

## ABSTRACT

### Equipping Believers for Gospel Conversations

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The purpose of this project was to discover what effect a greater engagement with storytelling might have on helping Christians become more confident and motivated in the practice of evangelism. The six-week intervention included nine participants within a local church who were instructed on the biblical foundation of storytelling being used as an evangelistic tool and were given opportunities to practice sharing stories with others that might help them initiate gospel conversations. In order to measure the effectiveness of the project, a post-intervention qualitative interview was conducted, transcribed, and analyzed in addition to the pre-intervention and post-intervention quantitative and qualitative surveys which were provided to this experimental group as well as to a control group who were exempt from the training. Observational notes from discussions in the training and personal conversations were also used to evaluate the success of the intervention.

  
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Equipping Believers to Confidently Initiate Gospel Conversations by Using Storytelling  
as an Evangelistic Tool

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Ashley.

To our three children: Raelyn, Nash, and Rhett.

## CHAPTER ONE

### An Introduction to the Project

#### *Problem Statement*

Matthew 28:18-20 records Jesus' famous words of instruction that He spoke to His disciples after His death and resurrection. This passage is best known as the Great Commission because it is here where His followers are tasked with the responsibility to go out and make disciples of all nations. They were appointed to be His witnesses throughout the world and to teach others to do the same. This timeless charge to share the gospel and make disciples reverberates to all of Christ's followers even now. It is not just a commandment that was given to the first disciples or merely to those who have highly sociable personalities, but it is an order for every believer to live by.

Often, within the church there is a misconception that evangelism is only meant for certain people with the God-given spiritual gifts to do so. It is considered to primarily be the responsibility of pastors or church leaders who have been uniquely gifted with gospel sharing qualities and not intended for the rest of the church body. This is inconsistent with the biblical mandate for every believer to participate in the mission of pointing people to the Savior as His witnesses. While some may argue that the Apostle Paul makes a clear distinction between the various roles of believers in Ephesians 4:11 by identifying select individuals with uniquely endowed characteristics that are conducive to evangelism and others who are more gifted to be prophets or teachers; their unified purpose always originates in communicating the salvation that may be found through

Jesus Christ. In his book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*,” Robert Coleman explains how this indifferent mentality is flawed. Coleman writes,

Evangelism is not an optional accessory to our life. It is the heartbeat of all that we are called to be and do. It is the commission of the church that gives meaning to all else that is undertaken in the name of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

No one is relieved of this duty until they are welcomed into eternity after their life on earth is complete.

The problem apparent to contemporary evangelism is that the most transformative and life changing news in the history of the world resides within the church, and yet, many Christians are not actively engaged in sharing it with others. Today, there is an absence of motivation and confidence amongst believers to tell the gospel in meaningful ways to others. This has unfortunately caused evangelism to become a subject that Christians habitually avoid and a practice that is received with great reluctance.<sup>2</sup> Why are believers not eager to have conversations with others about God’s most precious gift to humanity? If Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is truly good news and available for all people, then why are Christians not boldly proclaiming it?

There are numerous reasons for this disengagement with gospel sharing. One of the most significant challenges confronting the practice of evangelism comes from an increasingly secularized postmodern society whose values and principles have found their way into the church. This secularization has been felt in the extensive lack of participation in religious activities that were once common practice in Western society. People have become less involved in church today because their time is being occupied

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993.), 89.

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Models of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 21.

by a myriad of worldly undertakings which leave no room for corporate worship or any other form of deeper engagement in Christian practices. Congregations have had great difficulty in looking for ways to offer the type of spiritual fulfillment that people in their communities are no longer seeking.<sup>3</sup> This dissonance has significantly contributed to the shortage of motivation and courage among believers in their evangelism efforts.

The existing postmodern framework has caused a rift between the secular and the sacred, paving the way for a perspective that considers religion to be merely supplementary to the immanent frame of time in which we live. This contemporary reality seeks to draw its own distinctive conclusions about what may be considered facts and values. Even though this broad cultural ideology does not reject the observance of any particular spiritual understanding, it does consider religious faith to be a private matter that can make no claim to ultimate truth.<sup>4</sup> Aside from the conviction that there is no such thing as universal truth, Western society discards any claims to real objective truth and deems any assertions of absolute certainty to be characterized by relativism. Consequently, the principle follows that what may be true for one individual depends on their particular situation and does not necessarily mean that it is true for everyone.

In addition to relativism is the adherence to the worldview known as pluralism which has become a primary characteristic within postmodern context. Pluralism celebrates a myriad of beliefs without acknowledging any officially approved pattern of behavior.<sup>5</sup> There are no specific guidelines or criteria for what may be acknowledged as a

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 27. Kindle.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

legitimate spiritual understanding only that there be plenty of room for any and every form of personal pious conviction. This has become a contemporary reality as religion has been isolated to a set of good causes and individual values instead of reliable facts that are universally applicable to all people. As a result, it has become more complicated and difficult for believers to connect with a growing population that is hostile to the Christian faith and intolerant towards any remaining evangelism efforts.

Not only has there been an increasing cultural stigma towards religious belief, but there is also disagreement among believers as to the methods deemed most appropriate for evangelistic encounters. Congregations have espoused a range of unique approaches for initiating gospel conversations, creating a plethora of debate as to the most reliable formula for connecting people to the gospel. Scot McKnight, the author of “The King Jesus Gospel,” explains that the problem extends beyond any particular method and is rooted in a misplaced motivation and desired outcome that has become the primary focus of evangelism. He says,

Most of evangelism today is obsessed with getting someone to make a decision: the apostles, however, were obsessed with making disciples...evangelism that focuses on decisions short circuits and - yes, the word is appropriate - aborts the design of the gospel, while evangelism that aims at disciples slows down to offer the full gospel of Jesus and the apostles.<sup>6</sup>

Christians have not been commissioned simply to have people give verbal assent to a set of biblical principles, but their purpose is to tell others about Jesus and lead them into becoming authentic followers of Christ. The church has allowed evangelism to be more about people making decisions and less about making disciples.

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<sup>6</sup> Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 18.

Disagreements are not merely limited to the motivation or particular methods being used in evangelism but they also involve the content of the gospel. Some have misunderstood or overemphasized portions of the gospel message for the sake of accommodating to contemporary culture which has led to the neglect of the authentic narrative of salvation that is found in the story of Jesus Christ. McKnight reveals,

Our biggest problem is that we have an entire culture shaped by a misunderstanding of the gospel. That so-called gospel is deconstructing the church.<sup>7</sup>

A major consequence of this muddled up gospel, in addition to the rapid secularization of modern society, is that many Christians within the local church do not feel capable of being able to present the story of God's redeeming love in a way that meaningfully connects with their listeners.

Unfortunately, Western Christians and congregations are not actively pursuing fresh ways to adapt evangelism strategies to relate to the shifting cultural needs, and consequently, many believers have stopped seeking opportunities in which to share the gospel altogether. In addition to a variety of external factors, including advancements in technology, social isolation, and the emphasis on individuality, the lack of gospel conversations being initiated by Christians today has become a prominent factor in the church's steep decline and overall reversal of the multiplication of new believers that was once characteristic of the early church and throughout much of Christian history. The discouraging reality is that local congregations are not being encouraged enough to talk about their faith and they have become complacent in the task of evangelism that has been given to every believer. Sadly, many contemporary Christians are unmotivated to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 27.

share the gospel and typically mortified at the thought of talking with anyone else about their faith.

### *Purpose Statement*

In order for local churches in Western contexts to have more conversations that are centered around the gospel, there must be a revival of motivation for wanting to have them and a greater confidence among believers in their ability to do so. The purpose of this project is to inspire and embolden Christian individuals to initiate consistent dialogue about the gospel through the training and practice of storytelling. Storytelling is an ancient practice that has been used throughout the history of humankind to impart valuable experiences, wisdom, and information in a way that deeply connects with one's audience. The research purpose of this project seeks to discover how equipping the local church to initiate gospel conversations through narrative might produce greater resonance among listeners as well as encourage believers in the task of evangelism. Therefore, this project will examine the effects upon the confidence and motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations by using storytelling as a model for evangelism. The intervention will test the value of implementing stories into everyday conversations that will lead to more meaningful dialogue about the gospel.

### *Rationale for the Project*

Human depravity is on public display wherever you look. Turn on the news and you will see it. Step outside the door of your home and it is there. It does not take long to perceive the evil that exists within society. There is no denying it or hiding from it, we

live in a broken and dying world and this is the result of sin. A rising majority of people are far from God and experience the effects of this separation from Him, resulting in turmoil and tragedies due to the evil that exists within the human heart. It is in the midst of this present darkness that God has placed His followers and commissioned them to be beacons of light as they share the good news of His saving grace.

The present reality of sin and death is not what God originally intended for His creation. Because of His immense love for us, He has intervened to provide an open door as a way out of this brokenness due to sin and back into a good and perfect relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is the good news for all who believe in Jesus, having accepted His forgiveness for their sins and made Him Lord of their lives. But it is also good news to a world that is helplessly spiraling away from God's goodness because it is the certainty of redemption and restoration that is possible for all people through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. Christians are needed, and commanded, to share the gospel and to help people throughout the world come to the knowledge and faith in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

The church has always had the responsibility of serving as a witness to God's goodness and the truth of the gospel in a world that is increasingly characterized by a variety of principles and perspectives. The evangelistic task for believers is simple, and yet has proven to be a growing challenge due to cultural shifts and secular values that have become subtly integrated within the church and have further altered the way Western society receives and processes information. Now, the contemporary task in the West is set within a highly secularized society that has turned away from the more traditional and widely accepted moral and religious values that were once standard for the

general population. This observable struggle is elevated by the believing community's growing tolerance and acceptance of similar ideologies and morals that accompany this present reality.

This postmodern cultural shift has demonstrated the embrace of pluralism as an ideology which seeks to acknowledge a plethora of beliefs and values without recognizing any particular set of them as customary for society.<sup>8</sup> A noticeable feature of the pluralistic context in which we live is that it chooses to value the multiplicity of opinions and ideals rather than hold onto a set of specific principles and claim them as the truth for everyone. This creates significant dissonance between the relatively common dogmas of the past and an ever-changing system of new beliefs and ideas. No longer is it socially acceptable to present one's own principled views as universally true. Lesslie Newbigin explains the reality of this postmodern context by stating, "One is free to promote it as personal belief, but to affirm it as fact is simply arrogance."<sup>9</sup>

This idea originates from the relativism that runs parallel to the celebrated pluralism that has become evident within postmodern society. Relativism is the perspective that truth is based on the views of the individual rather than on the idea that there is such a thing as universal truth. Instead, the attitude is such that what may be true for you, may not be true for me or anyone else. Truth becomes relative to the person that is claiming it as a reality. This has made it challenging for congregations to present the veracity of the gospel in a way that others will believe and accept it with certainty.

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<sup>8</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 10, Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 15.

Ever since the age of Enlightenment, the Western world has often used rationalistic propositions in order to connect people with the gospel. These traditional modes of evangelism relied heavily on making a series of abstract and logical statements in order to convince listeners of the rational truth of the gospel.<sup>10</sup> A few examples of such statements are: “Human beings are sinful,” “God is love,” and “Give your heart to Jesus.” Even though these gospel concepts are absolutely true, analytical affirmations like these no longer produce the type of resonance within the current climate of Western society.

A primary reason for the ineffectiveness of such propositional phrases for evangelism is due to the postmodern shift in preference styles for the majority of individuals in the West to oral ways of learning over more linear and logical forms.<sup>11</sup> Instead of learning that is accomplished by a more textual approach, such as reading, many people today would rather watch or listen to a story. This style of education is referred to as concrete-relational learning as opposed to abstract learning.<sup>12</sup> These communicative approaches to gaining knowledge are nothing new to the majority of the world’s populations who are accustomed to gathering information through nonliterate methods of interaction as opposed to more abstract literary means. Additionally, the communication of bare facts can become dry and lifeless. Standing on the receiving end of a firehose of data is never an enjoyable experience nor is it beneficial to listeners for retaining any significant knowledge of the information that is given.

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<sup>10</sup> Christine Dillon, *Telling The Gospel Through Story: Evangelism That Keeps Hearers Wanting More*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2012), 34. Kindle.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News about Jesus More Believable* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 175.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

People today can argue over specific details and data that are being claimed as the ultimate reality, which is why storytelling is such an inviting form of communication because it speaks to the mind and emotions of the listener rather than the analytical, and often argumentative style of an informative monologue.<sup>13</sup> Storytelling provides a much more animated form of communication that is full of life and imagination that invites listeners to participate instead of demanding adherence to an unyielding set of facts. By implementing the intentional use of narratives into conversations, listeners are indirectly stimulated to reach the desired conclusion on their own terms and in ways that are less likely to be interpreted as disrespectful or condescending.

Another benefit to using storytelling in evangelism is that it allows believers to speak naturally about the gospel in a way that does not feel like it is a rehearsed speech or a type of sales pitch. People are already being hounded on a daily basis by promoters who are seeking their business. As a result, styles of communication have been innately developed within many individuals to quickly close the opportunity for further discussion when they perceive that a product is being promoted. This can make it exceedingly difficult for believers to use propositions and intellectual statements to present the gospel. On the other hand, storytelling can provide a genuine account of God's love and faithfulness in ways that deeply connect to both the listener and the gospel presenter. This is also the primary way that the good news was shared by the early church as they simply explained the reality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection to others.

This project's purpose is to assist believers with a biblical and theological foundation for having the confidence and courage to initiate gospel conversations by

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<sup>13</sup> David Swarr, Ricky Gidoomal and Psalm Araujo, *Master Storyteller: God's Oral Communication in The Bible and Hebrew Tradition* (Richmond: The Center for Oral Scriptures, 2017), 69.

using storytelling. The emphasis upon having gospel conversations is intentional and vital to our evangelism efforts because many believers are hesitant to talk about Jesus out of a fear that they will be ignored or rejected. However, relating the stories of divine activity and personal transformation is a natural way to overcome the angst that is often accompanied by talking about spiritual matters. This is reasonably so because it is much easier to maintain an interactive dialogue when people do not feel threatened by the topic or when it is a subject that appears to be forced. Storytelling is an evangelistic method that can delicately introduce the gospel into a conversation as well as produce clarity and resonance among listeners.

It is also a good practice within the church to strive for having gospel conversations instead of measuring our efforts merely by the number of converts we have been able to make. As Sam Greer points out in his book, “The Gospel Conversational Church”,

Research from the North American Mission Board and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary suggests that one out of every ten gospel conversations result in a lost person being saved.<sup>14</sup>

This goes right along with the storytelling initiative that is conducive to evangelism because stories provide engaging and reproducible content. This is an important element to consider within the modern cultural framework because stories enable believers to naturally illuminate the good news of Jesus Christ and shift their focus and interaction into becoming a spiritually driven conversation.

In turn, this project will focus on providing a renewal of motivation and courage for believers to engage others with this good news and to help guide conversations into

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<sup>14</sup> Sam Greer, *The Gospel Conversational Church: Cultivating a Culture of Engaging in Gospel Conversations* (Bloomington: WestBow Press, 2019), 16.

more meaningful dialogue about the gospel as stories are being told. Although important biblical truth may be injected into the narratives, in order for believers to effectively engage others with the gospel, it is necessary to adjust our methods of communication to fit into a more concrete style of learning that has become the practice and preference of our listeners.

### *Research Questions*

Since the purpose of this project is to equip followers of Jesus Christ for evangelistic engagement within the postmodern society, this study will be guided by the following research questions: How does the practice of storytelling relate to the confidence of believers to initiate gospel conversations, and how does the practice of storytelling relate to the motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations? Both the motivation and confidence of believers will be evaluated as they engage in storytelling as a primary method for having gospel conversations.

### *Definitions*

The list of definitions below has been provided for clarity so that the reader may experience a greater understanding for the author's intentions with the use of each term.

- Evangelism – The work of the church that was commanded by Christ to plant seeds of the gospel by communicating the story of salvation that has been made possible by Jesus to the world, and by living as personal witnesses of the gospel so that others may come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
- The Gospel – The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who took on human flesh and became the ultimate sacrifice for humanity's sin by dying on the cross and being raised to new life, and of the invitation for salvation that has been made for all creation to participate in this new reality.
- Storytelling – The verbal communication of stories.
- Postmodernism – The present age that is marked by a suspicion of all claims to universal truth, in contrast to the modern era that was characterized by rationalism.<sup>15</sup>
- Pluralism – The belief that everyone is entitled to “have a faith of their own” and that all religions are to be accepted.<sup>16</sup>
- Relativism – The belief that truth is relative to the individual and the rejection of any type of universal truth.
- Orality – The reliance on spoken, rather than written, language for communication.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 27. Kindle.

<sup>16</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 27. Kindle.

<sup>17</sup> International Orality Network, *What is orality?*, accessed on 5/23/2023, <https://orality.net/about/what-is-orality/>.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Biblical and Theological Foundation

#### *Introduction*

In Romans 10:17, Paul emphasizes the necessity of verbal communication in sharing the gospel to others as he states, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Just before this statement, Paul belabors the point that without the testimony of Christ’s followers, people are unable to come to the knowledge of Jesus.

How then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?<sup>18</sup>

This passage illuminates the inherently oral nature of evangelism which requires believers to audibly communicate the good news of salvation because in order for people to authentically place their faith in Jesus they need to initially hear the gospel story. In addition to the verbal proclamation of the good news, Paul reveals that the story of salvation is rooted in the Word of God which is what ultimately informs the theology and practice of evangelism. It is the contention of this study that God’s Word continues to be the primary resource for addressing these issues as it provides the most accurate and comprehensive instruction for evangelism today.

