

Proclaiming the Gospel as Metanarrative to Postmodern Hearers

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Abstract

Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, as "incredulity towards metanarratives" might seem to pose a daunting barrier for Christian proclamation, tempting preachers to avoid the universal claims of the biblical story in favor of the more palatable approach of preaching isolated "stories." This paper will argue for the absolute necessity of proclaiming the biblical metanarrative in today's culture, highlighting the story's aspects that answer and diffuse postmodern charges of the totalizing and oppressive nature of all metanarratives.

Introduction

Sitting in a conference room in 2004 with three hundred aspiring European movie screenwriters, producers, directors and actors, I experienced, vividly and unforgettably, the antipathy of contemporary culture towards the Christian message. The speaker was Robert McKee, a Hollywood screenwriting guru, giving his annual "Story" workshop in London. I was an incognito preaching professor, hoping to gain some insight for equipping students in narrative communication. Early in the second session, McKee was explaining that a significant human value should be at stake in any story to lend power to the conflict. On his list of possible values, he mentioned "peace." In mid-sentence, he suspended his train of thought and said, "By the way, we will never have peace until we wipe all religion from the face of the earth." I was somewhat stunned, but the surrounding silence seemed more of intrigue than of offense. "Mind you, I'm not opposed to spirituality," he continued, "but these ideas of heaven and hell, that 'there's only one way to God and it's my way,' 'I'm right and you're wrong,' 'I'm in and you're out'—these will keep us blowing each other up until we get rid of them completely." People around me nodded agreement, and there was a smattering of applause in the room. McKee went on to speak for three days about the nuts and bolts of communicating "truth" through stories. The stories he had in mind were fictional. The "truth" was universal, yet fluid and personal—helpful tidbits of insight into the "human condition" that the screenwriter might discover even in the process of writing the story, and then transmit to the audience in its telling.

That moment crystallized for me the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel in the contemporary secular West. Secular hearers are generally not the least interested in what we have to say, and if they are, it is usually for merely therapeutic reasons. They hope we might give them some story, some insight, some pithy saying that will inspire them and help them make it through the day. However, they distrust our serious claims to Truth, seeing them as destructive, dangerous, unsophisticated and uncivilized. Telling helpful stories is one thing, but affirming a grand story, making universal claims, drawing all-inclusive conclusions—this is something else altogether.

McKee's matter-of-fact dismissal of all religion as dangerous for the common good illustrates the essence of the postmodern mindset as defined by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, first published in French in 1979. "Simplifying to the extreme," he wrote, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives." (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv) The original French word "*incredulité*" carries a slightly stronger nuance than the English "incredulity" or "disbelief," and comes closer to describing the suspicion and outright resistance present in contemporary culture towards any affirmation of absolute truth. For those of us who preach, and who attempt to equip others to preach, this barrier to our message is too significant to ignore.

Is Christianity a Metanarrative?

The first question to ask and answer is whether the Biblical story is, in fact, a metanarrative in the sense that Lyotard has in mind. And if it is, what is it about the Biblical story that Lyotard finds so objectionable? This question has been the subject of some discussion. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, assuming that the Christian story is, indeed, a target of Lyotard's rejection, contend that the ultimate reasons for this rejection are both epistemological and ethical. First, the Christian story, like all metanarratives, claims to know more than it could possibly know. When a story that is local in nature, the product of a particular community's vision of the world, lays claim to moral universality, it oversteps its realm of knowledge. "No metanarrative ... is large enough or open enough genuinely to include the experiences of all people." The second objection is ethical in nature and flows from the first. Metanarratives, including the Christian story, inevitably lead to oppression and violence in their claims of "totality." (Middleton & Walsh, 1995b, pp. 70-71)

