the congregation, but will enrich and clarify the reality of what we preach. The most impacting stories are ones that come from life's experience, ones that people can emote with or think, 'I can identify with that!' When we share such things, the audience can relate to the wonder of God at work in spite of circumstances.

I remember sharing last year at a men's dinner that I had just been diagnosed with prostate cancer. I found that my experience of walking with God in this opened up special opportunities to engage with those men that night. At one point I described my interaction with my urologist who bluntly said to me: 'You have high grade prostate cancer and it's probably in your bones. How do you feel about God giving you that?' How does one respond to such a question?! I believe our response always needs to be out of our experience of God. I replied, 'In all the years I've been a follower of Jesus, he has always been my strength. I passionately believe in the goodness of God and still do!' The truth is that our simple affirmation of the incredible privilege of knowing God and his presence in daily life affirms the reality of his sufficiency to those with whom we share. Rather than an intellectual exposition of a passage such as 2 Corinthians 1 ('Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the god of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God') how much more powerful is the application of this truth when put in the context of our own struggles and response to the challenges life throws at us!



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I was speaking with a Chinese pastor yesterday, who asked how he could make the most of his preaching opportunities. My response was to remind him that we all preach in stereo! People hear what we say, but they also read who we are and what is evident in our lives. It is only as we give of ourselves in our preaching that people truly engage with the message we bring.

I want to close with a reminder of what we have covered in the two previous articles in this series on preaching. Whilst we do need to consistently teach the Scriptures in the context of our own experience, we must at all times preach Christ. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23,24 said, 'We preach Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God.' We also preach in the context of the ministry of the Holy Spirit who not only interprets his word to the minds and hearts of the hearers, but supernaturally transforms those who respond. Let us never forget the supernatural element in our preaching.

That is why the story of God at work in our own lives is so powerful; it testifies to God at work within us and models the truth and credibility of the word we proclaim. The sermon is not a biblical lecture designed merely to inform the hearer of dry, detached truth. It is a vehicle for an encounter with the Most High God. This encounter does inform but it also provides hope, healing, direction and salvation. Because of this, preachers should embed in their sermons an expectation of a response from the congregation. This response might be a resolve to be more focused on Jesus, to deal with some relational breakdown, to spend more time with God or to learn how to more effectively share our faith. The point is that every sermon should ask the people for some response. As Eric McKiddie says, 'The preacher must connect emotion to cognition in order to get action.'



Why I am a Christian

by Kel Willis

My dad was an atheist, an angry, selfish and hard man who held forth with angry expletives whenever religion was mentioned. And so I grew up with the belief that God simply didn't exist, and dismissed those who did believe in him as naive and non-thinking.

My first encounter with anyone who openly confessed to being a Christian was with the truant inspector whose job it was to chase me up after my frequent absences from school! I observed his real care and concern for those he was seeking to help. My curiosity was aroused one day when I noticed a large black book in his glove box. I'd never seen a Bible before and asked him why he had it. He simply said, 'It's God's book and my guide to life.' I began to ridicule his claim that Jesus was his friend, saying that Jesus was dead and that I was surprised that a person like him was so religious. I've never forgotten his response: 'I abhor religion too. Religion is all about trying to follow a bunch of rules that nobody can really keep. The Christian message is about what God has done for us, and our response to his invitation to know him. This,' he said, 'leads to experiencing God's purpose for our lives.'

Over several years, I had ongoing contact with Mr Mac, my truant inspector friend, and each time we bantered a little about my being an atheist. One day he offered me a book by CS Lewis, the great English philosopher, and challenged me to tell him what I thought of it. It told of Lewis's journey to faith after having set out to destroy Christianity by 'credible argument'. Apparently, after researching the historical documents about the life and claims of Jesus, Lewis had concluded that either Jesus was all he claimed to be, or he was the greatest imposter who ever lived or, perhaps worse, he was an imbecile. I was incredibly impacted by Lewis's journey of discovery. He realised that, instead of discrediting the story of Jesus and the resurrection, his research had convinced him that it was absolutely true, and he went on to become one of the great apologists for the Christian faith.

As I read Lewis's story I became convinced that there was something unique about Jesus and his resurrection. For example, the Old Testament in the Bible was written some hundreds of years before Jesus was born and yet over 270 times it clearly records details of his birth, life and death and his resurrection. Hundreds of years later, these prophecies were fulfilled in detail.

One of the things that prompted C.S Lewis to question the sanity of Jesus was his astounding claim to be God, clothed in human form! Jesus also claimed to be the only way to come into the presence of God. In fact everything about him was out of the ordinary. He was born of a virgin (a miraculous act of God), he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, fed over



5000 people at once with a few loaves and fish, stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee and called the religious leaders of the day hypocrites!

Jesus also calmly and deliberately predicted his death and resurrection, claiming he had come to give his life as a ransom for all of us. As his crucifixion drew near, and under great pressure from the burden of taking upon himself the sin of humanity, he declared he could call 10 000 angels to rescue him, but would not because he was born for this purpose. This, then, was my dilemma: Was Jesus telling the truth or was he a con man, a liar or a lunatic?

Initially I found it very difficult to even begin to accept the idea of Jesus' resurrection. The Apostle John describes Jesus' body being mummified using approximately 32kg of ointment and cloth, before being placed in a tomb cut into a large rock, with a 2 ton boulder rolled across the entrance. The Roman governor instructed that the tomb be sealed with two rawhide ropes and his seal of office, and that anyone who broke that seal would be executed. In addition, 'a watch of Roman soldiers (usually four men on four hourly shifts) were ordered to guard the tomb.

Yet on the third day the grave was empty, the great stone rolled away, the mummification bandages still intact (as if the body had passed right through them) and Jesus' followers proclaiming that they had seen him alive! History shows that they were totally transformed, their lives changed forever. Saul, a religious leader of the day, was determined to stamp out any notion that Jesus was alive and in fact had many of those who claimed to have seen him imprisoned, stoned and persecuted, until he was himself confronted by the resurrected Jesus. He was later to become the great Apostle Paul who wrote much of the New Testament.

I discovered, like C.S Lewis, that there were lots of theories put forward to explain away the resurrection, but in the end none of them proved to have substance. It is hard to argue against an event that has so much evidence: 500 eye witnesses, so many personal encounters! One of the most convincing arguments to me was the fact that so many of those who saw Jesus after his resurrection were put to death over a thirty year period, rather than deny the event. I asked myself, why would they die for a lie? Then of course there was the radical transformation of Jesus' disciples who after the crucifixion were crowding together in an upstairs room in fear of their lives. What changed them into those who later proclaimed that Jesus was alive and that we can now know him, and through him engage with God?

As I read, argued, and objected to the story of Jesus, I found myself on a journey of discovery that was to lead to an entirely different view of God. Instead of a God who was angry and vindictive (my father's view gleaned from the religious school he had attended as a boy), I discovered a God who loved me and wanted me to know him. All the philosophical questions that had so preoccupied me were answered along my journey. I found myself responding to a God of purpose, who has utterly changed my life and given me freedom to become what he intended all of us to be: three dimensional people.

The Christian message does not call us to be religious or to live under rules that make life miserable. It is about a relationship with the living Lord Jesus. It is a life that begins with knowing Jesus and allowing him to be the centre of our lives. It is a life of meaning and purpose.

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