One recognizable feature of this biblical model is the consistent implementation of storytelling that was used throughout scripture. This is made evident through the oral tradition of ancient Israel, but also as the primary means of the early church to communicate and connect listeners to the gospel narrative. The existence of storytelling is as old as the Bible itself and can be traced back to the beginning of time. It is a practice

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<sup>18</sup> Romans 10:14, NASB.

that has been universally applied within cultural traditions extending throughout the course of history. This type of verbal communication has been associated with the term orality which describes a reliance on spoken, rather than written, language for communication.<sup>19</sup> It has been used extensively in scripture not just to reveal God's character and eternal plan for His creation, but also as a valuable method for sharing the gospel and biblical principles.

The biblical record supports the idea that storytelling is a highly valuable practice to both motivate and embolden believers to initiate gospel conversations with others. There are numerous reasons for this assertion, but the fact is that people of any age, background, and education level can tell a story. Nearly every Christian can learn how to effectively share the stories of God and be able to communicate them with confidence. While it is true that not every believer has the capability to preach a sermon or explain some of the deeper doctrines of the faith, learning a story and being able to tell it in a simple way for others to easily understand is something that most people can do.<sup>20</sup>

Both the biblical narrative and the practice of orally communicating God's truth are foundational to the topic of evangelism. Therefore, this study is committed to assisting contemporary Christians with the motivation and confidence to actively engage in the task of evangelism by promoting a similar style of gospel sharing that has been applied throughout scripture. Not only does this tie into the evangelistic method of the early church and the oral tradition of the Old Testament, but it also builds onto the sweeping narrative that is found throughout the Bible. We will begin by considering God's Word as a

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<sup>19</sup> <https://orality.net/about/what-is-orality/> accessed on 5/23/2023.

<sup>20</sup> Johnny Norwood, *The Big Story: Bible Storying for Evangelism and Church Planting* (Individually Published, 2020), 6.

continuous story that is true for all creation. This will be followed by an exegetical analysis of both Old and New Testament passages where storytelling has been used as a means of communicating significant truth. Attention will also be given to several of the evangelistic efforts located within scripture and throughout church history that have modeled the use of storytelling as the primary method for sharing the gospel. Finally, the study will conclude with the exploration of some of scripture's motivating factors for believers to have gospel conversation with others.

### *The Grand Narrative*

Consisting of sixty-six books, the Bible was composed by a variety of divinely inspired authors at unique times in history. It includes ancient writings from both the Old and New Testaments and is the condensed record of God's oral communication that has been given from the beginning of creation.<sup>21</sup> As such, the enduring works and narratives located within scripture are not without contemporary significance because they are derived from the eternal vision of God and reveal the truth about His ultimate plan for the world. These biblical stories were formally canonized together to tell a sweeping narrative which features a common heritage that is fundamentally true for all humanity.<sup>22</sup>

The grand narrative of scripture began when God formed the cosmos, and He did so by speaking it into existence with words. "Let there be light," were the first verbal utterances recorded in scripture and they come from the Creator Himself. As God

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<sup>21</sup> David Swarr, Ricky Gidoomal and Psalm Araujo, *Master Storyteller: God's Oral Communication in The Bible and Hebrew Tradition* (Richmond: The Center for Oral Scriptures, 2017), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Goldsmith, *Storytelling: Sharing the Gospel with Passion and Power* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 38.

continued to create and shape the world, He gave life and purpose to everything else that exists simply by the sound of His voice. This not only reveals the power of God to construct the universe “ex nihilo” but also demonstrates that spoken words are a part of the very nature of the Godhead. His vocal commands brought about the creation of light, plants, animals, and everything that is involved within this vast universe was created simply by the words of His mouth. Retired missionary to Thailand and seminary professor, Alex Smith, echoes this verbal quality of God when he says,

The Bible is replete with multiple accounts of dialogues between God and men, and amongst humankind themselves. God primarily communicated orally. The Gospel was to be heralded in the entire world and proclaimed by word of mouth everywhere through the believers’ witness.<sup>23</sup>

The New Testament supports the idea that God primarily used oral means to communicate and identifies this verbal quality of the Creator as being intricately connected to the second person of the Trinity by describing Him as “The Word” in the gospel of John. Similar to the introduction found in the book of Genesis, John opens his gospel with the phrase, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”<sup>24</sup> Here, the gospel writer emphasizes the eternal presence of the Word within the Godhead and His comprehensive involvement in all of creation as everything has been made by Him and through Him. Although John uses the Greek term *logos* in reference to the Word, being raised with the knowledge of the Old Testament, his insight into this theological claim would have been greatly influenced by the Hebrew scriptures. Consequently, he is likely envisioning the Hebrew word, *davar*, which

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<sup>23</sup> Alex G. Smith, *Communication and Continuity Through Oral Transmission*. Communicating Christ through Story and Song: Orality in Buddhist Contexts (Pasadena: William Carey, 2013), 24. Ebook.

<sup>24</sup> John 1:1, NIV.

contains a much deeper significance than the koine Greek or even the English description of a “word.”<sup>25</sup>

The Hebrew term, *davar*, has been consistently used throughout the Old Testament and was a word filled with significance for the people of Israel. It can refer to “a word, utterance, prophetic message, purpose, cause, power, matter, an object or even a text. It can be written, spoken, visual or experienced.”<sup>26</sup> John’s description of this Word seeks to connect his readers to a much deeper truth as it signifies both the person of Jesus Christ and His power as creator and communicator. The “Word” that is declared to have existed in the beginning represents the unending existence of God’s Son who has forever been with God and through whom all things have been made. John introduces his gospel with the eternal presence and inventive activity of the Word to invite readers into a deeper understanding of Christ’s embodiment of both divine and human nature as well as the grand narrative that involves all of creation. The “Word” is applied by the gospel writer as a primer to speak about the greatest story ever told, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup>

The sixteenth century reformer, Martin Luther, described the Bible as “the cradle which holds the Christ.” This statement reveals that God’s Word contains the true story of the world’s savior; however, scripture does more than just include the account of the Messiah’s journey on this earth, it reveals that the Son of God is the primary subject and focus of the entire biblical narrative. It is through Him that the Bible is seen for what it

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<sup>25</sup> Swarr et al. *Master Storyteller*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

truly is, the sweeping narrative of divine redemption that has been made available for all humanity. This gospel is ultimately one unbroken story that flows from the beginning of time and into the final consummation of the Creator's supreme purpose. For this reason, the biblical narrative is not just the simple passing down of historical events or the relation of information pertinent to human life, but it is God's Word which reveals the ultimate truth about who we are and our purpose for existence as it narrates the continuous story of God's cosmic plan and how we are invited to participate in it.

The Bible has more than just a communicative quality to it as it chronicles the beginning and ending of life on this earth; it also actively calls humanity into a relationship with the living God. It is the divinely inspired Word of God that is "alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."<sup>28</sup> Rather than merely being a collection of ancient stories that run together to form a grand narrative, scripture is the primary means by which the Creator continues to speak and reveal Himself to His creation. Theologian and renowned missionary to India, Lesslie Newbigin recognizes that the Bible itself contains "an invitation for all of creation to believe in and respond in obedience to the reality of God's kingdom."<sup>29</sup> It is within this timeless text that God bids humanity to enter into His kingdom narrative as He communicates His perfect will through the stories that are found in His Holy Word.

The Bible is unlike any other form of communication because it presents an extensive account of human existence illuminating everything from the beginning of

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<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 4:12, NIV.

<sup>29</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 65. Kindle.

creation to the final redemption and renewal that will ultimately take place according to God's masterful plan. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible itself is a grand narrative that tells the complete story of creation, human depravity, the character of God and His love, salvation in Christ, and the anticipation and expectancy of His eternal kingdom. That master story is continuing to unfold all around us and is being played out in our daily lives; however, it is often overlooked as the grand narrative that includes every human being.

While the biblical text is considered by many to be a positive resource for the discovery of wisdom, inspiration for moral purity, or even deeper spiritual truth, it is seldom recognized as the historical narrative that is fundamentally connected to all human life. The sequestering away of scripture's comprehensive story to the mere symbolic expression of ethical principles has become detrimental to an authentic ontological understanding of human identity and purpose. A primary consequence of this disconnection to scripture's grand narrative is a host of false ideologies and values that can be seen today. Newbiggin observes that within contemporary society, the biblical story is rejected as an authentic narrative of existence and ultimately placed within a category similar to that fables and fairy tales which some people may choose to believe as true and others may reject their credibility. He asserts that two distinct stories about human existence are constantly placed in competition with each other, the invention of evolutionary theory and the story that is embedded in scripture. Newbiggin explains,

These are two different and incompatible stories. One is taught as fact; the other — if it is taught at all — is taught as a symbolic way of expressing certain values in which some people, but not all, believe. The first is taught as what we know; the second as what some people believe.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 28. Kindle.

The modern mind is determined to rationalize and explain every aspect of human existence so that it favors a fabricated human narrative over the authentic story that is found in God's Word. Scripture is no longer considered to be the source of intrinsic knowledge about life but is continuously being pushed further into the realm of personal belief and deemed highly insignificant to an increasingly secular society. Newbigin acknowledges the need for and the possibility of a "dialogue" between the Christian story and other stories, but he rightly perceives that this calls for a healthy and spirited participation by Christians in their tradition, with confidence and commitment, in both thought and practice.<sup>31</sup> It is critical for believers to understand that scripture's metanarrative is not only valid for their own lives, but that it contains the story that is universally true for all people. The Christian community subsequently ought to discover ways in which to communicate this grand narrative so that others may experience a deep connection to it and begin to embrace it as their own story as well. It is the opinion of this author that oral forms of communication may be the most effective way to share the gospel by connecting others to this biblical narrative of human existence.

### *Stories Communicate Corporate Identity*

Orality is a primary characteristic of the Creator, and as image bearers of the eternal Word of God, humanity has been created to be innately oral as well. Long before people were introduced to literary techniques, verbal communication was the primary means of human interaction.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, stories have always been and continue to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>32</sup> Grant Lovejoy, *That All May Hear* (Nashville: International Mission Board, 2010), 2. PDF.

be a significant part of human life.<sup>33</sup> At an early age, children are told stories to help them understand basic concepts about life which eventually enable them to discover who they are and their purpose in the world. They are taught fundamental principles through tales that emphasize truth and morality, and they are raised with stories about family, religion, and purpose that become integrally central to their lives.<sup>34</sup>

The foundational characteristic of sharing stories and passing down historical legacies from generation to generation resides in the heart of human culture extending back to the beginning of creation. Pastor and professor of homiletics, David Buttrick, compares the telling of these early childhood stories and the communication of fundamental values through narrative to the assembling of Israel's story in scripture:

Notice that these early narratives are not unlike the assembling of Israel's story in scripture - tales of the patriarchs, place-name stories, an exodus narrative, and finally a preface added including the story of creation and the first human beings.<sup>35</sup>

Sharing past experiences and cultural history to pass along faith and identity was a primary feature of the Hebrew people. The structure of an oral tradition is visible within the historical narrative of scripture as the ancient Israelites communicated the history of creation, their inception as a nation, God's deliverance, and His promises to them by chronicling the events that have taken place.

Throughout the Old Testament, it is evident that the story form was the primary method of communication as it formed the basis for Israel's theology and culture. For

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<sup>33</sup> Swarr et al., 4.

<sup>34</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletics: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 9.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

centuries, they did not write anything down but relied solely on verbal communication to embed the same cultural principles and values to their children. The Hebrew people embraced their rich heritage and placed significant value on passing along their communal story to the following generations because they found their distinctiveness as a nation and God's purpose for their lives in the stories they shared. One of the most well-known theologians of the modern era, N.T. Wright, provides additional insight into this approach as he explicates that the theology and history of Israel were expressed in terms of explicit story coming from within the oral tradition.<sup>36</sup> Included in the numerous reasons for the use of stories as a communal practice is the fact that they used stories to share their corporate history and establish a deep connection with one another through their mutual experiences. Wright says,

For most Jews, certainly in the first century, the story-form was the natural and indeed inevitable way in which their worldview would find expression, whether in telling the stories of YHWH'S mighty deeds in the past on behalf of his people, of creating new stories which would function to stir the faithful up in the present to continue in patience and obedience, or in looking forward to the mighty deed that was still to come which would crown all the others and bring Israel true and lasting liberation once and for all.<sup>37</sup>

Human identity is fundamentally being shaped by and positioned within a story. Although each person has their own unique story to live and tell, every human being is also deeply connected to a much larger story that stretches back to beginning of creation.<sup>38</sup> Once an individual is born into this ongoing narrative, they become a major part of it as they live and grow. By the stories that are being shared around them, people

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<sup>36</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1* (London: Fortress Press, 1992), 77. Kindle.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> David Buttrick, 11.

discover who they are and their purpose for existence; however, there is also the possibility that they are presented with a false narrative that will lead them away from fulfilling their purpose that is found within God's big story. This is made evident by the plethora of deceptive ideologies and religions that have caused men and women to reject or be completely oblivious to the biblical truth. The existence of these counterfeit stories makes it all the more imperative for Christians to share the reality of this grand narrative of which every human being is a part.

### *The Shema – Deuteronomy 6*

In the case of corporate identification, individuals are brought together through the communication of a common history or a collective narrative. A perceptive look into Israel's oral tradition will show how the nation was strengthened by the communication of a shared story. The Passover is one such story that the Hebrew people have communicated to future generations for centuries to impart a shared identity through the retelling of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and their journey into the Promised Land. The annual celebration of this historical event became the most important occasion among the Israelite people as it preserved their past and reinforced their unique cultural rituals and values. The Shema of Deuteronomy 6 serves as a primary example of this oral tradition because it is here where Moses emphasized the value of hearing the stories of God and passing them along to future generations in order to communicate a common history and a shared identity as the people of God.

The Hebrew word for “Shema” literally means to “hear” or “listen”<sup>39</sup> and sets the tone for Moses’ instructions to the increasing nation of Israelites. As they prepared to enter into the Promised Land, Moses established the significance of storytelling as positive reinforcement to what God has already done and who they are to be as His people. Here, they are commissioned to constantly talk about the commandments of God, to impress them upon their children, and to always remember what God has done for them as a people. In this declaration, Moses conveyed the importance of listening to the story of their redemption as a nation and to always live their lives in response to the deliverance that they experienced as a community. The Shema served as a charge for future generations to remain obedient to God and to help solidify their legacy as the people of God.

*Wisdom Literature – Psalm 105-106*

Throughout their rich heritage, the leaders of Israel continued to use the power of story to bolster their identity as the people of God. In addition to the Deuteronomic call of Moses, the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament provides substantial evidence of an oral tradition that existed within the Hebrew nation. It is important to keep in mind that there is a vibrant historical background that was taking place as these songs and proverbs were being written. The content of these writings is connected to the context and ongoing narrative that is happening within the lives of the authors. For example, many of the psalms were written by during the life of David, so a deeper look into the

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<sup>39</sup> Francis Brown, et. al. *The Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 8085

books of 1 and 2 Samuel will richly flavor the interpretation of these descriptive songs that have a storied background.<sup>40</sup> The sweeping narrative that is located behind the text is what accurately informs the reader of the writer's imagery and purpose. This proves the point that every form of literature (and the life of every individual for that matter) is being written within the context of a much larger story.

In some cases, the writings themselves capture the essence of an oral tradition as they tell the story in a way that would have been verbally communicated. Psalms 105 and 106 are two instances where Israel's salvation history was shared in order to keep the story of God's covenant alive within the hearts and minds of the people. These songs were customarily sung within the community as a way to tell the story of God's faithfulness and instill within one another their collective identity as the people of God. While both chapters communicate the events of Israel's captivity and exodus from Egypt, as well as their ensuing wanderings in the wilderness, each passage features a distinct aspect of the same stories to elicit a different response.

Psalm 105 details the narrative of God's provision and deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt in order to communicate the faithfulness of God and incite future generations to remember everything that the Lord has done for them. Psalm 106 also describes the story of Israel's captivity and exodus from Egypt; however, this passage emphasizes their corporate failures and disobedience as a warning of divine judgment and the need for a renewed commitment to God. Both chapters empower the use of a shared story to remember what the Lord has done and encourage faithful obedience. These are

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<sup>40</sup> Dillon, 193.

just two examples of the vibrant oral tradition that had become customary within ancient Israel to help illuminate their corporate identity as the people of God.

*Return from Exile – Nehemiah 9*

After many years of captivity and oppression by foreign nations, the return of the Israelites to their homeland was also accompanied by the retelling of their story as a nation that had been preserved for many generations throughout the exile. An essential piece to reciting their national history included lists of genealogies to fully capture the identity of this remnant of people. While lists of names in the Bible are not typically appreciated or understood as much when they are read today, within the oral tradition, and especially coming out of exile, genealogies provided this remnant of Israelites with stability, purpose, and a renewed sense of their distinctiveness as the people of God. This is because they thought deeply about themselves and their relationship with the Creator. They placed significant value on learning the stories from God's activity within their national history and recognized a connection to the larger narrative that was being communicated by their ancestors.

In Nehemiah 9, the people of Israel gathered together once again to tell their story of God's presence and the lasting covenant that He had made with them. As a collective body, they shared a summary of their history beginning with God's creation of the universe and traced through His choosing of Abram and His persistent faithfulness to the covenant that He had made with the nation of Israel. This was a significant moment for the Hebrew people as they admitted their failures and remembered who they were called to be from the stories that they shared. Through the retelling of these historical narratives

and the oration of their genealogies, the Jews were reminded of their original identity and purpose as the people of God.

### *Jesus and His Disciples*

Just as the Israelites imparted important beliefs and a corporate distinctiveness by reciting their mutual history, Jesus also communicated within the context of the Hebrew people. He frequently referred to stories, people, and places that could be traced throughout Israel's history in order to relate to His Jewish followers, but also to demonstrate the reality of a much larger divine metanarrative that was rooted within the story of God's people. At the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."<sup>41</sup> Here, Jesus testified to the arrival and fulfillment of God's ancient promises that can be found throughout Israel's history; however, the coming of His kingdom is news that not only affects the Jewish people, but extends to every human being. The pronouncement of this event revealed how God's kingdom essentially encompasses all of His creation within this grand narrative.