Middleton's and Walsh's proposed solution is to answer this misconception by emphasizing the "antitotalizing thrust" of the Biblical metanarrative, apparent in four distinct biblical trajectories. The first is the sensitivity of Israel towards suffering, as seen particularly in the Exodus account and subsequent exhortations to practice justice towards aliens, widows, orphans and other oppressed peoples. Second, the OT prophets proclaimed God's judgment against Israel because of its own injustice, and advanced a vision of the creator God's redemptive purpose for all peoples. Third, the shape of the Torah, beginning with creation and ending before Israel enters the land underscores the universal nature of God's purpose and the nature of Israel's election for service rather than for privilege—called as a vessel to mediate God's healing to all the peoples of the world. Finally, the ministry of Jesus, taking the side of the marginalized and the outcast against the political and religious establishment, radically exhorting his disciples to "love your enemies," emphasizing the universal call of Israel to be a "house of prayer for the nations," culminates in the ultimate climax of the entire story as the Son of God voluntarily submits to death, vindicated through resurrection, on behalf of all humanity. The Biblical metanarrative properly proclaimed, Middleton and Walsh maintain, answers postmodernism's objections of totalizing oppression. (Middleton & Walsh, 1995a, pp. 141-154)

James K.A. Smith and Merold Westfal both contend that, not only is Christianity exempt from postmodernism's incredulity toward metanarratives, but that Christians should see this

incredulity as friendly territory for the faith. Smith claims that metanarratives are a distinctly modern phenomenon: “they are stories which not only tell a grand story (since even premodern and tribal stories do this), but also claim to be able to *legitimate* the story and its claims *by an appeal to universal Reason.*” (Smith, 2001, p. 354) This appeal to universal, autonomous Reason for legitimacy characterizes such modern narratives as Hegel’s dialectic, Kant’s emancipation of the rational, Marx’s dialectical materialism and Adam Smith’s wealth of nations. It is towards these modern myths that Lyotard directs his critique, not because of their universal scope, but because, in their appeal to reason, they fail to acknowledge that reason itself is just another language game. They will not own up to their “mythic ground.” (Smith, 2001, p. 360) Since the Christianity makes no such pretentious appeal to universal reason, but rather places faith before reason, Smith claims it may in fact find in postmodernism an ally in the construction of a Christian philosophy.

Westphal also claims that Lyotard’s target is limited to enlightenment thinkers like those mentioned above, but for slightly different reasons. Similarly to Smith, he believes that the Christian narrative is distinguished from Lyotard’s metanarratives by the fact that the latter are told by philosophers, appealing to reason, while the former is told by prophets and apostles, appealing to divine revelation. But Westfal gives yet another reason. Modern metanarratives are constructed for the purpose of legitimizing the discourses to which they relate. We tell stories to justify ourselves. In contrast, the Biblical story tends to delegitimize the status quo. The Bible “does not tell us, as a society, as a culture or even as a church that our practices constitute the Kingdom of God, the goal or culmination of history.” (Westfal, 2003, p. 34) Westfal, then, sees Lyotard’s incredulity as an unwitting commentary on the fallen nature of man, and an opportunity for Christian teaching on human sinfulness.

Justin Thacker responds to both Smith and Westphal with a thorough review of Lyotard’s writings to demonstrate that Lyotard specifically includes Christianity among the metanarratives rejected by postmodernism. In Thacker’s view, the issue for Lyotard is not that metanarratives are grounded in universal reason, or that they are attempts by autonomous human beings and societies at self-justification. The issue is that metanarratives do not remain in the local social setting in which they are constructed and told. They “overstep their bounds, and begin to control or manipulate other narratives.” Thacker concludes, “Christianity must be such a metanarrative, for almost any claim it makes will, for Lyotard, impinge upon the claims of other narratives.” (Thacker, 2005, p. 310)

Regardless of where we might stand on the question of just what Jean-François Lyotard meant by “metanarrative,” Thacker’s conclusion seems to reflect most accurately the mind of the audience we face when we seek to address the secular West with the Gospel message. My screenwriting teacher, Robert McKee, did not pronounce his sweeping judgment on all religion, including Christianity, because their teachings are based on universal reason, or because they are attempts by individuals and communities to justify themselves, or even merely because they tend toward totalizing oppression of the minority. It is because he believes that claims about ultimate and universal truth, held with certainty and conviction in a pluralistic culture, are bound to generate disagreement, conflict and even violence, and he sees this belief confirmed on the evening news every day. Living in a pluralistic and multicultural milieu has led him to declare “tolerance” the supreme virtue, and consequently to view adherence to an absolute truth, or a

universal story as the supreme evil. He admittedly is open to “spirituality,” and he and my fellow screenwriting students, as well as most postmodern travelers in our culture, would welcome the light our stories might shed on the “human condition,” as long as we maintained a “local” and provisional tone in the telling. But when our message takes on the flavor of a metanarrative, in the universal, absolute and exclusive sense, they will see us as having stepped over the bounds of what we might possibly know, and what we can legitimately proclaim.