Jesus' disciples were also innately embedded within Jewish history, and they recognized the value of building onto this storytelling initiative that had been so prevalent within Israel's oral tradition and taught by Jesus Himself. The sermons of Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul in the book of Acts reveal the early church's origins in the story of God's people located within the Old Testament. In each one of these public proclamations, the historical narrative of the Hebrews was acknowledged as the primary context of the

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<sup>41</sup> Mark 1:15, NASB.

Savior's arrival. A major reason why they communicated some of Israel's most well-known stories was not just to embrace their cherished heritage, but because the gospel itself is uniquely rooted in the story of God's chosen people. These first century Christ followers shared the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as it had been prophesied about throughout Jewish history and provided detailed evidence pointing to Jesus as the anticipated Messiah. Essentially, they established a connection to the promise of salvation that was made many years earlier and proclaimed the good news that this monumental event had indeed occurred.

### *The Church - A Gospel Centric Community*

Individual inclusion within the Christian community is formed on the basis of claiming the gospel as a story of their own. As a body of believers in Jesus Christ, the church consists of people who have embraced the truth of this grand narrative and have accepted the good news of God's forgiveness and love for their lives. A primary role, then, for those who have accepted the gospel is to invite others to live and grow into the reality of Christ's atoning sacrifice that has been made for all people by telling the sweeping narrative that is found throughout scripture. Wright agrees,

Indeed, it might appear that the retelling of the story of the previous acts, as part of the required improvisation, is a necessary part of the task all through. The Israelites retold the story of creation and fall. Jesus retold, in parable and symbol, the story of Israel. The evangelists retold, in complex and multifaceted ways, the story of Jesus. This may suggest, from a new angle, that the task of history, including historical theology and theological history, is itself mandated upon the followers of Jesus from within the biblical story itself.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 142. Kindle.

The importance of establishing a basic connection to biblical history cannot be overemphasized because if the church becomes disoriented from this story, then it has lost its essential purpose of existence and true identity.<sup>43</sup> When this happens, congregations no longer understand the specific meanings and implications that are associated with being the people of God and end up turning the gospel into some type of personal fulfillment instead of the good news that it is.

This is just the beginning of a proper interpretation of the gospel that is easily overlooked by the existing treatment of the salvation story. In contemporary society, the gospel has been thought more of as some good religious advice as opposed to the good news of an event by which everything has changed. Wright explains that simply describing the story of Jesus as a good suggestion for spiritual fulfillment misses the point because it is more than just a new way of thinking, but it is the news of an actual event with which life as we used to know it is completely different. Wright says,

The good news brought by Paul (and before him, by Jesus) was not about an option you might wish to take up. It wasn't a piece of advice about something you might or might not wish to do. It was news. They claimed it was good news.<sup>44</sup>

At its core, the gospel message is a true story that is rooted within the historical narrative of scripture and is the proclamation of a new reality that has completely changed the world and the course of human life. Wright continues,

When Paul told people his good news, he didn't mean for them to say, "Well, that's interesting. I'll see if that's going to suit me or not." He wasn't inviting them to try on a new way of thinking or living that would enable them to live differently or think differently. He was telling them that something had happened which had changed the world, that the world was now a different place, and that

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<sup>43</sup> David Buttrick, 10.

<sup>44</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is Good News and What Makes It Good* (New York: Harper One, 2017), 19. Kindle.

he was summoning them to be part of that new, different reality. He was telling them about an event that would cause them to adjust their entire lives in order to come into line with the way things now were.<sup>45</sup>

One of the difficulties associated within postmodern society is that it is characterized by the ideological concept of relativism which rejects any claims to universal truth or even authentic historical narratives. This promotes the belief that truth, or any type of reality for that matter, is ultimately based upon one's particular situation and can be different for everyone else depending upon their personal experiences. This line of thinking contends that everything is relative to the individual so that people can have their own "truths" while eliminating the idea that there is any form of ultimate reality. Regardless of the faulty contemporary belief systems, God's Word contains the true story of the world and the good news of Christ's coming to save the world from the punishment of sin.

Belonging to and consistently affirming this corporate story is an important factor in the health and growth of the congregation because it is what unites people together under the same biblical principles and enables them to become the hands and feet of Jesus. This creates a bond that is stronger than any other corporate group because it involves the sweeping narrative of existence but also because it is being held together by the power of the Holy Spirit. Even though these congregations are joined together under the banner of the overarching gospel narrative, it is worthwhile to mention that there are individual groups within this broader Christian context that have been created by their own distinct stories. Today, there are a multitude of these subgroups that have been

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 20.

formed on the basis of a shared language, culture, and a plethora of other contributing factors.

The Black church is a unique example of a community that is not only shaped by a common Christian heritage but is consistently building upon their corporate identity that is found within the oral tradition of African culture. Their distinctiveness as a people group is being communicated consistently through the use of storytelling in a variety of oral forms of expression including song, dance, and verbal proclamation. Robert Smith Jr. in his book, “Doctrine that Dances”, describes how there are moments within the African American church that worshippers will say things like “Paint the picture, doc,” in response to preaching where stories are being used to draw listeners in.<sup>46</sup> Sometimes these illustrations are employed to communicate their corporate identity and establish a sense of belonging, and other times they are used to describe a significant truth as in the form that will be introduced in the next section.

### *Stories Communicate Deeper Truth*

In addition to the practical preservation of a national heritage, another common application of storytelling is through the use of parables, which are fictional stories that contain a deeper truth. Parables were employed throughout scripture to help illustrate important principles and values so that the minds of the listeners could connect with a particular subject that was being communicated indirectly. It is to this point that Christine Dillon, the author of “Telling the Gospel through Story,” asserts how “stories are

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Smith Jr., *Doctrine That Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2008), 30.

excellent vehicles for facts.”<sup>47</sup> These facts may be described in the form of an historical narrative or told as an allegory to connect the listener with a previously unperceived reality. Wright broadens the perspective that metaphors can be used to implicitly speak the truth in ways that are not initially apparent and can prevent the speaker from coming across as too blunt or harsh in the message that is desired to be received. Wright says,

The parable hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favour which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden away for safety.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, the power of story provides clearance into the heart of the listener in ways that would otherwise be inaccessible simply by the colorless communication of information alone.

The Old Testament narrative of David’s immorality which is brought to light by the prophet Nathan is a primary example of the way parables may be used to identify a significant truth, and in this case, expose sin. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan provides the king with a tale about a man who had many sheep but favored the one sheep that his neighbor had, and because he coveted the other man’s sheep so badly even though he had many others, he killed the man and took his sheep. It is with the words of this story that the king’s anger began to boil at the injustice that he had just heard and claimed that the corrupt man ought to be killed. Here, the prophet proceeds to connect the king’s own evil doings with the one in the story to cleverly reveal the error of his ways. It is with this carefully crafted story that the prophet wisely describes the king’s sin by providing him

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<sup>47</sup> Dillon, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 40.

with the opportunity to agree that actions like the ones in the parable are unacceptable and that these atrocities were actually his own.

Storytelling was also a primary way that Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God. Whether He was given a controversial question by the Pharisees or had an opportunity to teach His disciples an important truth, Jesus often used narratives to relate to people on a deeper level. Dillon explains,

Jesus' basic verbal teaching method was storytelling—so much so that the word “parable” has come to be associated strongly with Jesus. For him, not using a story was the exception. Jesus offers stories in situations where we might be tempted to jump to abstract teaching.<sup>49</sup>

The Gospels record that Jesus told over forty-six different parables<sup>50</sup>, but that number is likely to be much higher because in Mark 4:33-34 it says, “With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.”<sup>51</sup>

Using parables as His primary method of communication helped provide Jesus' listeners with the space to actively relate to the stories that were being told. This is because Jesus was highly personable and often spoke in ways that brought in various themes and objects that would have been familiar to His audience.<sup>52</sup> By doing so, Jesus afforded them the opportunity to discover and reach the desired conclusion on their own terms without necessarily forcing them to understand. As these heavenly truths were

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<sup>49</sup> Dillon, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Swarr et al., 66.

<sup>51</sup> Mark 4:33-34, NASB.

<sup>52</sup> Lovejoy, 1.

communicated through parables, hearers would be able to enter into the story and retain what they had heard by resonating with the characters and descriptions that were told. They were able to come to a better understanding and a deeper connection to the divine truth that Jesus conveyed because of these stories. This is primarily the case because illustrations and metaphors creatively enter into the imagination of the listener and help make truth claims easier to understand.<sup>53</sup> Through His consistent use of stories in His teaching, Jesus presented the deeper truth of the gospel and the Kingdom of God by connecting to the minds and imaginations of His listeners.

### *Stories Communicate with Resonance*

Storytelling is a highly productive form of communication that has been used throughout scripture to establish a corporate identity as well as to indirectly relay important values and beliefs. Essentially, a large portion of the biblical text is rooted in narrative in order to connect future generations to their identity as the people of Israel, but also because the majority of their community were illiterate and preferred the spoken word.<sup>54</sup> They could not read or write for themselves, so they used stories in order to better transfer the information, practices, and virtues that they wanted to share. It is through their communication of divine activity that people centuries later would continue to be able to grow in the knowledge about God and His promises to them. The enduring legacy of these ancient narratives as they are recorded in scripture is an indication of the well-founded oral tradition that has been made evident throughout Israel's history.

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<sup>53</sup> Chan, 120.

<sup>54</sup> Lovejoy, 3.

Even though orality has been an ancient approach to learning and instruction, it continues to prove its relevance within a postmodern context as stories assist in the discovery of self-understanding and a greater awareness of purpose. While many people today are highly literate and have grown accustomed to textual instruction through abstract concepts, the majority of the world prefers oral learning.<sup>55</sup> The emphasis on storytelling across the globe has been a primary method of communication that stretches back to the beginning of time; however, it has only recently begun to take precedence within Western society through the inception of postmodernity. Orality had previously taken a back seat to the rationalistic thinking that was highlighted during the era of the Enlightenment. Now, with the shift to relativism, people are less inclined to depend on intellectual reason to reach a common understanding and more reliant on personal experiences to justify their own conclusions. Thus, stories have been given more attention in postmodernity because they communicate the authority of experience over reason.

Due to the increasing speed of society, the busyness of life threatens to diminish the existence of fruitful human interaction. Many people feel as if they do not have the time that is necessary to fully engage in deeper conversations or to even give much thought to matters of spiritual significance.<sup>56</sup> However, the attention span of many people today is still being captured through the telling of stories. Even those who know how to read and write are fascinated by stories and “gravitate toward oral communication whenever possible.”<sup>57</sup> The rapid advancements in modern technology have greatly

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<sup>55</sup> Swarr et. al., xvii.

<sup>56</sup> Dillon, 54.

<sup>57</sup> Lovejoy, 2.

contributed to this affinity for verbally presented methods of communication. A modern example of this is the recording of books for listeners who prefer to listen to someone else tell a story rather than read the words for themselves. While this is merely a single illustration, there are many different ways that oral forms of learning are being used in the world today, including movies, music, poetry, and dramas. These contemporary methods have not only made information more accessible but have allowed people to experience a deeper connection to the world around them, and even the gospel.

A primary reason that many people resonate with the oral transmission of information is because that is how they most naturally communicate with others. Author and International Missions Board missionary and executive, Avery Willis, concludes,

God has wired us for stories. We like stories. We remember stories. They penetrate beyond our heads and get down into our hearts.<sup>58</sup>

Stories are not only used by those who come from oral traditions or those who do not know how to read or write, but they are practical forms of communication that relate to people on every level of education, literacy, and socio-economic class.<sup>59</sup> Storytelling is a relaxed and informal method of human interaction that most people enjoy because it is an effective way to establish a connection with others. In everyday conversations, people like to share stories with one another for a variety of reasons. Some people simply want to recount events that have impacted their lives, others tell stories in order to gain approval or acceptance, and there are those who use metaphors to emphasize a deeper truth or meaning. The fact is that human beings are inherently oral communicators and

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<sup>58</sup> Dillon, 186.

<sup>59</sup> J.O. Terry, *Basic Bible Storying: Preparing and Presenting Stories for Evangelism, Discipleship, Training, and Ministry* (Fort Worth: Church Starting Network, 2008), 10. Kindle.

learners who most naturally gain information or pass it along through visual, aural, or sensory means.

While stories are likely to produce resonance among listeners, something that every human being is born with is a desire to connect with God. This is because humanity was created with the awareness that there is something greater, a presence, and a reality that extends far beyond the physical world. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has “set eternity in the human heart.” Consequently, it is not just that people may positively connect with gospel stories, but that the subject of those conversations, namely God, is at the heart of what they most truly desire. Doug Pagitt, the author of “Evangelism in the Inventive Age,” employs the illustration of a tuning fork to explain how humanity was created with a God-given frequency that finds its fulfillment in the message of the gospel. Pagitt explains,

There is a God vibration that runs through everything God created. It is this vibration that runs throughout God’s story. Evangelism in the Inventive Age demands that we deliver the good news of God by finding the resonance between God’s story and the story playing out in each of us. This is what the first evangelists did when they wrote their Gospel proclamations. It’s what we are called to do today.<sup>60</sup>

By using stories in gospel conversations, believers may more fully connect with the preferred oral communication of their listeners, but more importantly, they may tap into the existential longing that resides within every human being for a relationship with the Creator.

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<sup>60</sup> Doug Pagitt, *Evangelism in the Inventive Age* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 17.

*Stories Communicate the Gospel*

Due to the understanding that the majority of the world connects more deeply with oral forms of communication, it is reasonable to consider the use of storytelling as a primary means to share the gospel with others. Still, some of the more familiar evangelistic methods within the church have typically focused on making rational statements to provide intellectual assent to the gospel message. Sam Chan claims that many of these traditional gospel presentations risk offering Jesus as a propositional fact to acknowledge instead of simply viewing Him as a real person within a true story.<sup>61</sup> These models have often given off the impression that salvation in Jesus is experienced by adhering to a set of principles to follow and not ultimately about the acceptance of the good news that it is. McKnight contends,

When the plan [of Salvation] gets separated from the story, the plan almost always becomes abstract, propositional, logical, rational, and philosophical and, most importantly, de-storified and unbiblical. When we separate the Plan of Salvation from the story, we cut ourselves off the story that identifies us and tells our past and tells our future. We separate ourselves from Jesus and turn the Christian faith into a System of Salvation.<sup>62</sup>

Instead of communicating the gospel within the context of the biblical grand narrative, many well-intentioned evangelism efforts have been characterized by propositional phrases and intellectual statements that can be difficult to comprehend and do not fully explain what the good news really is.

In addition to the detachment that contemporary society may experience when confronted with a list of logical statements, there is also the danger of interpreting the

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<sup>61</sup> Chan, 98.

<sup>62</sup> McKnight, 62.

gospel to merely be a matter of individual redemption instead of the good news that is intricately connected to the grand narrative that is presented in scripture. McKnight continues,

We are tempted to turn the story of what God is doing in this world through Israel and Jesus Christ into a story about me and my own personal salvation. In other words, the plan has a way of cutting the story from a story about God and God's Messiah and God's people into a story about God and one person - me - and in this the story shifts from Christ and community to individualism. We need the latter without cutting off the former.<sup>63</sup>

Even though the gospel affects every human being on a personal level, it has always been and continues to be rooted within the context of God's Word and the story of His chosen people. Separating the story of salvation from scripture's grand narrative does not fully communicate the gospel and misleads people to believe in a set of concepts rather than the good news of an actual historical event by which the world is now a different place.

Although the practicality of involving stories to share the gospel seems to be a fairly novel concept, it has been the most common and natural form of Christian evangelism across the globe from the early church's inception. It is only in the modern West that this oral method of communication has been largely overlooked and replaced with more literate means.

Ironically, an estimated 90% of the world's Christian workers presenting the gospel use highly literate communication styles. They use the printed page or expositional, analytical and logical presentations of God's word. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for oral learners to hear and understand the message and communicate it to others.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>64</sup> International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. *Making Disciples of Oral Learners: To Proclaim His Story Where It Has Not Been Known Before*. (Lima: International Orality Network in cooperation with Elim Publishing, 2005), 3.

The fact is that the majority of the world's population prefer oral methods of learning, but many evangelists in the West are continuing to try and reach others with the gospel in ways that are not as easy to understand or connect with as stories can be. It is necessary, then, to continue moving modern evangelistic strategies towards a more storied approach of gospel sharing in order to produce greater resonance among listeners.

### *Sharing Bible Stories in Gospel Conversations*

One of the primary elements to maintaining a gospel-centered evangelistic approach is to implement stories that come directly from the Bible and are based on the same grand narrative that is being presented throughout the text. Since stories were extensively used throughout scripture and continue to be applied today, Christian efforts at leading the lost to Christ may be greatly enriched by using God's stories as a starting point for sharing the gospel with others. Dillon endorses the application of storytelling for evangelism by pointing out that scripture itself does not begin with an explanation of salvation or a series of challenging propositions, but that it is introduced with a story.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, it is a highly valuable practice to consider the grand narrative that flows throughout the Bible and seek to follow along in a similar storytelling pattern. This is not just because the biblical narrative presents a practical model for the church to look at, but because it is the set of lenses by which believers look through to view the world.<sup>66</sup>

As believers seek to share the good news of salvation with others, it is important to keep in mind that people from various cultures across the globe may experience

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<sup>65</sup> Dillon, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 6.

significant barriers to an authentic encounter with the gospel message if it does not entail the entire story from the beginning of creation. Instead of coming to a genuine understanding of Christ's atonement and what it means to accept God's free gift and follow Him, they may superficially accept the Christian faith as another spiritual belief that they have added on to their previously established religious narrative.<sup>67</sup> Since over half of the Bible was written in preparation for Jesus, evangelistic efforts explaining the gospel story would do well to "start with Genesis or Jesus will just become one among many gods."<sup>68</sup> For this reason, the importance of connecting others to the entire scope of this life changing reality cannot be overstated.