What’s a Preacher to Do?

How, then, shall we preach? In the face of such cultural hostility, several strategies present themselves. Depending on the personality and inclination of the preacher, one might choose a strategy of confrontation, taking our cue from the note, scribbled in the margin of a preacher’s outline: “Weak point—pound the pulpit and speak louder.” However, our postmodern audience does not give the impression that it is likely to be overpowered by our strength of conviction, or even convinced by our most clever and rational arguments.

Others might be inclined to opt for a strategy of acquiescence: “If they won’t take what we’re offering, let’s offer them what they’re taking.” Preaching as therapeutic dialogue could conceivably have the appearance of some success, and even resemble Biblical preaching. Tell them the stories of the Bible in an interesting and engaging style, help them to find strength, encouragement and tips for daily living in the pages of the Scriptures. Or look for ways to point out intersections between God’s story and theirs, as they make their way through life. The problem with this approach is that it confirms the postmodern impression that the Christian story, like all other stories, is but a local social construct, void of any real universal or eternal meaning. Our hearers don’t need to see intersections of their own stories with God’s story, they need to see that their stories do not exist independently of His—God’s story is where they already live.

Another option, reflecting a strategy of *détente*, might be to enter an apologetic dialogue with the culture. This is the strategy of simply keeping the lines of communication open, while agreeing to disagree. As Justin Thacker points out, Lyotard himself recognizes that, in order to remain consistent in his thought, his rejection of metanarratives can only be provisional. Otherwise, he finds himself in the circular quagmire of maintaining an absolute rejection of all absolutes. According to Thacker’s analysis, Lyotard answers this dilemma by recognizing that narratives must sometimes be recognized as being contradictory to one another. In these cases, we should simply “bear witness” to the differences, describing them without attempting to resolve them. Thacker suggests that the best strategy for coexisting with Lyotard and postmodernism is to retain an absolute commitment to Christianity, while maintaining a dialogue of *détente* with postmodern thought. (Thacker, 2005, pp. 311-312) Thacker’s observation is helpful, and opens at least a space in the postmodern milieu where we might share our story. However, as a veteran of ten years as a missionary in Western Europe, I wonder whether this strategy might become an easy out that is not necessarily true to our apostolic calling. I would question whether simply staying in the same room with Lyotard for a lifetime is equivalent to bearing faithful witness to the Gospel.

Finally, we could opt for a strategy of kerygmatic proclamation, entering into a prophetic dialogue with postmodern hearers. “Prophetic” implies an unapologetic telling of the Christian metanarrative. “Dialogue” implies sensitivity to the incredulity we face, and willingness to listen as well as to speak. J.P. Moreland, in an address on “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy and the Postmodern Turn,” points out the immoral nature of taking the approach of “intellectual pacifism” towards the challenges of postmodernism, which “recommends backgammon while the barbarians are at the gate. It is the easy, cowardly way out that removes the pressure to engage alternative conceptual schemes, to be different, to risk ridicule, to take a stand outside the gate. But it is precisely as disciples of Christ, even more, as officers in his army, that the pacifist way out is simply not an option.” (Moreland, 2005, p. 113) Preachers, and teachers of preaching, must enter the fray, accepting the challenge to engage our culture in meaningful ways with the Gospel. How we accomplish this is an open question, but we will spend the remainder of this paper suggesting some possible directions for a strategy of “prophetic dialogue.”