Even though the primary method of evangelism in the West has previously focused upon the intellectual understanding of the gospel, since the 1980s there has been an increase in the use of Bible stories as a teaching tool with adults.<sup>69</sup> In many ways, communicating these narratives make it possible for individuals to see themselves within the biblical story and allow them to experience a deeper connection to the gospel that may not be as easy to do through the use of propositional statements. Christian missionary and author, Martin Goldsmith affirms the opportunity for biblical stories to produce more resonance among listeners because they do not merely contain claims about how people are to live and what they ought to believe, but these biblical truths are embodied within the telling of real historical events as they are revealed within scripture. Goldsmith says,

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<sup>67</sup> Personal conversation with Joel Shumate, an evangelist to South America and Africa. 7.9.23.

<sup>68</sup> Dillon, 36.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 18.

Narrative theology is based on the fact that God reveals himself and his will in stories, not just stark doctrinal formulations. Our beliefs are based upon the narrative of scripture. This shift of emphasis from a more theoretical view of the Christian faith may open the door for the message of the Lord to become more relevant and attractive...our creeds only contain statements of fact, but the Bible's method of stating our faith is by telling the story of events where God has blessed his people.<sup>70</sup>

A deeper engagement with the biblical narrative will shape the way believers communicate the gospel to others by demonstrating that it involves the history and theology of Israel that is described in the Old Testament as well as God's initiation of His ultimate plan of restoration as it develops in the New Testament. In order to accurately apply God's Word as a model for evangelistic practice, it is imperative that contemporary conversations about the gospel recognize the comprehensive significance of these ancient stories as they relate to every human being.

A prominent feature that is evident throughout biblical history is that scripture itself was most often presented verbally to groups rather than read separately by individuals. This is due to the fact that many people in antiquity could not read for themselves or did not have access to the written word and had to have the Bible read to them out of necessity. Grant Lovejoy notes,

Both the Old and New Testaments indicate that it was typical for one person to read Scripture aloud to a group. Moses instructed the priests to read the law to all the people at the end of every seven years (Deut. 31:10-13; cf. Josh. 8:33-35). Ezra read the law to the assembled people of Israel (Neh. 8:1-3). Paul instructed that his letters be read among the churches. Several of his letters seem to have been dictated orally to a scribe. Thus, even the letters of the New Testament have more oral character than casual readers recognize.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Goldsmith, 33.

<sup>71</sup> Lovejoy, 3.

Scripture repeatedly reveals the presence of an oral environment and that listening to the spoken word was the preferred, and sometimes, even the instructed method for the communication of God's Word.

### *Gospel Sharing in Scripture*

Storytelling has been used extensively from the beginning of time to communicate corporate identification, important and fundamental principles, as well as the grand narrative of human existence in relatable and engaging ways. The gospel writers themselves were all storytellers as they communicated Jesus' life and ministry from their own perspectives; however, even before Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John penned their individual accounts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the gospel narrative had been verbally proclaimed from person to person for decades.<sup>72</sup> The awesome reality of this life changing event made it impossible for believers to stop talking about the stories of Jesus which led to the church's exponential growth as it is revealed in the book of Acts. As a result, the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life were preserved for many years through oral forms of communication until the gospel writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit to permanently record them on scrolls.

Oral communication has been used throughout scripture to connect people to the greater biblical narrative and lead them to experience the salvation of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus frequently instructs those who would become His followers to share stories about what He has done so that others may come to know Him and experience His goodness. Mark 5:1-20 contains Jesus' encounter with a demon possessed man who had

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<sup>72</sup> Avery Willis Jr. and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 35. Kindle.

been rejected by society and was living among the tombs. After Jesus sent the demons out of the man and into the pigs, the man expressed his desire to follow Jesus wherever He went. Interestingly enough, Jesus would not allow him to go with him; instead, He told him to go home and tell all of his friends about the amazing things that God had done for him and how He had compassion on him. Basically, Jesus told him to go and share the story of his personal encounter with the Lord.

Stephen Stringer, who is the author of “Storying Training for Trainers,” offers a promising evangelism strategy that seeks to promote the telling of Bible stories as well as the use of personal testimonies and biblical encounters with Christ to lead into gospel presentations. The most basic approach that he presents is built around this biblical account of a demon possessed man whose life had been dramatically changed by Jesus.<sup>73</sup> Stringer explains that this particular narrative provides an ideal illustration of the incredible transformation that has taken place in the life of every believer and that Jesus has given each of His followers the same command as He did to the formerly demon possessed man, to go and share the good news of what He has done. The S-T4T model reveals how this biblical narrative may be communicated in conjunction with one’s own personal testimony as a unique way to describe how the gospel has directly impacted one’s life while at the same time establish a connection between scripture’s grand narrative and the lives of others. While this is just one simple strategy of intentional evangelism, it is a powerful description of the gospel’s impact and Christ’s commission for all of His followers to go and tell the good news.

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<sup>73</sup> Steve Stringer, *S-T4T: Intentional Evangelism Utilizing Stories from God’s Word Resulting in Multiplying House Churches* (Monument: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 11.

*The Emmaus Road Encounter – Luke 24*

Throughout His life and ministry on this earth, Jesus told vibrant stories as a way to establish a connection with His listeners and provide them with an invitation to participate in His eternal kingdom.<sup>74</sup> His purpose in telling stories, then, was not merely for entertainment, but to radically change the worldview of His listeners.<sup>75</sup> After His death and resurrection, Christ’s mysterious encounter with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus is one example of how Jesus used stories located within Israel’s history to introduce His listeners to the reality of a much larger narrative. As loyal Jews, these disciples had grand expectations for the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah who would deliver them from their oppressors. However, the events of the previous couple of days had left these two followers grieving and confused because their hopeful hero had died. But as they walked along the road from Jerusalem and were discussing their shattered dreams, Jesus appeared to them disguised as a stranger. Eventually, He began to connect their experiences to the reality of a much bigger story, and so “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”<sup>76</sup>

Jesus engaged these two disciples in a conversation about the stories that they had been accustomed to hearing and shed light on His true identity as the promised Messiah. After they made it to the village, the two disciples invited Jesus into their home to share a meal together. As the Son of God, He naturally assumed the role of the host by blessing

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<sup>74</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 65.

<sup>75</sup> Jim Roché, *Biblical Storytelling Design*, Journal of Bible Storying, Issue 35 (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2022) 1.

<sup>76</sup> Luke 24:27, NIV.

the bread and breaking it for them, but just as soon as He did, the disciples recognized who He was and then He disappeared from their sight. Once they realized it was Jesus, they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”<sup>77</sup> It was in that moment that these two disciples realized how enthralled they were by the presence of the risen Lord and the stories that He shared with them. And as quickly as they could, they returned to the rest of the disciples to tell them about their encounter with Jesus and of the things that He had spoken to them. As a result of this interactive experience, Jesus made it simple for His followers to engage in gospel conversations with others by commissioning them to simply tell the story of the good news.

#### *Philip the Evangelist – Acts 8*

Additional evidence of storytelling being used to share the gospel is found in Acts 8 and Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Not only did Philip assist the intrigued royal servant into a deeper understanding of scripture but he established a connection between the Old Testament scriptures and the story of Jesus, namely, that Jesus was the sacrificial lamb that was being described by the prophet Isaiah. Michael Green, the author of “Evangelism in the Early Church,” makes the correlation that Philip’s knowledge of scripture allowed him to explain the passage with which the eunuch was struggling to understand while at the same time establishing a connection to the good news of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>77</sup> Luke 24:32, NIV.

Philip knew his scriptures and how to apply them to the gospel of Jesus. This he proceeded to do so effectively and with such directness that the man believed.<sup>78</sup>

The eunuch came to a genuine faith in Jesus Christ as a result of Philip's understanding of scripture's grand narrative and because he was able to explain, in simple terms, who Jesus was and why His life, death, and resurrection mattered to him as well as everyone else. Green comments,

I have no doubt that Luke intended the story of Philip to illustrate the value of this personal evangelism, and the need that those who practice it to have for humility and obedient trust in God, for tact and knowledge of the Scriptures, for directness in pointing to Jesus and for bringing the man to the point of decision.<sup>79</sup>

Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch is a testament to the concept of personal evangelism and the incredible value of recognizing how deeply connected the gospel is to the rest of scripture. Consequently, it also reveals the significance of using biblical stories to effectively assist in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Robert Coleman, the author of "The Master Plan of Evangelism," recognizes that in everything Jesus said and did "it was made abundantly clear that the word written in the Scriptures and the word spoken by Christ were not in contradiction, but rather complimented each other."<sup>80</sup> Jesus communicated the scriptures so powerfully and with such boldness that the disciples understood how important it was for them to learn those sacred stories by heart and use the Bible as their foundation for their gospel proclamations.

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 224.

<sup>79</sup> Green, 225.

<sup>80</sup> Coleman, 74.

*The Gospel According to the Scriptures - 1 Corinthians 15*

As mentioned above, the early church based the proclamation of the gospel within the context of scripture. The sermons of Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul as revealed in the book of Acts were all immersed in Israel's history as they brought together stories located within the Old Testament to explain the reality of the good news. One of the most succinct and earliest descriptions of the gospel as it relates to the grand narrative of scripture is found in 1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter, the Apostle Paul reminds believers of the gospel's connection to the entire biblical story, "that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures."<sup>81</sup> Preben Vang sees the repetition of the phrase "according to the scriptures" as the Apostle's way of highlighting the fact that Jesus' death, burial and resurrection occurred as a result of God's master plan.<sup>82</sup> Here, Paul draws attention to the gospel story being rooted in a biblical context and made evident by the experiences of eyewitnesses who have shared the story of their encounters with the risen Lord.<sup>83</sup> McKnight perceives this chapter as a crucial beginning point for a genuine understanding of the gospel because it recognizes that the good news about Jesus is intricately tied to the greater narrative of scripture that is revealed in Israel's story.

One of the biggest advantages of this one-of-a-kind definition of the gospel is that many scholars think it is also among the "oldest" set of lines in the entire New Testament. Scholars think this was the oral tradition about the gospel that every New Testament apostle received and then passed on. First Corinthians 15 is

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<sup>81</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. NIV.

<sup>82</sup> Preben Vang, *1 Corinthians*, Teach the Text Commentary Series, Ed. Mark L. Strauss (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 201.

<sup>83</sup> George A. Buttrick, Ed. *Corinthians*. The Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. 10 (New York: Abingdon, 1953), 215.

nothing less than a lifting up of the curtains in the earliest days of the church; it tells us what everyone believed and what everyone preached.<sup>84</sup>

This biblical text is yet another illustration of the early church's recognition of the gospel story as the climactic event of the grand narrative that is being presented in the Bible.

### *Gospel Storytelling in Church History: A Celtic Model*

In addition to the numerous biblical examples of stories being used to communicate the gospel, church history is replete with evangelism efforts being characterized by storytelling. While there are numerous Christian groups in various cultures that have implemented the use of oral forms for gospel sharing, the Celtic Christians were a highly intentional and influential group at communicating the good news as a story. George Hunter, who is the author of "The Celtic Way of Evangelism," explains that "the Celtic Christian movement was effective, in part, because its leaders took the pathos of the Celtic audience seriously."<sup>85</sup> They were intentional about building onto the imaginations of their listeners by sharing stories and metaphors that deeply resonated with them instead of initially seeking to reach them through a drier intellectual approach. The Celtic Christians spoke into the lives of others by placing significant value on narrative being the natural expression of communication. Hunter describes how they entertained the imaginations of their barbarian neighbors through storytelling and poetry, and through their intentional efforts to build onto the well-known stories of the various traditions they encountered, they were able to introduce them to the gospel in ways that

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<sup>84</sup> McKnight, 46.

<sup>85</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*. 10th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 50.

resonated deeply with their enculturated backgrounds.<sup>86</sup> Hunter reveals that Celtic monks and druids were highly invested in oral tradition and sharing wisdom through narrative,

Many of them became prodigious storytellers. They communicated much of the biblical message by telling its stories, and many of their more original stories, and the stories of the saints, were passed to many generations through their oral tradition.

Not only did the Celtic believers focus on storytelling, but they did so in a way that gained the trust and respect of their listeners who began to understand that the good news of Jesus Christ was a reality for them to accept. They communicated the gospel through stories as well as by the way they lived their lives.

Even though the Irish missionaries experienced great success in their evangelism efforts, many of them did not intentionally set out to be preachers and teachers. Jeanneite Angell explains how “the writings of these early saints show them as great poets and storytellers but not sermon writers.”<sup>87</sup> Instead they were motivated and determined to build ascetic communities which eventually became the primary vehicle for the spread of the gospel. As a monastic people, the Celts prioritized community and connectedness to one another which led to evangelism efforts being characterized by a gradual discovery of God and the gospel rather than a quick and immediate adherence to their religious beliefs.<sup>88</sup> They placed significant value on the concept of “belonging before believing” which greatly contributed to their success in sharing the good news with others because they did not require nonbelievers to completely identify with their Christian beliefs

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<sup>86</sup> Hunter III, 68.

<sup>87</sup> Jeanneite Angell, *Evangelism and Hospitality in the Celtic Church*. Liturgy, 9:2, 81-86, 1990. 84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04580639009409990>. accessed on 8.7.2023.

<sup>88</sup> Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven*, 239.

before allowing them to experience what it looks like to live among the body of Christ. By sharing stories that built onto imaginations and being an example of Christian love, many people from pagan religious backgrounds who were previously considered barbaric, came to accept the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and follow Him with their lives.

### *Motivation for Gospel Conversations*

There has been much discussion up to this point about the positive use of storytelling in evangelism efforts extending from the early church and into contemporary society. It is the hope of this study that believers will be able to more confidently initiate gospel conversations through oral forms of communication since it is the most natural way to share the good news and because it has been the overall primary method of Christian evangelism from the beginning. However, it is imperative that believers are not just given the tools to share the gospel without the motivation to do so. It is also vital that evangelism efforts extend from the heart and are not just a reaction to feelings of guilt or obligation to do so.<sup>89</sup> The following paragraphs contain a number of reasons taken from several biblical passages that explain the biblical inspiration that exists behind the desire to share the good news of Jesus with others. Although this is not an exhaustive list of motivating factors to arouse evangelistic zeal, the individual motives provided below offer enough reason on their own to encourage believers into greater aspirations for having gospel conversations with others.

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<sup>89</sup> Dillon, 134.

*Commanded by Christ – Acts 1, Matthew 28*

In Acts chapter 1, Jesus left His disciples with the charge to be His “witnesses, in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>90</sup> The book of Matthew also records Jesus’ last words of instruction just before His ascension into heaven as He delivers the Great Commission to His followers. Here, Jesus told them to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”<sup>91</sup> After the original disciples were given this mission, the Bible chronicles how the early church began to grow exponentially by the power of God and through the commitment of these believers to live out the evangelistic calling that they have been given. Michael Green comments,

One of the most striking features in evangelism in the early days was the people who engaged in it. Communicating the faith was not regarded as the preserve of the very zealous or of the officially designated evangelist. Evangelism was the prerogative and the duty of every church member. We have seen apostles and wandering prophets, nobles and paupers, intellectuals and fishermen all taking part enthusiastically in this the primary task committed by Christ in his church.<sup>92</sup>

It is also the responsibility of every believer today to engage in evangelism simply because it is commanded by Christ. As followers of Jesus, Christians have been given the task of sharing the gospel with others by the Lord Himself which ought to provide sufficient cause to do so. The early church grew significantly because believers committed themselves to faithfully live out the commands of Christ. In addition to their

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<sup>90</sup> Acts 1:8b NIV.

<sup>91</sup> Matthew 28:19-20, NIV.

<sup>92</sup> Green, 274.

desire for simple obedience to Christ's command, these early Christians were inspired to share the gospel with others because of several other motivating factors, including a deep reverence for Jesus and a desire to obediently follow Him.

*Fear of the Lord: 2 Cor. 5:11*

In 2 Corinthians 5, the Apostle Paul puts into words a number of reasons for believers to actively participate in their evangelistic calling. Initially, it was a decision to do so by His disciples out of a holy reverence for God. An accurate expression of this type of devotion is explained in verse 11 which says, "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience."<sup>93</sup> The fear of the Lord here is not so much about shaking in terror of divine wrath upon disobedience as it is the reverential awe and respect of God's holiness that recognizes His omnipotence and omniscience.<sup>94</sup> In his commentary on this letter, David Garland aptly states it this way,

(Paul) knows he is accountable to God and stands in reverential awe of God's final judgment. It is said that whatever one fears the most, that is what one will serve the most. Paul is steeped in the OT tradition that understands fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7), but he understands it to be the basis of faithful service as well. Paul's supreme awe of God motivates him to act as he does and prevents him from vainly trying to rely on his own meager resources.<sup>95</sup>

Paul claims that because believers maintain a holy reverence for God, they are to be committed to telling others about Him. This desire to "persuade men" about the good

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<sup>93</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:11, NIV.

<sup>94</sup> George A. Buttrick, *Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians*, 332.

<sup>95</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*. Christian Standard Commentary (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers), 2021. 297.

news of Jesus Christ is most appropriately displayed in a communal understanding of who God is and what He does.<sup>96</sup> As a result, the early church made it their goal to please the Lord with their lives and to tell others about Him because they recognized the universal impact that the salvation story has on the world. That because of Jesus' blood and righteousness, humanity can experience true reconciliation with Almighty God. Their love and dedication for God became a powerful testimony of the transformative work that had been accomplished in their own lives.

*Compelled by Christ's Love: 2 Cor. 5:14*

In addition to a love and reverence for God, Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 5:14 that incredible motivation to live out the evangelistic calling is because "Christ's love compels them" to do so. Garland reveals that the "love of Christ" here may imply: (a) Christ's love for Paul; (b) Paul's love for Christ; or (c) both Christ's love and Paul's love.<sup>97</sup> Although Paul's love for Christ is most definitely on display throughout his apostolic ministry, it is Christ's love for him that is the primary reference as Paul goes on to describe that Christ "died for all," and as a result of His love, believers are to no longer live for themselves but for Him. It is Paul's recognition of Jesus' love for him that motivates him to live for God and share the good news with others.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Judith A. Diehl, *2 Corinthians*. The Story of God Bible Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 203. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bayloru/detail.action?docID=6651587>.

<sup>97</sup> Garland, 307.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

Similarly, Christians understand that God's amazing love has been put on full display in the sacrifice of His one and only Son in order that humanity may be set free from sin. The reality of this life changing event has stirred up an awareness within the church of the Creator's undying love for all of His creation. It is the reality and acceptance of this unconditional love of God that inspires and "compels" believers to share that love with the rest of the world. The genuine experience of Christ's love transforms lives to become less focused on self and more intentionally driven into a deeper love for God and for others. Numerous illustrations of this selfless love being demonstrated by the church can be seen through evangelism efforts which seek to show and tell the story of Christ's love in a variety of ways. Ultimately, Jesus' love causes people who were once consumed by selfish desires to look out and see the world through the eyes of Christ because they have been transformed by His power and love for them.

*New Creation: 2 Cor. 5:17*

This spiritual transformation is another reason to be motivated to share the gospel with others. In verse 17, Paul reveals that "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old is gone, the new is here!"<sup>99</sup> When an individual places their faith in Jesus Christ, they are born again and begin to live as a new person. Garland states that the resurrection of Jesus gave humanity a fresh start and those who choose to live by trusting in Him are made into this new creation.<sup>100</sup> This transformation includes a monumental change within the hearts of individuals so that their lives are not focused on themselves

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<sup>99</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV.

<sup>100</sup> Garland, 310.

but are reoriented to live for God and His kingdom. The gospel of Jesus Christ also provides believers with a new perspective on who they are, what they are called to do, and how they see others. For Paul, his transformation took place while he was on his way to persecute believers and it was initiated with a period of blindness as he encountered Jesus on the way to Damascus. After he committed his life to Christ, Paul's sight was restored, and he was given a whole new perspective of the world and his purpose in it.<sup>101</sup>

Paul's transformative experience with Christ caused him to see people the way that God sees them which created an overwhelming desire to bring the good news to them.<sup>102</sup> As a new person, Paul began to love those around him and was motivated to tell them about Jesus because of his own experience of transformation. The personal testimony of how one has been made into a new creation in Christ can a powerful motivator for evangelism. This is because telling one's own story comes more naturally than trying to explain an event by which they are not deeply affected. People are typically able to share stories that have impacted their own lives and caused some type of fundamental change to them much more than impersonal narratives that have little significance to their lives. However, sharing gospel stories with others is not just another thing that Christians are supposed to do, but because they have been transformed by the love of Christ, evangelism becomes a fundamental feature of their new lives. Chan makes a pointed claim that being made into a new creation in Christ means that believers do not simply add on evangelism as another thing to do, but that Christians are to embody an

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<sup>101</sup> Acts 9.

<sup>102</sup> David C. George, *2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians*. Layman's Bible Book Commentary. Vol. 21 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 30.

evangelistic lifestyle that is characterized by sharing the gospel everywhere they go.<sup>103</sup> Thus, being made into a new creation by Christ necessarily involves the practice of everyday evangelism.

*Ambassadors for Christ: 2 Cor. 5:20*

Another primary motivator for believers to advance the gospel is because the church has been commissioned to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. However, many contemporary Christians do not feel that this type of “ministry” is their duty or that they have been called to share the gospel because that is the work of the pastor or evangelist. Yet, because of God’s great love and mercy for them, every believer has been given “the privilege and responsibility to share in this great divine enterprise and are to call others to be reconciled to God.”<sup>104</sup> The emphasis here is on what God has done for His creation in order to overcome their hostility towards Him.<sup>105</sup> Garland explains that this is totally the work of God and not something that humanity has done on their own.

It is important to recognize that sinful humans do not reconcile themselves to an angry God. Instead, a loving God has taken the initiative in reconciliation, and our reconciliation and being out right comes through Christ’s death and our being in Christ.<sup>106</sup>

As recipients of this divine grace, Christians everywhere, whether corporate or individual, are to reflect God’s love to the world around them and participate in this

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<sup>103</sup> Chan, 45.

<sup>104</sup> Garland, 323.

<sup>105</sup> George, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Garland, 324.

ministry by serving as Christ's representatives to a world in need of being reconciled to Him.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul explains that he and his colleagues have been sent out as these representatives, or ambassadors, of God in order to tell others about the divine settlement for sin debt that has been made possible through Jesus. Diehl provides clarity to Paul's description of being "ambassadors for Christ" when she notes,

Ambassadors are people sent from one country to another country as message--bearers from one leader to another leader of another country. This implies that, as God's representatives, Paul and his colleagues were in God's "authority and in his service," lending credence to Paul's words and actions. It is also a constant reminder of who is "King" and who is not; neither believers are God, nor are human rulers of the world. All believers are to be humble representatives of God on earth—to be God's hands and feet, to be God's heart and love, to be the blessing to other people that God has been to us.<sup>107</sup>

Paul saw himself, and his colleagues, as representatives of God to invite those who had been formerly enemies of God and "dead in their sin,"<sup>108</sup> to experience new life in Christ and enter into a restored relationship with the Creator. It is important to note here that being an ambassador of Christ indicates the ultimate authority by which the believer's purpose and message have been directed. The redeemed community has been commissioned and validated by a power that extends beyond any individual or flawed human organization but have been sent out under the authority of Almighty God. This ought to instill a sense of overwhelming confidence for believers to be able to accomplish the task they have been given because their instructions come from the Creator. Christians may also experience a deeper motivation to participate in the ministry of

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<sup>107</sup> Diehl, 209.

<sup>108</sup> Ephesians 2:1.

reconciliation because they are seen by others as representatives of Christ. The truth is that every believer has been commissioned to be an ambassador for Christ and His love to the world around them; however, they are not alone in this ministry because God has sent His Holy Spirit to be with them.

### *Holy Spirit Inspiration*

The final, and most important, motivation for Christians to participate in the task of evangelism comes from God Himself. It is only through His Holy Spirit living inside the lives of believers that the gospel can be proclaimed in authentic and powerful ways. The Holy Spirit supplies believers with the motivation to share and provides all of the resources that are needed to do so.<sup>109</sup> Not only does the Holy Spirit enable and inspire Christians to proclaim the story of Jesus but He also prompts them to engage in specific conversations that will lead into the gospel and even provides the words when they are uncertain about what to say. In Mark 13:11, Jesus encouraged His disciples to not worry about what to say when they are confronted with opposition, “but say whatever is given you at that time; for you are not the ones speaking, but it is the Holy Spirit.”<sup>110</sup> Knowing that the Holy Spirit continues to be with believers today just as He was with the early church is comforting and inspiring because God will provide everything that is needed to accomplish the task that He has given. If He has called His people to it, then He will see them through it.

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<sup>109</sup> Dillon, 83.

<sup>110</sup> Mark 13:11, NASB.

*Conclusion to Initiating Gospel Conversations:*

Christians have been given the privilege and responsibility of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. This gospel sharing necessarily involves the telling of the grand narrative of existence that is communicated throughout the Bible and reaches its climax in the story of the Son of God who lived as a human being, who died, and who rose again to new life in order that salvation may be available to all humanity. Although there are a variety of methods that could be used to explain the redemptive work of Christ, followers of Jesus may experience a greater confidence in their ability to share this divinely inspired message by focusing on telling stories of transformation and revealing the narrative of what God has accomplished throughout history. This is largely due to the biblical and theological foundation that has proven storytelling to be an historical practice that has been used from the beginning of time and continues to be the most conducive form of communication in postmodern society for evangelistic practice. As a result, Christians may be emboldened to participate in evangelism efforts by engaging in oral forms of communication that come most naturally to them and are easier to establish a connection with others.

In the midst of all of the discussion surrounding evangelism, it is imperative to not neglect the reality that this is a divine project that has been going on since the beginning of time and will continue until God's supreme purpose and plan have been fulfilled.<sup>111</sup> In the fullness of His grace, God has invited believers to participate in the task of sharing the good news with others so that more and more people will experience the salvation and freedom from sin that is only possible because of Jesus' ultimate

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<sup>111</sup> Coleman, 66.

sacrifice for sinners. Since this holy task has been given to imperfect and flawed human beings, evangelism efforts ought to be immersed in prayer by constantly seeking the Lord's will in conversing with others about the gospel. In order for Christians to faithfully initiate gospel conversations, they must be connected to the source of wisdom and power that comes from the Holy Spirit by bathing everything they do in prayer. Before believers are given the words to say, they must primarily be given a new heart by God that is characterized by an unwavering love for Him and a compassionate desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ with everyone.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Intervention

#### *Introduction*

The reality that many Christians today lack the passion and boldness for sharing the gospel prompts an urgent exploration of the causes and potential solutions for the renewal of evangelism efforts that were once characteristic of the early church. Over the centuries, storytelling has been used as the primary method of communication in many non-Western settings but has largely been overlooked by believers in the West as a beneficial practice for inviting others into deeper spiritual conversations. This project surveys the possibility that a deeper engagement with oral forms of communication, namely storytelling, will benefit Christians in their evangelistic task. The confidence and motivation of believers within the local church to share the gospel will be evaluated as they participate in this storytelling evangelism training. This intervention offers an evangelistic model that may produce greater conviction among believers to reach the lost and more assurance in the ability to do so.

#### *Description of Intervention*

The intervention of this project consisted of two levels of comparison. First, a control group was assembled to compare to an experimental group who would participate in a 6-week evangelism training. The experimental group gathered together for 6 sessions, each lasting for one and a half to two hours in length and were trained in the significance and practice of using storytelling as an evangelistic practice. The effect of the intervention was then compared to the absence of the training in the control group. The answers to a set of pre-intervention surveys were also compared to the answers of a set of post-intervention surveys that were provided to

each group. Then, assessments were made from the responses of a post-intervention interview that were taken by participants within the experimental group in order to provide a more detailed analysis of the renewed confidence within and motivation for evangelism that has been brought about as a result of the training.

The overall structure of the training began with 30 minutes of accountability and prayer where participants were given opportunities to practice initiating gospel conversations as they shared how they have applied what they have learned from each session as well as any struggles or joys that they have encountered during their storytelling engagements of the prior week. The next 45-60 minutes involved alternating between teaching various aspects of storytelling and having participants practice what they have learned. The training focused on the biblical basis of storytelling and how narrative has been used and may continue to be a way to move dialogue towards the gospel. The experimental group then used the specific methods that were taught for that particular session by engaging in conversations via one-on-one and within small groups. The final 30 minutes served as a time to craft a particular story, either from a personal experience or from the Bible, and think about other individuals who they may be able to share their stories with as they seek out opportunities to initiate gospel conversations throughout the week.

The first session introduced the significance of storytelling within postmodern culture and provided a biblical basis for using narrative to share the gospel. Participants also practiced telling simple, short stories with one another and were given homework to share a similar story with five different people. The second session focused on the value of listening well in order to establish a deeper connection with others and be able to identify any existing barriers to the gospel that others may have. Group members applied this intentional listening to the details and descriptions that were presented while others practiced telling simple stories.

The third session included the topic of sharing personal stories of gospel transformation and introduced participants to the idea of crafting their own 30 second testimony. Each person rehearsed their 30 second testimony with several others in the group and prepared to share it after the training was over. The instructor then taught on the biblical motivation for having gospel conversations with others and acknowledged passages from Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 1, and 2 Corinthians 5:11-20 that attested to the believer's reasons for initiating spiritual dialogue. The fourth session concentrated on the grand narrative of scripture and the value of using Bible stories to lead into conversations about the gospel. The instructor shed light on the oral tradition that is evident throughout the biblical text as well as the use of parables and narratives to produce resonance among listeners. Participants practiced mapping out a biblical story and worked on telling the story to one another in their own personal and unique way.

The fifth session consisted of identifying some of the evangelistic methods that are located within scripture. Primarily, attention was given to the parables of Jesus as He spoke about the Kingdom of God, His approach to presenting the gospel to the woman at the well in John 4, and His instruction to the formerly demon possessed man to go and tell the story of what Jesus had done for him in Mark 5. Participants practiced sharing their 30 second testimony with one another while seeking to transition into telling a biblical story. The sixth and final session provided a quick overview of the entire training and allowed participants to practice articulating the gospel with an invitation for listeners to respond. The instructor identified four typical responses to the gospel as they are found in Acts 17:32-34<sup>112</sup> and what believers can do when they are encountered by them. In addition to the practical instruction that was involved,

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<sup>112</sup> Received in a training with e3partners. 9.11.22

participants were encouraged to make a list of five people that they know who need to hear the gospel and to commit to consistently pray for them each week.

### *Research Questions*

This project is guided by two primary research questions that are related to the ability of believers to engage in gospel conversations. Their combined purpose is to assist in evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention.

1. How does the practice of storytelling relate to the confidence of believers to initiate gospel conversations?
2. How does the practice of storytelling relate to the motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations?

### *Description of Research Method*

The researcher chose a mixed methods, experimental research approach to measure the effectiveness of the intervention. This type of research involves both quantitative and qualitative strategies in order to confirm and understand the values that individuals or groups ascribe to a particular subject.<sup>113</sup> As such, the researcher applied a sequential explanatory strategy which uses the qualitative results to help explain and interpret the primary findings of the quantitative study.<sup>114</sup> This strategy employed pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys given to both the control group and experimental group. However, the only group to receive the training was the

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<sup>113</sup> John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 199.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

experimental group. This allowed for comparisons to be made between the groups as well as any changes within the individual participants as a result of the training.

Following the final session, the researcher conducted a post-intervention interview with the participants of the experimental group. These open-ended questions were intended to “elicit views and opinions from the participants,”<sup>115</sup> and assisted in determining the overall value of the training and whether or not participants felt more motivation and/or confidence to engage in gospel conversations. In addition to the surveys and interviews, observational notes were taken by the researcher during each session to assess the behavior and reactions of the participants as they engaged in the training.<sup>116</sup>

#### *Role of Researcher*

As the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hereford, Texas, the researcher was personally involved in this intervention. The researcher designed, facilitated, and instructed on the material that was presented. He also had a pre-existing relationship with all participants of the study who were gathered through personal conversations and general announcements with members of the church. The role of the researcher was to teach on this evangelism training, implement surveys before and after the intervention to both the control group and experimental group, conduct post-training interviews with the training participants, compile and organize the data, and interpret the conclusions of the data.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 186.

### *Obtaining the Sample*

This case study sample was gathered from members of the First Baptist Church of Hereford, TX. The researcher assembled this group through personal conversations and flyers within the church building before the evangelism training began. The study was conducted with a control group of twelve and an experimental group of nine. Although the groups were originally formed to provide equal representation, the researcher encountered time conflicts with several potential experimental group members who had to drop the course out of necessity. The differentiation between the two groups took place by assigning those who were able to commit to the six-week long training into the experimental group while the control group included those who were interested but unable to attend for the duration of the course. Both groups participated in pre- and post-intervention surveys, but the experimental group also participated in the weekly evangelism training as well the post-intervention qualitative interview.

### *Entering the Field*

As the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hereford, TX, the researcher had established a presence in the field since November 1, 2022, and knew the participants personally. The researcher had led various Bible studies within the church and had worked alongside a majority of the participants in ministry efforts within the community.

### *Data Collection*

The primary sources of data for the researcher were the pre- and post-intervention surveys taken by both the participants of the control group and the experimental group (see Appendix C). The surveys included questions that focused primarily on participants' motivation

for having gospel conversations with others as well as an evaluation of their confidence in their ability to do so. Here are a few examples of the types of questions that were asked in the survey:

- “Do you feel motivated to have gospel conversations with others?” (never, rarely, sometimes, or often)
- “Do you feel confident in your storytelling ability?” (never, rarely, sometimes, or often)
- “Do you feel confident in your ability to share your own coming to faith story with others?” (never, rarely, sometimes, or often)
- “What are your current motivations for sharing the gospel?” (open-ended text box)

The pre-intervention surveys were completed by the first week of the training in July 2023 and the post-intervention surveys were completed during the final week of the training in August 2023. The responses to these questions were kept in a file. Only the researcher had access to this information.

The secondary source of information came in the form of a short, post-intervention interview (see Appendix D) that was taken by participants within the experimental group at the conclusion of the training at the end of August 2023. These interviews were designed to measure whether the intervention provided participants with a renewed sense of confidence and motivation to initiate gospel conversations with others. Here are a few examples of the types of questions that were asked in the post-intervention interviews:

- “What are some of the greatest barriers to having gospel conversations in today’s society?”
- “How does storytelling connect with scripture?”
- “In what ways has your experience in this training affected your confidence in being able to initiate gospel conversations?”

- “In what ways has your experience in this training affected your motivation in being able to initiate gospel conversations?”

The responses to these questions among several others were recorded, transcribed, and stored digitally. The interviews were less than 10 minutes long on average. Pseudonyms are used for the participants in all written results.