Humbly Confess Our Humanity

Contemporary hearers do not resist the Christian story out of blind prejudice. They base their distrust, as Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh have observed, on systematic insight and historical observation. The insight is that “those who articulate metanarratives and worldviews are inevitably finite, fallible (indeed, fallen) human beings.” The historical observation is that “the biblical story has, in fact, often been used ideologically to oppress and exclude those regarded as infidels or heretics.” (Middleton & Walsh, 1995a, p. 142) Westphal’s read on the distinctive characteristics of the Christian metanarrative is correct. The Bible does not exist to legitimize our practices and our prejudices. It rather rebukes and corrects us. The first step towards a prophetic dialogue with our postmodern hearers will be to have the humility to acknowledge that they are right about us. We, the messengers, are indeed finite, fallible, fallen human beings. Our vision is limited by our finiteness, by our sinfulness and by our cultural bias. We have often throughout history abused our story by using it to legitimize ourselves instead of allowing it to correct us. Once we have removed ourselves from the debate, we may focus on the message we have received from God.

In his book, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, Donald Miller tells the story of a small group of Christians on the campus of Reed College in Portland, Oregon, a campus selected by the *Princeton Review*, as the college where students are most likely to ignore God. This handful of followers of Jesus felt they needed to “come out” with their faith, and they chose an annual campus festival called Ren Fayre, a two-day party devoted primarily to the consumption of drugs and alcohol, as the time they would make their Christian identity known to their classmates. The method they chose was a “confession booth” in the middle of the campus, where, presumably, their friends could enter and confess their sins. When the students entered the booth, however, expecting a joke of some kind, the Christian students surprised them by asking them to hear their own confessions on behalf of Christendom, acknowledging how Christians had not been true to the teachings of Jesus. Miller recounts his first confession to a friend name Jake:

“There’s a lot. I will keep it short,” I started. “Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened, you know, if my ego gets threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across.” (Miller, 2003, p. 123)

The result of this group’s honesty and vulnerability was remarkable. Not only did their peers receive their coming out with grace and tolerance, but they also opened the door for them to share the Christian metanarrative over and over again. Once the hostility towards Christendom was defused, they found real interest and openness to know what the “central message of Christ” really was. A small circle of believers gained immense influence in an intensely secular and postmodern place through simple the act of humble confession. The first step towards an effective telling of the Biblical story to postmodern hearers must certainly be a confessional and humble tone.

Tell the Story, Shape the Worldview

A decade ago, in the course of my training to go to the mission field, I was exposed to the concept of the chronological “storying” of the Bible as a tool for evangelizing primitive, oral cultures. The rationale, as I perceived it, was two-fold. First, because they were oral cultures, they were more able to receive and process information in the form of stories than of abstract principles. Second, because they were primitive cultures, with little or no previous exposure to the Biblical story, they needed to hear the whole story, from the beginning, in order to lay the worldview foundations necessary to comprehend and receive the good news of Jesus. If they merely heard the story of Jesus, without the proper foundations of the Old Testament, they were most likely to end up with some form of syncretism, adding Jesus to whatever gods they already had stored away in their worldview.

Upon arriving in Western Europe, I quickly became convinced that the same approach was needed in a post-literate and post-Christian context. In the postmodern West, stories are once again the medium of choice for communicating at the deepest levels, and we can no longer rely on the an underlying Christian story in the minds of our hearers to support the Gospel message. We must, in our telling of the story, intentionally construct a biblical worldview.

N.T. Wright has done a tremendous service in defining the make-up of a worldview, and the role that narrative plays. “Worldviews provide stories through which human beings view reality,” he writes. “Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark.” (Wright, 1992, p. 123) It is through the stories of the worldview that we learn the answers to the fundamental questions that define our existence: who are we, where are we, what is the problem, what is the solution? To proclaim a metanarrative is essentially to answer these questions in story form. Our metanarrative may be

composed of many stories, but each has its place in the worldview and each contains, in some way, the answer to one or more of these basic questions.

Through the years of our ministry in Portugal, we determined to intentionally construct a biblical worldview, through the careful selection and telling of Bible stories, in all our evangelism efforts. We discovered that when we took the pains to do this, whether with school children, third-world immigrants, university students or business professionals, we consistently enjoyed three natural advantages. First, initiating a witnessing relationship was much more natural and stress-free, because there is nothing threatening or high-pressure about telling and listening to stories. Second, when the moment came to invite a response, those who had listened to the entire story were almost always ready to respond positively to the Gospel. Over time, they had gained understanding, openness, and belief in the view of the world they were discovering in the Biblical story. Third, the process of follow-up was simplified and accelerated, because the process of discipleship had begun well before conversion, through the narrative construction of a biblical worldview.