The final source of data collection came from observation notes by the researcher during the evangelism training. As the participants shared their engagements with storytelling and responded to questions posed by the researcher, notes were taken and stored in a digital format similar to the data collected from the surveys and interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher collected data from the pre- and post-intervention surveys that were completed by both the control group and the experimental group. Then, the researcher analyzed the data from both sources by indexing and coding the responses from each participant.<sup>117</sup> The pre-intervention surveys initially provided the researcher with the necessary information to assess the potential success of the project after gathering data from the post-intervention surveys and post-intervention interviews. Through these instruments, the researcher sought to isolate and identify emerging themes and patterns, and with the post-intervention surveys and post-interview interviews noted any changes in the confidence and motivation of the participants in the area of evangelism. Along with the surveys and interviews, the researcher recorded observational notes during the weekly meetings which helped shed light on significant findings after the project was completed.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 192.

### *Data Reporting*

The findings of the data collection are recorded in Chapter Four. A combination of data from surveys, interviews, and field notes were analyzed to arrive at a series of post-intervention findings. The researcher sought to record and report the findings of this project with proficiency and accuracy. Chapter Five contains the conclusions and implications drawn from these findings.

### *Validity and Reliability*

In order to protect the validity and reliability of the findings, several trustworthy techniques were employed. The researcher initially triangulated different sources of data which provided the basis for a coherent justification of themes.<sup>118</sup> This included information from pre- and post-intervention surveys, interviews, and observational notes that were taken during the training. After the data was examined from multiple sources, the researcher implemented a detailed analysis using a coding process which is characterized by organizing the material into categories and themes.<sup>119</sup> This coding process assisted in describing the underlying beliefs and values of the participants.

Serving as their pastor for the past year, the participants and the researcher have previously established relationships which could potentially assist in the credibility of the findings, as he has spent some considerable time in the field. It is also significant to note the researcher's desire to see the intervention succeed which could potentially create a biased narrative regarding the effect of the training. However, in addition to the reliable research methods already mentioned, the researcher maintained the highest degree of integrity during the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 192

project in order to produce a tested curriculum so that future evangelism trainings may benefit more believers to be inspired and emboldened to initiate gospel conversations for many years to come.

### *Ethical Issues*

Prior to conducting any research or implementing the intervention, the researcher submitted the Non-Human Research Determination Form to Baylor's Institutional Review Board, and it was determined that this project does not meet the definition of human subject research. The researcher offered the training only to participants over the age of eighteen in order to avoid any complications of working with minors and established an ethos of respect and accountability within the group to ensure that all participants were treated with dignity and respect. The results from the surveys and interviews questions were held in the strictest confidence by the researcher, and electronic copies were stored in an encrypted file that is accessible only to the researcher. All files will be stored for three years and then destroyed. The researcher has also used pseudonyms for those involved in the research project in order protect the anonymity of participants.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Statement of Findings

#### *Introduction*

This project proposed a solution to the reality that many Christians are not actively sharing their faith with others. As a result, a biblically based evangelism training was offered to consider how a greater engagement with storytelling can spark the motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations with others as well as provide them with more confidence to do so. Through this training, participants were given opportunities to consider the significance of stories, including those located within scripture, and how narratives may be a beneficial approach to telling others about Jesus. Participants explored the use of stories across the grand narrative of scripture along with the storytelling initiative for evangelism that can be found within the early church. The researcher sought to test the effectiveness of this training as it relates to the confidence and motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations.

Two groups were selected from members of First Baptist Church in Hereford, Texas who are regularly involved in various church activities and ministries. The experimental group and the control group were formed and divided by those who participated in the training and those who did not. The control group was composed of six men and six women from a broad range of ages from thirty-one to seventy-five years old. Their time of living as a Christian also varied from twelve to sixty-eight years. The experimental group was less diverse as it consisted of eight women and one male with the majority age of the group ranging from seventy-two to eighty-nine, although one woman was thirty-nine and the one male was twenty-nine. These participants averaged a higher length of time as believers than those within the control group.

Both groups took part in a pre-intervention survey of twenty questions, thirteen being quantitative and seven qualitative. The experimental group participated in a six-week long evangelism training focused on storytelling (see Appendix B). After the six weeks of training, both groups were given a post-intervention survey; however, the control group was denied any knowledge of the evangelism training. The experimental group also participated in post-intervention interviews in order to supplement the data that was gained from the surveys.

The inquiry into the effectiveness of this project was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the practice of storytelling relate to the confidence of believers to initiate gospel conversations?
2. How does the practice of storytelling relate to the motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations?

### *Pre-Intervention Findings*

*Pre-Intervention Primary Finding One: Very Few Participants Had Previously Received Any Training in Evangelism.*

Participants in the qualitative survey comprised a group of believers from both the control group and the experimental group who had little to no experience with any type of evangelism training. The majority of the responses simply expressed that they had never received any form of training on how to share the gospel with others. However, there were a few participants who claimed to have had some type of evangelistic instruction many years ago in a church setting. Rick even mentioned being taught the Romans Road strategy as a child but had not engaged in any training since then. Dave considered the practice of regularly teaching Sunday School as a confidence builder in covering the gospel and also because “educators are

basically ‘sellers’ of information and ideas.” Regardless of the few responses that noted a form of inspiration for evangelism, there was virtually no evidence of any substantial training on gospel sharing. Primarily, this lack of any significant training reveals the neglect of both churches and individuals in equipping believers to faithfully live out the Great Commission by seeking to reach the lost for Christ.

*Pre-Intervention Primary Finding Two: The Majority of Participants Rarely or Sometimes Sought to Initiate Spiritual Conversations with Others.*

The following question in the pre-intervention quantitative survey was presented to both groups in order to assess the frequency with which participants sought to engage in spiritual conversations. 1) “Do you ever initiate spiritual conversations with others?” In response to this question, all of the participants claimed to have, at one time or another, been the primary motivator to move a conversation in the direction of spiritual matters. However, the survey results revealed that eight out of the twenty respondents (40%) admitted that this was rarely the case with one participant not providing an answer to this particular question. Only three of them (15%) claimed that they often sought to initiate spiritual conversations.

Linked to the question of their frequency in starting spiritual conversations, participants were asked to describe a time when they had shared their faith story, or personal testimony, with someone else. Most of the participants were able to describe a time when they had shared their personal testimony with another individual, but these were typically accomplished many years ago. Adam, a participant in the control group, was the only one to describe a recent conversation that included his personal testimony when he shared with his Mormon neighbor about his own conversation experience. Adam explained how it was “tough to convince him that even the demons know who Jesus is, but not what Jesus did on the cross.”

Six of the participants (29%) identified that they had shared their coming to faith story in a church setting, while five of them (24%) mentioned that they had talked to their family members about it at some time in their lives. There were two within the control group who were not sure that they had ever shared their personal testimony with another individual. Jessica, who claimed to have been a Christian for thirty-nine years said, “there’s not much to tell.” Perhaps there was some misunderstanding about what constitutes a faith story and what does not, but this type of response reveals a lack of desire to share what Christ has done for them personally. From this study, it is evident that initiating gospel conversations with others is something that many believers have done before, but that it is not something that they typically strive to do.

*Pre-Intervention Primary Finding Three: Participants Perceived a Lack of Confidence and the Fear of Rejection as the Greatest Barriers to Initiating Gospel Conversations.*

In recognition that spiritual dialogue is not always an easy topic to bring up in everyday conversations, two questions in the pre-intervention qualitative surveys were directed towards identifying the types of barriers that make it difficult for gospel conversations to be had. 1) What kind of barriers exist that hinder these types of conversations? 2) Do you feel that these barriers come more from within yourself or from others?

The answers to these questions were numerous and varied which offers a valid assessment of the multiplicity of barriers that can often hinder gospel conversations. Both the test group and the control group identified a diversity of demographics such as language, religion, and cultural backgrounds as major obstructions to deeper spiritual dialogue with others. Two of the most mentioned factors, however, were a fear of rejection and a lack of confidence within themselves. Twelve of the twenty-one participants (57%) acknowledged one of these two reasons, or a combination of both, to be the primary hindrance to initiating gospel conversations.

The same number of respondents claimed that these barriers originated more from within themselves rather than from others. Eight different respondents (38%) contributed these difficulties as coming from both within themselves and from others.

In addition to the fear of rejection and a lack of confidence among believers, time was another perceived barrier to initiating gospel conversations. Stacy explained, “we just get caught up in getting so many things done a day that we lose sight of what is most important in life.” In her assessment the busyness of believers is what stands in the way of engaging in deeper spiritual conversations. Barry perceived that the walls of obstruction have been built mainly by others who simply do not have the time or do not care to listen. The numerous responses from these questions revealed that there could be an even longer list of barriers to initiating gospel conversations.

*Pre-Intervention Primary Finding Four: Both Groups Revealed that They Were Sometimes Motivated to Have Gospel Conversations while Claiming Compassion for the Lost as the Greatest Motivating Factor.*

An essential element of the theory proposed in this project is concentrated on the motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations. In order to measure the internal aspirations of participants to engage in evangelistic dialogue, the following two questions were asked in the pre-intervention surveys. 1) Do you feel motivated to have gospel conversations with others? 2) What are your current motivations for sharing the gospel?

The majority of the participants expressed a desire to have gospel conversations with others, claiming that they were at least sometimes motivated to initiate spiritual dialogue. Four out of the twenty-one respondents (18%) often felt inspired to talk about Jesus, while only three (14%) said that they rarely felt moved to do so. The primary motivation for initiating these types

of conversations was compassion for those who do not know the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ. A few of these responses identified the contemporary culture as the central motive for sharing the gospel with others. Kim is one who perceives the presence of increasing evil within postmodern society as a sign that “we are living in the beginning of the end times.” For this reason, she and several others were motivated to tell the world about Jesus before it is too late and their opportunity to turn to Christ is over.

As well as being motivated by the current state of the world, four of the participants (18%) recognized that sharing the gospel with others is a command by Christ to His followers. Betty explained that she was ultimately motivated to share the good news in order “to follow God’s commandment and to build the church.” Another four participants revealed that their main motivation originated from a desire to see their family and friends come to know Jesus as their personal savior. Only one response recognized that it was the Holy Spirit’s role to inspire them to have spiritual conversations with others. Barry claimed that his motivation extended from a longing within himself to connect with others and gain personal achievement.

*Pre-Intervention Primary Finding Five: Participants Experienced Less Confidence in Their Ability to Share Their Personal Testimony rather than Other Stories, with Most Having Only Shared Their Personal Testimony in Church Settings Many Years Ago.*

This project was concentrated on assessing the confidence of believers in their ability to share the gospel with others. In order to determine the level of confidence that participants felt in initiating gospel conversations, the following questions were asked in the pre-intervention surveys: 1) Do you feel confident in your storytelling ability? 2) Do you feel confident in your ability to share your own coming to faith in Jesus (personal testimony) with others? 3) Describe a time when you shared your coming to faith story (testimony) with someone else.

When asked about their confidence in their storytelling ability, participants were mostly positive that they could do so well. Nine out of the twenty-one respondents (43%) claimed that they often felt confident in their ability to share stories while seven (33%) shared that they sometimes experienced such assuredness. Even though a large percentage of both groups felt confident in this area of dialogue, several individuals expressed a disparity of self-confidence as they reported never feeling certain in their own storytelling ability. As the questions moved more specifically to sharing their coming to faith story, the average level of confidence dropped among participants who had previously expressed more certainty in their storytelling ability. Only six respondents (29%) claimed to frequently experience a sense of confidence in sharing their personal testimony while another six stated rarely or never feeling confident in their ability to do so.

Since this project recognizes a lack of evangelistic zeal among believers, participants were asked to describe a particular time in their lives when they shared their coming to faith story with somebody else. The responses revealed that the overwhelming majority of surveyed individuals had communicated their personal testimony to others at some point in their lives; however, Jessica and Susan were the only ones who were not sure they had ever shared their story of coming to faith in Jesus with anyone else. Jessica explained her reason being that “there’s not much to tell,” and Susan admitted that she was “not sure I have completely done so.” These two responses, while distinct from the majority, reveal a troubling lack of confidence in their ability to articulate the salvation that has been made available to them in Jesus Christ.

This particular question also disclosed that while the majority of participants had shared their coming to faith story with someone else, almost all of them had not talked about it recently. Most of the respondents described a time long ago within a church setting or among family

members as the most recent time that they talked about having a personal encounter with Jesus. Adam was the lone participant to detail a recent conversation where he shared his personal testimony and was also only one of three who claimed to do so with a person coming from a different religious background. The majority of participants described a time that occurred many years ago when they were asked to share their encounter with Jesus among other believers within a church setting.

*Pre-Intervention Primary Finding Six: Both Groups Expressed that They Often Enjoy Listening to Stories Told Verbally and that Storytelling Could Be a Beneficial Component of Initiating Gospel Conversations.*

As the project seeks to offer a solution to the lack of motivation and confidence among believers to initiate gospel conversations, the researcher posed the following questions in the pre-intervention surveys to consider if participants considered stories to be a beneficial component to their evangelistic calling: 1) Do you enjoy listening to stories told verbally? 2) How likely are you to participate in gospel conversations using storytelling? 3) Could storytelling be a beneficial component to initiating gospel conversations in your life?

The majority of participants from both groups claimed that they enjoy listening to stories that are told in everyday conversations with seventeen saying that they often do and three others declaring that they sometimes do. Only one of the participants from the experimental group shared that they rarely enjoyed stories being told in conversations. The abundance of positive responses to the delight of stories being shared in casual conversation is useful in consideration of using storytelling as a primary method of evangelism. As a result, the researcher has determined that most people appreciate the general use of stories in conversations.

The survey also evaluated how participants felt about their own willingness to use stories in conversations about the gospel. Even though nearly all of the participants claimed to enjoy

listening to stories, their responses revealed that they were less likely to actually implement the use of storytelling when talking about the gospel. Most of the respondents reported to do so rarely or only sometimes; however, eighteen of them (86%) considered storytelling a beneficial component to initiating gospel conversations in their lives. Several participants like Aaron explained how stories can be great “attention grabbers” and that they are capable of helping to establish a connection with others. Kim stated she would like to think storytelling could be beneficial to initiate gospel conversations because “people usually respond better if you share personal experiences rather than just giving them facts.” Barry was the only one who expressed some doubts about the benefits of storytelling for evangelism. He reasoned that it “comes down to whom you are telling the story to” because some people just do not care to listen to anyone.

#### *Post-Intervention Findings*

*Post-Intervention Primary Finding One: Participants in the Experimental Group Noticed Stories Being Used More Often in Casual Conversations Because They Listened More Attentively.*

During the pre-intervention quantitative surveys, most of the participants in the experimental group claimed to only sometimes notice when stories were being told in casual conversations. Two out of the nine respondents (22%) expressed that they often observed the use of stories prior to the training. A similar count was recorded by the control group with just four out of twelve respondents (33%) regularly noticing when stories were being shared. However, the post-intervention quantitative surveys revealed that six out of nine participants (67%) within the experimental group felt a significant change which caused them to recognize the use of stories in conversations with others much more frequently than they had before. This is contrasted with the results from the control group’s post-intervention surveys which recorded no significant changes to their observation of stories being used in conversations. This shift in

thinking within the experimental group has allowed participants to consider the regularity with which stories are already being used within their everyday lives and how storytelling could be beneficial within the practice of evangelism.

Although the evangelism training's primary emphasis was on storytelling, a major explanation for the experimental group's increase in their ability to notice more stories being told is because they sought to listen more attentively to others. This was an unexpected outcome that several participants shared in the post-intervention interviews as the most valuable element of the training. Ruth explained that the practice of sharing stories and intentionally listening to others within the group helped her recognize the frequent use of stories being told in casual conversations in her daily life. Betty also commented that the training has "made me a better listener and more aware of how really valuable stories are and I have never really thought about how much we use stories in our conversations until this." The practice of listening more attentively contributed greatly to the participants' awareness of the frequent use of stories in everyday conversations.

*Post-Intervention Primary Finding Two: Participants in the Experimental Group Became More Active in Seeking and Initiating Gospel Conversations.*

As mentioned above, both the experimental group and the control group revealed that they were not actively striving to engage in conversations about the gospel. In the pre-intervention quantitative surveys, five out of nine (56%) experimental group participants claimed to rarely be the one to initiate gospel conversations with others. Even though only three of the twelve (25%) control group respondents stated that they rarely initiated gospel conversations, in the pre-intervention quantitative surveys, seven of the twelve (58%) maintained that they were sometimes the ones to do so. However, the post-intervention surveys indicated that four of the

experimental group participants (44%) reported an increase in their ability to bring up spiritual conversations while there was no change to report among members of the control group.

At the beginning of each training session, participants in the experimental group shared their storytelling engagements of the previous week, detailing their successes and failures at initiating gospel conversations. The researcher took observational notes of the reported weekly interactions of the participants, noting that they all shared an attempt to talk about the gospel with at least one other person during the prior week. Linda and Georgia were particularly involved in sharing Bible stories with family members, which had been a change from their typical conversations with them. Aaron explained that his confidence boost in gospel sharing from the training led him to seek out a friend that he knew had been facing difficulties. In sessions three and four, Aaron gave updates on how he shared some of his own struggles that Jesus had brought him through in order that his friend might feel a connection to them and want to place his faith in Jesus as well.

Prior to the training, all nine of the test group participants disclosed that they had shared their personal testimony at some time in their lives, but none of them were able to describe a time where they had recently done so. The post-intervention qualitative surveys from the experimental group indicated that six of the nine participants (67%) experienced a change as they were able to describe a recent moment that they had talked about their faith with someone else, but the control group did not record any new conversations where they related their personal testimony with someone else. In the experimental group, Karen explained that within the last two weeks she had spoken with the mail lady about her faith in Jesus. She said, "I did share a little issue I was dealing with and how I was getting through it, which was my faith in Jesus."

A primary cause for this progress has been accredited to the training which has made participants more aware of people in their lives who need to hear the gospel as well as the opportunities to engage in spiritual conversations with others. In an interview with Tracy, she identified that the training has “given me a desire to be more aware of circumstances around me and listen for when there is an opening to have a gospel conversation.” Stacy was another participant who described how the training has impacted the way she thinks about and practices evangelism by “making me more aware of people that I can tell about God and Jesus.”

*Post-Intervention Primary Finding Three: The Majority of Participants in the Experimental Group Felt More Confident in Their Ability to Share Their Personal Testimony.*

During the pre-intervention quantitative surveys, participants in the experimental group felt at least sometimes confident in their ability to tell stories but were much less confident in their ability to share their personal testimony. The same could be said of the control group who primarily reported feeling less confident when talking about their own coming to faith story. The post-intervention quantitative surveys revealed no change to the confidence in the overall storytelling ability of both groups, but a significant change was recorded in the experimental group’s confidence in their ability to share their own personal testimony. Eight out of nine participants (89%) in the experimental group felt more confident in their ability to share their personal testimony after the training, whereas no one in the control group experienced a difference in this area.

When participants within the experimental group were asked in the post-intervention qualitative interviews about how the training has affected their confidence in being able to initiate gospel conversations, all of them claimed to have much greater confidence. Karen explained that prior to the training she had no confidence in gospel sharing and “did not even

really attempt to do so...and I guess it's a lack of self-confidence but after the storytelling thing, it's just about relating and being personable and coming from a place of love." Betty also acknowledged that while she could talk about her faith with other believers that she had not really attempted to do so with a nonbeliever, but that she now thinks "it's not going to be as hard as I thought it would be and I'm very pleased to feel that way." Overall, each one of the training participants expressed satisfaction at the increased confidence they felt in being able to initiate gospel conversations.

Throughout the training, the researcher took observational notes on the confidence levels of the participants within the experimental group. The growth in each one's confidence in sharing the gospel is undeniable. Stacy and Georgia are two just examples of the significant change that was observed by the researcher. Both participants were hesitant to offer a definition of the gospel in the first session of the training as the researcher sensed a lack of certainty or intimidation, but by the end of the training, they both were able to talk about the gospel with confidence and poise.

*Post-Intervention Primary Finding Four: Participants in the Experimental Group Felt that Storytelling Could Be Much More Beneficial as an Evangelistic Practice after the Training.*

Another one of the primary findings from the post-intervention surveys was the increasing positive response in the views of the participants regarding storytelling being used as an evangelistic practice. The following question was asked in both pre- and post-intervention qualitative surveys to measure whether or not participants believed storytelling could benefit evangelistic practice: "Could storytelling be a beneficial component to initiating gospel conversations in your life? Why or why not?"

Before the training, both the experimental group and the control group expressed an overall positive response to stories being a valuable evangelistic tool; however, their explanations for believing so were often vague and varied. Linda was one who thought stories might be helpful but did not express complete confidence in them. In her pre-intervention survey, she said, “probably so, Jesus used stories to illustrate a point so why can’t we?” Kim is another participant who answered with some reservations by saying, “I would like to think so.” Ultimately, many of the responses from both groups revealed a lack of experience in using stories to initiate gospel conversations.

Findings from the post-intervention surveys and post-intervention interviews revealed that participants within the experimental group had gained a better understanding of how storytelling could be a beneficial method of evangelism in their lives and that they had a deeper appreciation for the value of using stories in order to initiate gospel conversations. Whereas ten of the twelve respondents (83%) in the control group believed that storytelling could be used as a beneficial practice for evangelism, five of the nine experimental group participants (56%) expressed some hesitancy to affirm storytelling for evangelistic practice in the pre-intervention surveys.

After the six-week intervention, all nine of the experimental group participants reported in the post-intervention surveys with a unanimous “yes” to the benefit that using stories can have on initiating gospel conversations, providing more confidence and clarity in their answers for this belief. Although the majority of the control group expressed affirmation for storytelling in both the pre- and post-intervention surveys, they offered no distinctions from their initial responses. On the other hand, the experimental group increased the positive responses to include every participant as they stated multiple reasons why storytelling could be beneficial to their evangelistic practice. Prior to the training, Tracy, who was a participant in the experimental

group, admitted that she did not know whether storytelling could be a useful tool for evangelism, but in the post-intervention survey she claimed, “through this study I have learned ways to initiate gospel conversations through storytelling, and it is a way to connect people and build relationships based on God’s truth.”

### *Conclusion*

This project achieved its intended goal by helping participants feel more motivated and confident in their ability to initiate gospel conversations. By participating in this evangelism training, the experimental group demonstrated significant growth in their overall desire to engage in meaningful dialogue and have felt more equipped to talk about the gospel with others. This study allowed participants to not only be more aware of stories being told in casual conversations, but also how storytelling is an ancient practice that continues to be a beneficial method for contemporary evangelism.

The post-intervention qualitative interviews revealed that the training greatly contributed to the participants’ ability to recognize opportunities to share the love of Christ through stories of personal transformation and biblical narratives. This was increased by the emphasis that was placed on listening well before speaking into a situation. The majority of the participants claimed the thirty second testimony to be an extremely helpful tool to use because it allowed them to quickly share their coming to faith story in succinct and meaningful ways. This was one approach that gave them more confidence in their ability to share the gospel. Several participants also expressed disappointment that the training was over and that they believed more believers would benefit from future evangelism trainings focused on storytelling.

While the training proved to be beneficial, consideration must be given to the ages of participants within the experimental group. With seven out of nine (78%) participants over the age of seventy, the average age of this group was much higher than the control group which averaged fifty-five years of age. Since most of the participants in the experimental group were above the age of seventy, there is potential for a younger sample group to produce a variety of different results. Younger participants may experience more anxiety in seeking to initiate conversations with others or have less familiarity with scripture than the participants involved in this project. The older age of participants in the experimental group also provided them with more life experiences to naturally connect with others. Even though this particular group had spent decades living as Christians, they displayed an earnest desire to learn Bible stories in fresh and inviting ways in order to share them more readily in conversations. Georgia and Ruth, ages 84 and 89 respectively, were the most excited to map out biblical narratives and seemed to be the most prepared to tell gospel stories with the group. Overall, the average age of the participants and their time spent as a Christian are worthy considerations in evaluating the success of the training and the potential of future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Reflection

#### *Implications for Ministry*

The purpose of this project was to increase the motivation and confidence of believers to initiate conversations about the gospel. In order to accomplish this task, nine participants were led in a six-week biblical training centered on using storytelling as an evangelistic method. The research data from pre- and post-intervention surveys, post-intervention interviews, and observational notes have revealed that the project has reached its intended goal of enabling participants to feel more equipped and inspired to share the gospel with others through stories. During the course, participants were given numerous opportunities to practice sharing biblical and gospel centered stories with one another, and encouraged to do so outside of the group, in order to boost their personal confidence in their storytelling ability. While the training produced the desired results, the use of storytelling as an evangelistic model contains a number of additional implications for ministry, several of which are listed below.

Since all of the participants were members of First Baptist Church of Hereford, Texas, there is anticipation and expectancy that the effect of the training will continue to reverberate within this particular context in many unique and positive ways. While the initial instruction was conducted with nine participants, there is potential for a condensed version of the training to be offered to other church members so that those who were unable to attend due to its original time and length would also benefit from it. This would also accomplish the desires of several participants who expressed the hope that this training would be made accessible to more believers within the church. Participants stated that the training has allowed them to realize that sharing the gospel is a much simpler task than many people understand it to be, and for this

reason, they want other Christians to see it that way as well. Although participants may still struggle to find appropriate ways to introduce a Bible story or relate a personal testimony into a casual conversation, they have admitted to being better prepared to do so when those opportunities arise and have been able to experience more meaningful dialogue as they continue to strive towards gospel conversations.

Although a formal study of the same material would be beneficial to the evangelistic growth among church members, it is not the only thing that would inspire other believers to share the gospel. Another cause of motivation within the congregation may come directly from the enthusiasm and influence of the former study group. This implication is evidenced by the response of nonparticipants who have witnessed the training material secondhand. For instance, after hearing about how much Stacy had benefitted from the study, her mother from a congregation in Central Texas inquired about the availability of the training for her own church as well. Because of additional supportive comments like this one, the researcher has been greatly encouraged and would like to see the usefulness of the training extend to congregations beyond rural West Texas.

The primary inspiration for more gospel conversations does not reside in the content of the training itself, but in the movement of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. The initial spark for sharing the gospel that has been ignited in the hearts of the participants has been a result of prayer and can be replicated in the lives of others only as they continue to share and confidently tell the story of Christ's love and salvation. Many other believers will benefit from the training, and be encouraged in their evangelistic endeavors, simply by the fruit that is produced in the lives of the participants themselves as they display motivation and confidence to engage in gospel conversations. Prayerfully, this experience will not only allow believers to be an example

of evangelistic eagerness but will help them listen more attentively to others and be able to shine the light of Christ in the midst of dark and troubling circumstances.

In addition to the biblical teaching that has been offered during the training, participants experienced a greater awareness of and receptivity to opportunities to share the gospel with others. This was primarily due to the intentional emphasis on the subject of evangelism as well as the space that was provided for participants to consider when and where they might be able to talk about Jesus with people in their everyday lives. One of the most beneficial elements to the training was the time that participants took out of their busy schedules to spend thinking about and practicing sharing stories with one another. There is the potential for the training to have a greater impact on the confidence and motivation of participants if they were given more opportunities to practice storytelling with others. Furthermore, if Christians would regularly take time to reflect upon the biblical mandate to share the gospel with others, as these participants have done, there would naturally be an increase in evangelistic zeal within the church.

The intrinsic value of storytelling that was presented in the training is not limited to the applicability it has had for the practice of evangelism. Many other areas of Christian ministry may also benefit from a greater engagement in storytelling, especially in the realm of preaching and teaching. Pastors often rely on storytelling in their sermons in order to establish a connection with the congregation. Storytelling is employed to illustrate biblical truths or simply be used to present the narratives that are located in scripture in ways that resonate more deeply with listeners. In pastoral counseling and spiritual direction, the use of stories may also be deemed valuable avenues of connectivity. There are numerous discipleship models that would profit from a more intentional emphasis on storytelling, including teaching Bible stories to children. Many Sunday School teachers and lay leaders would benefit from a deeper understanding of the grand

narrative of scripture and the ability to present the biblical stories in a way that connects to the gospel. Linda and Stacy were two participants in the study who expressed their intentions of taking what they learned from the training to have more meaningful conversations with their children and grandchildren.

### *Biblical and Theological Significance of the Project*

Although the training intentionally dealt with instructing participants to notice and implement the use of narratives in their conversations, storytelling is anything but a new concept. The training itself simply focused on building up the confidence and motivation of believers to engage in gospel conversations while exploring the extensive use of narrative that is evident throughout scripture, specifically highlighting the ways in which the gospel was shared through storytelling. It is imperative to the study that the evangelism model being presented was rooted in scripture and that participants recognized the common biblical theme of storytelling as a primary means to share the gospel.

In addition to the desire to align with the biblical standard for evangelism, storytelling has provided an approach that allows Christ followers to communicate the gospel more simply than some of the contemporary propositional statements. The pressure and weight that has been typically attached to stating evangelism presentations such as the Romans Road or Four Spiritual Laws can produce anxiety and hesitancy among believers to ever share the gospel. The emphasis on storytelling as presented in the training has provided participants with an alternative that has created a sense of relief in the realization that evangelism is ultimately telling the story of an event that has happened by which their lives, and the entire world, have been changed. A deeper understanding of this reality has assisted participants in their ability to adequately describe the

good news by bringing the complete gospel story, from creation to Christ's return, to the forefront. At the conclusion of the training, participants were left with a deeper understanding of the grand narrative of scripture as they were learned about Christ's salvation being the most vital element of that big story.

Building onto the confidence of believers in the practice of evangelism was a primary objective of the study; however, the training also concentrated on providing participants with greater inspiration for engaging in gospel conversations. While many believers are accustomed to the understanding that Christians are commanded by Jesus to tell others about Him, the current decline in evangelism efforts within the West reveals that the Great Commission is not being taken seriously enough. As a result, the training shed light on several additional incentives for Christians to share the gospel with others as they are revealed in scripture. Taken primarily from the context of 2 Corinthians 5:11-20, participants have grown to understand that they are not only commanded by Christ to make disciples, but that their motivations for doing so are numerous and essential. This has allowed each one to rightly consider the significance of evangelism for their everyday lives and has given them more reason to initiate gospel conversations.

#### *Possibilities for Future Research*

Although the project reached its intended goal, further research could be done to measure the quantity and quality of the evangelistic conversations that have taken place as a result of this storytelling emphasis. The researcher's goal was to build up the confidence and motivation of believers to initiate gospel conversations, but results could be exponentially increased if the training included more practice in storytelling. This is due to the fact that more repetition can lead to greater confidence and more willingness to employ storytelling in casual conversations

which can lead to Christian dialogue. It would also be a worthwhile study to consider the specific situations when narratives have positively led to spiritual transformations and how often personal testimonies were used when presenting the gospel. While the experimental group and control group were chosen to be similar with all participants being members of the First Baptist Church in a rural West Texas town, an intriguing study would be to evaluate the evangelistic determination of people from different generations and across varying cultural backgrounds. In addition to this research, there is potential to explore the impact of this training on a broader population base which would allow a future researcher to discover the greater significance of storytelling for evangelism on a global scale.

As previously mentioned, this particular storytelling approach to evangelism is not a novel concept. There are many other groups who have taken a similar method that is characterized by the intentional use of stories in order to initiate deeper spiritual conversations. The Alpha Course is such a community that offers some additional insight into the ways in which casual conversations could be moved into deeper spiritual dialogue.<sup>120</sup> This organization is committed to bringing people together, both in person and online, in order to help inspire conversations about God and religious faith. With over one and a half million participants, the Alpha Course provides a significant amount of data that could be instructive to this project, especially in the area of evaluating meaningful dialogue.

Additional research could be accomplished by assessing the benefit of storytelling on the confidence levels of preachers who have intentionally involved narrative in their sermons. The deliberate focus on using stories from the pulpit may also contribute to the preacher's confidence in sermon delivery and congregational receptivity to the message. The research could extend to

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<sup>120</sup> <https://alpha.org/home/>. Accessed on 9.14.23.

discover the intentional use of stories among teachers and counselors and the benefits of using narratives for formal instruction among adolescents as well as adults.

### *Concluding Statement*

Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is inherently the task of every believer. Since the people of God have been graciously given the knowledge of Christ's atonement for sin, they are to tell others openly and boldly about the salvation that has been made available for them as well. Unfortunately, churches in the West no longer prioritize evangelism and have largely become complacent in their desire to reach the lost for Christ. In many ways, the contemporary culture has been a substantial factor in the overall lack of motivation and confidence of believers to participate in evangelism efforts. This is largely due to the fact that secular society promotes extreme individualism and busyness that can hinder conversations of eternal significance.

Christians will always experience difficulties and challenges when seeking to share the gospel. However, this project has illuminated a practical way for believers to talk about the good news of Jesus in fresh and inviting ways. By focusing on storytelling as a primary means of communication, this study has provided a simple evangelistic approach that is rooted in scripture and has enabled believers to experience confidence in their ability to share the gospel with others. In addition to the storytelling approach, the training has sparked a sense of urgency among Christians to share the gospel and to continue to talk about what Jesus has done for them.

Overall, the study reveals that evangelism can be accomplished in casual conversations and that the primary hindrance for doing so often comes from a lack of awareness when those opportunities present themselves. Believers need to be actively sharing the gospel with other people in their everyday lives, not merely with nonbelievers but also among fellow Christians. The reason for this is multifaceted but it primarily allows them to grow in their storytelling

ability and because the more Christians talk about Christ with one another, the more He becomes the center of not only their conversations but of their lives.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## International Review Board Determination Letter



## Baylor University

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD – PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

**NOTICE OF DETERMINATION OF NON-HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH**

Principal Investigator: Nathan Adams  
Study Title: Equipping believers to confidently initiate gospel conversations by using storytelling as an evangelistic tool.  
IRB Reference #: 2053050  
Date of Determination: May 15, 2023

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The above referenced research project has been determined to not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to federal regulations at 45 CFR 46.102(e) & (l). Specifically, the sample size is insufficient to generate generalizable findings.

The following documents were reviewed:

- Non-Human Subjects Research Determination Form, submitted on 05/15/2023
- Dissertation Project Proposal document, submitted on 05/15/2023

This determination is based on the protocol and/or materials submitted. If the research is modified, you must contact this office to determine whether your modified research meets the definition of human subject research.

If you have any questions, please contact the office at (254) 710-3708 or [IRB@baylor.edu](mailto:IRB@baylor.edu)

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Deborah L. Holland'.

Deborah L. Holland, JD, MPH, CHRC, CHPC  
Assistant Vice Provost for Research, Research Compliance

## APPENDIX B

## TRAINING NOTES

**Session 1: “Postmodern Culture & The Power of Story”****Welcome and Introduction:**

“I’m not a fan of cats” short story.

Communicating the ethos of accountability, the practice of sharing stories, and prayer involved each week for best training practices.