Those who preach to postmodern hearers must give special attention to the architecture of the worldview they proclaim. The biblical metanarrative itself is our best tool.

Tell the Story to Evangelize, Not Legitimize

Having defused postmodern antipathy through humble confession of our humanity, and painstakingly shared the Christian story with a high degree of worldview intentionality and awareness, we need to remain committed to the goal of our proclamation before a postmodern hearing. The objective is not to defend, promote or to legitimize Christendom, Christians or any given expression of the church. Our calling is to announce the good news of God's activity in the world, from creation to final redemption, climaxing His redemptive work in Christ, in such a way that hearers might respond to Him in faith.

At this point it is worth saying that there is no need to shift suddenly into a systematic mode, spouting our customary four laws or five steps, itemizing the requirements for a legitimate faith. D.A. Carson suggests that our evangelistic tools might more properly be developed as a subset of biblical theology than of systematic theology, especially when those to whom we bear witness have not bought into the Judeo-Christian heritage. "The good news of Jesus," he affirms, "is virtually incoherent unless it is securely set into a biblical worldview." (Carson, 1996, p. 502) Carson maintains, as we have, that this worldview is established through an understanding of the Bible's "plotline," which he traces exhaustively through Creation, Humanity, Fall, Redemption and Culmination. (Carson, 1996, pp.193-346)

Let me lead towards our conclusion with a story. João was a typical postmodern traveler. He had rejected the religious training he had received as a youth and spent much of his life exploring spiritual options, taking the eclectic approach of gleaning whatever he found interesting and useful from Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, New Age philosophies and African mysticism. He was invited to a noonday Bible study in the office of a friend in the large publishing company in Lisbon where he worked. He accepted the invitation, because of his friendship with the host, but

didn't expect to hear anything he didn't already know, and his attitude towards the experience was apparent as he sat in his chair crossed his arms and said, each week, "I'm just listening." As João listened each Thursday over a period of eight weeks, he heard the biblical metanarrative methodically unpacked before him. The stories of God's intentions in creation, the special place of man, the Fall through sin, the judgment through the flood, the call and faith of Abraham, the redemptive activity of God in the Exodus and the Law, the failure and forgiveness of David and the redemptive work of Jesus were all unfolded, one after the other. Perhaps for the first time, João grasped clearly the work of God from beginning to end. In the seventh session, he ceased being a passive listener and became a follower of Christ.

Conclusion

Lyotard's description of postmodernism is probably accurate. Contemporary listeners in the secular West do have a decided incredulity towards metanarratives. But their incredulity may not be terminal. The problem with the postmodern position is that it is unsustainable on a practical level because it is so unsatisfying. To affirm that "the truth is there is no truth, our metanarrative tells us that metanarratives are evil, we are tolerant towards all except those we perceive as intolerant, we know that we cannot know," puts postmodern adherents in a disconcerting malaise of circular reasoning and hypocrisy that is simply not sustainable. My experience increasingly tells me that many postmodern people are actually in search of a metanarrative in which to believe.

There's no easy answer to the epistemological issue of our metanarrative, except to point to divine revelation, which, while resolving the question of our limited vision places our foundation squarely on a faith supposition. This is as it should be. Having established such a faith-based foundation, and humbly acknowledged our humanity, all that is left to do is to faithfully tell the story, carefully and accurately convey the biblical worldview, and allow God's Word and His Spirit to take root in the hearts of our hearers.

I recently heard Erwin McManus preach in his church in Los Angeles. Meeting in a downtown nightclub, his audience was obviously made up of many postmodern seekers. In the course of his message, he told the story of a lady who had complained to him one day after church. "I thought this was an interdenominational church," she said. "I've been coming here for two months and all you talk about is Jesus. You've not once mentioned Buddha or Mohammed." Erwin explained to her that she probably had in mind an inter-religious church, and that a Christian interdenominational church would follow Jesus exclusively. Regarding her complaint, he simply said, "This is the only story I know."

The Christian metanarrative is still the only story that can truly satisfy even a postmodern heart and mind. If not this story, what other story would we tell?

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