- Present Problem:
  - *“The primary goal for this training is to give each of you helpful tools to engage others in conversations about the gospel and to provide you with the confidence you need to be able to spark those conversations. The big idea of this training is to use stories as a way to help shape our conversations with others into conversations about Christ and His salvation.”*
  - *“A major reason that we are doing this is because Christians are not sharing the gospel with others like we should be. The gospel is a subject that a lot of people, including believers, shy away from because it can cause conversations to get serious really quickly. Due to our highly secularized society, many people in our world today do not want to talk about religious beliefs because they are unwilling to accept any claims to object truth because everything is considered relative to the individual. The mentality is that it is ok for you to believe what you want to, but do not try to claim objective truth about your religious beliefs. Because of this postmodern worldview it is much easier for us to engage in conversations about virtually any other topic, but when it comes to talking about the greatest news of all, many people would rather talk about something else. In addition to the cultural stigma towards religious beliefs, Christians are not initiating conversations that are conducive to the gospel. Why is that? Most likely, it is because we don’t feel confident enough to talk about the gospel or we are afraid of being rejected.”*
- Present Solution:
  - *“I believe that the solution to our disengagement in gospel conversations with others is through the use of stories. People enjoy listening to a good a story and sharing stories is something that comes naturally to most of us. We enjoy sharing stories about what we are passionate about or something significant that happened in our day. Stories may be our most natural way to talk about anything, so I believe that if we were to have a greater engagement in storytelling and embrace this type of communication that comes most naturally to us, then we would be able to have more of these gospel conversations and that we would feel better equipped to talk about Christ. Not only do I believe that this training in storytelling will help boost our confidence to have gospel conversations, but also*

*that those we enter into dialogue with will be more receptive and willing to listen through the use of stories.”*

- Prayer

### **The Power of Story:**

*We all tell stories, but I’m sure you can think of someone you know and maybe someone in your family who is especially good at...where people could just sit and listen to them tell stories all day long.*

*But, the reason they are so good at it is because they have practiced it over and over again. They have had lots of experiences telling stories...so that is a major part of what we are doing in this training...just practicing telling stories.*

*It is important throughout though to tell these stories in your own unique style. You can’t tell it like somebody else, you have to tell it like you. It takes time to develop your own style.*

### **Tell A Captivating Story:**

- Active Listening.
  - *Be thinking about what stands out the most. Are there important details or descriptions that are crucial to the story?*

**A Moving Short Story** - Uncle Mike, traveling to Arizona, convenience store, cherry pies, big mouth, yuck, pass to kids, mold, ring, whip around, searching in desert sand, rattlesnakes.

- Retell the story.
  - Get in groups of 2-3 and try to retell the same story to one another. Try to help each other point out any descriptions or details that were missed. Then, come back together with the entire group and discuss.
- Questions:
  - *“Could anyone retell it exactly the same way?”*
  - *“What stood out to you? Any details resonate with you?”*
  - *“Are there any questions within the story that you still want answers to?”*

### **The significance of storytelling for evangelism within a Postmodern Culture:**

- Two Different Styles of Learning: Abstract v. Concrete Relational<sup>121</sup>
  - *“In our Postmodern world today, there are two different styles of learning. The first one is abstract learning which is the ability to understand the meanings of concepts, ideas, propositions, and theories. Abstract learning is an intellectual form of understanding that is separated from any tangible (hands-on) experience. It is the ability to learn without having to use their physical senses, of what they can see, touch, taste, feel, and smell. Abstract learning is focused on concepts and*

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<sup>121</sup> Chan, 175.

*ideas that can be understood without being directly connected to an experience or concrete object.*

- *This style of learning really came into prominence during the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century. We see figures like Descartes who coined the phrase, “I think, therefore, I am.” And this was a time that focused on the human intellect and the understanding that people came to know things best through rational thought and logic. But this style of learning is dependent on the literacy, and ability of people to read and understand concepts and propositions, but the majority of the world does not learn that way.”*
  - *“For example: when you were young, your parent or a teacher may have asked you to do something that you have never done before and you had to learn how to do what they were asking you to do. In some situations, you may have understood the concept without much explanation because it automatically made sense to you. Through reason and logic you began to understand what they were asking you to do and how to do it. Abstract learning is the ability to acquire knowledge that does not require any type of sensory experience.*
  - *But, most often, your parents or teachers would teach you by example and would have shown you how to do something in order for you to learn how to do it. And, this is the most preferred style of learning in our world and it is called, “Concrete-Relational Learning.”*
- *“The majority of the world’s population are concrete-relational learners which simply means that they prefer learning from stories instead of trying to understand through abstract concepts. A primary reason for this is because many people in the world are illiterate or simply do not desire to read because with the recent shifts in our today culture, with new media, and technology over the past two decades, everything can be watched instead of read.*
  - *EX: YouTube videos over instruction manuals. Books on Audible.*
- *We will talk more about this in the weeks to come but stories are used throughout the Bible as a primary means to communicate things like corporate identity, as in Israel’s oral tradition, important truths through the use of parables and metaphors, and stories are also a primary way that the gospel is communicated throughout scripture.*
- *So, in order for us to get better at telling the gospel as a story, we are going to start by working on getting better at telling a short story really well.*

### **Practice crafting and presenting a short story of your own:**

Things to keep in mind:

- Facts: get rid of monotonous facts

- “For a story to be truly captivating, it must be  $\frac{1}{3}$  information and  $\frac{2}{3}$  description.”<sup>122</sup>
- Conversations: really slow down the story
- Descriptions: emotion and build onto the five senses (smell, taste, sound, touch, look)
  - Most of our stories are based upon what we saw, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted)
- Try to tell it multiple times to several different people in the group.

### **Homework:**

- Identify where stories are being shared in casual conversations this week.
- Practice telling a moving story to at least five different people.
  - “It’s okay to say: ‘I need to practice telling a story w/ 5 different people, can I tell it to you?’ They may also help you make it better! Ask them what they liked or what caught their attention, then you can build onto that.”
- List five people you know that need to hear the gospel and begin praying for them.

## **Session 2: “Listening Well”**

### **Welcome and Introduction:**

- Remind participants of the importance of accountability, of being on time and a willingness to practice sharing stories each week.
- Open with prayer.

### **Share storytelling engagements of the past week:** (Please keep responses to 2-3 minutes.)

- *First of all, how did it go this past week? Could you identify stories being shared in casual conversations? Share an experience where a story popped up.* (Remind everyone to listen well)
- *Were you able to practice telling a moving story with at least five different people? (Don’t tell the story you crafted yet...) Share that experience with the group!*
  1. Allow time (30 mins.) for participants to share their experiences of the past week.

### **Teach on the importance of listening well in order to map out a hearer’s worldview:**

*As I mentioned last week, we live in a secularized society that is characterized by relativism (meaning that people claim truth to be relative to the individual, so what’s true for you may not be true to me...many people are less willing to accept the idea of any type of universal truth.)*

*Our postmodern society is also characterized by pluralism...anyone want to help describe what this is? Pluralism is the cultural acceptance of a plurality/a bunch of different ideologies and religious beliefs...This is different from what we may refer to as a pluralistic society...and being a pluralistic society is not necessarily a bad thing...because it recognizes the differences that we all have and that none of us are exactly the same because God didn’t create us to be...but our culture in America isn’t just pluralistic but it is characterized by pluralism which is the blind*

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<sup>122</sup> John Walsh, storytelling seminar.

*acceptance of an abundance of different religions that may all be true...pluralism doesn't want to exclude anyone or anything and so like relativism anyone can claim their own truth but pluralism wants to celebrate the diversity of religions because the idea is that the more there are, the happier everyone is.*

*Well, as believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we know that we can't all be right and that there is only ONE way to be saved and it is through the blood of Jesus. There is only ONE God and not many...and so these cultural concepts of relativism and pluralism have become major barriers to the understanding and acceptance of Christianity in our world today.*

**Barriers to understanding and acceptance of Christianity:**

*What would you say are some other barriers to the gospel in the world today?*

*Christian terminology that we use.*

*Their background and/or culture...whether they have a religious background or not.*

*Barriers to their embracing of Christianity –*

*Their view of Christians from past experiences,*

*Their family background (some cultures it means being disowned or even killed)*

*Busyness (no time for it)*

*Worldliness (no desire for it)*

*How do you recognize these barriers located within others? Listen to them...which is an important and often overlooked biblical principle.*

**\*Need 3 volunteers to read:**

**James 1:19-27** “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry.”

**Mark 4:1-9** “Ears to hear, let them hear.” *In the Gospels, Jesus speaks of those who have “ears to hear” at the end of a difficult saying or parable. Listen for a deeper meaning below the surface. (often that is what we are looking for when we are talking to others...our minds have to shift to actually hear what they are saying and their reasons for saying it...they may mention something about growing up poor, or not liking their job, or feeling lonely or afraid of what the future holds...and if we don't have ears to hear, we might miss an opportunity to tell them about the good news of Jesus Christ.*

**Matthew 7:24-27** “everyone who listens to these words of mine...like a wise man.”

*After reading some of your responses in the surveys that you all took, many of you recognized that the barriers to sharing the gospel with others most often came from within yourselves because we don't want to do it or we don't feel confident enough to, but that's what we are commanded to do by Jesus...and we will talk more about our motivation for doing so next week.*

**Teach on the value of personal stories of gospel transformation:**

*The best thing we can do to lead someone else to Christ is to show them by the way we live our lives. They need to see the power of Christ at work in our lives and how we have been*

*transformed by Him...and I believe that having a short story about yourself and your encounter with God can do just that.*

**Listen to a story and repeat back what you heard and see if listener missed out on any important details (10-15 mins. – stories they crafted last week)**

*Now, I want to introduce to a 15-30 second testimony (depending on your story) and how you can use possibly use it in a casual conversation. It doesn't necessarily have to be your coming to faith for the first-time story, but it has to be your own personal encounter with God and testimony of what He has done in your life.*

**Introduce 15-30 Second Testimony** (write on board)

15 Second:

*“There was a time in my life when I was \_ and \_\_\_ (far from God, without purpose)  
But then I met Jesus and now I am \_ and \_ (growing in my relationship with God, know that He has a purpose for my life)  
Do you have a story like that?”*

30 Second:

*“There was a time in my life when I was in college that I was \_ and \_\_\_ (far from God, without purpose)  
But then I started going back to church and surrounded myself with godly people who loved the Lord, and through those relationships Jesus has given me a renewed sense of purpose and helped me grow in my relationship with Him.  
Do you have a story like that?”*

*Always remember to make Jesus the hero that He is! Sometimes, we can say things like...I cleaned myself up or I found my purpose, but we need to tell them that it's not something that we have done, but all about the work that Jesus has done.*

Have them map out your own 30 second testimony.  
(If not completed, take home and work on it.)

**Homework:**

- Practice listening well to others by engaging in dialogue with 5 different people. Just Listen!
- Seek to identify **opportunities** to move the conversation towards the gospel. (Could this be it?)
- Map out your own 30 second testimony. (Rework some of the details and prepare to share it next week)
- Pray for the 5 people you know that need to hear the gospel.

**Session 3: “30 Second Testimony”**

**Welcome and Introduction:**

- Remind participants of the importance of accountability, of being on time and a willingness to practice sharing stories each week.
- Open with prayer.

**Share storytelling engagements of the past week:** (Please keep responses to 2-3 minutes.)

- *How did it go this past week? Were you able to practice listening well with different people and could you identify any opportunities to move the conversation towards the gospel?* (Remind everyone to listen well)
  2. Allow time (30 mins.) for participants to share their experiences of the past week. **(Remember the goal is for them to practice telling stories)**

### **Review 30 second testimony**

15 Second:

*“There was a time in my life when I was \_ and \_\_\_ (far from God, without purpose)  
But then I met Jesus and now I am \_ and \_ (growing in my relationship with God, know that He has a purpose for my life)  
Do you have a story like that?”*

30 Second:

*“There was a time in my life when I was in college that I was \_ and \_\_\_ (far from God, without purpose)  
But then I started going back to church and surrounded myself with godly people who loved the Lord, and through those relationships Jesus has given me a renewed sense of purpose and helped me grow in my relationship with Him.  
Do you have a story like that?”*

### **Share 15/30 second testimonies.**

Spend time sharing these testimonies with 1-2 people in the group. (5 mins.)

### **Teach on the value of personal stories of gospel transformation.**

*The best thing we can do to help point others to Christ is to show them by the way we live our lives. They need to see the power of Christ at work in us and how we have been transformed by Him...and I believe that having a short story about yourself and your encounter with God can do just that.*

*It means so much more when you add the personal pronoun “my” in front of something. “This is not just a story, this is “my” story.” Not just a heavenly Father, but He is “my” heavenly Father. Not just a generalized concept of freedom from sin, but it is much more meaningful and feels more real when you can share your own experience of having true freedom from sin and the assurance that you have in knowing Jesus.*

*That’s why at the end of our 30 second testimony, we sometimes may end by saying, “Do you have a story like that?” because we aren’t just telling stories that sound good and they can say, “well, that’s nice but it doesn’t affect me,” but we want to make it personal for them in order to connect them to the reality that has taken place in our lives and that this good news is good news for them as well.*

**Transition:** *But why do we want to engage others in gospel conversations? Are there reasons that we should tell others about Jesus?*

*I think that there are 2 main reasons why Christians aren't talking about Jesus with others:*

- 1. lack of confidence – we don't think we know enough, afraid of rejection, etc.*
- 2. lack of motivation – we aren't inspired to do it, we don't have enough will power and desire to do it, so we don't...and I have always heard this statement and believe it to be true, “you make time for the things that you consider to be important.” If sharing the gospel with others isn't important to you or to me, then we won't have time to do it...but if it is and if we desire to tell others about the greatest news ever, then we will do it. You make time for the things that you consider to be important. So, let's talk about some of the reasons why sharing the gospel with others ought to be important to us. Why should we do it?*

**Motivation for sharing the gospel:**

- i. Commanded - Matt. 28:18-20
- ii. Reverence for God – 2 Cor. 5:11
- iii. Compelled by love – 2 Cor. 5:14
- iv. New Creation - 2 Cor. 5:17
- v. Ambassadors for Christ - 2 Cor. 5:20

**Introduce Narrative Bible Telling:**

Have them think about a favorite Bible story and try to tell it to someone without reading it to listeners.

**Homework:**

- Practice listening well to others by engaging in dialogue with 5 different people. Just Listen!
- Seek to identify **opportunities** to move the conversation towards the gospel. (Could this be it?)
- Share your 15/30 second testimony with someone and be prepared to share your experiences with the group.
- Pray for the 5 people you know that need to hear the gospel.

**Session 4: “Narrative Bible Telling”**

**Welcome and Introduction:**

- Remind participants of the importance of accountability, of being on time and a willingness to practice sharing stories each week.
- Open with prayer.

**Share storytelling engagements of the past week:** (Please keep responses to 2-3 minutes.)

- *How did it go this past week? Were you able to share your 15/30 second testimony with someone else this week?*

- *Did you practice listening well with different people and could you identify any opportunities to move the conversation towards the gospel?*
  - Allow time (30 mins.) for participants to share their experiences of the past week. **(Remember the goal is for them to practice telling stories)**

### **The foundation of scripture being rooted in narrative & the grand narrative:**

*From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible itself is a grand narrative that tells the complete story of creation, human depravity, the character of God and His love, salvation in Christ, and the anticipation and expectancy of His eternal kingdom. That master story is continuing to unfold all around us and is being played out in our daily lives. It is critical for believers to understand that scripture's metanarrative is not only valid for their own lives, but that it contains the story that is universally true for all people. We need to discover ways in which to communicate this grand narrative so that others may experience a deep connection to it and begin to embrace it as their own story as well I believe that storytelling may be one of the most effective ways to share the gospel by connecting others to this biblical narrative of human existence.*

God's Oral Character – “Let there be light,” “The Word became flesh,” etc.

Stories communicate corporate Identity – Oral Tradition

- The Shema – Deut. 6, Wisdom Literature, Nehemiah - Return from exile, Jesus and His disciples, the church in Acts

Stories communicate deeper truth.

- Parables
  - Nathan the prophet to David – 1 Samuel 12
  - Jesus' teaching

Stories communicate with resonance.

- The majority of the ancient world could not read or write (illiterate), and a majority of the world today still can't or prefer not to.
- Storytelling is a natural way to communicate with others.

Stories communicate the Gospel.

- Dangers of turning the gospel into a set of logical propositions to accept instead of proclaiming the good news that it is.
- Dangers of turning the gospel into good advice instead of the story of Jesus and the salvation that He has made available to all creation.
  - *Separating the story of salvation from scripture's grand narrative does not fully communicate the gospel and misleads people to believe in a set of concepts rather than the good news of an actual historical event by which the world is now a different place.*

### **Sharing Bible Stories in Gospel Conversations**

*Dillon endorses the application of storytelling for evangelism by pointing out that scripture itself does not begin with an explanation of salvation or a series of challenging propositions, but that it is introduced with a story. A deeper engagement with the biblical narrative will shape the way*

*believers communicate the gospel to others by demonstrating that it involves the history and theology of Israel that is described in the Old Testament as well as God's initiation of His ultimate plan of restoration as it develops in the New Testament. In order to accurately apply God's Word as a model for evangelistic practice, it is imperative that contemporary conversations about the gospel recognize the comprehensive significance of these ancient stories as they relate to every human being.*

### **Mapping out a biblical narrative**

Be able to map out a biblical narrative and work towards internalizing it to be shared as a story.<sup>123</sup> EX: Jesus Calms the Storm in Mark 4:35-41.

- Scenes, characters, props, speech bubbles, action
- Imagine yourself being there, what do you see, feel, taste, touch, hear?
  - *“When we actively listen, we imagine the story as it is being told. Oral-preference learners imagine themselves being inside the story.”*<sup>124</sup>

Tip to preparing to tell a Bible story:<sup>125</sup>

- Pray
- Read the Bible story - 3X at least, read aloud to slow down and think about details.
- Cartoon Strip
- Tell the story out loud.
- Close your Bible.
- Imagine yourself in the story.
- Check the details.
- Tell the story.

*Every time you tell the story it should be slightly different depending on your audience. You'll adapt the details, the level of language and kind of language used, and your tone.*

Avery Willis Quote: “How do we remember the story? Here are some tools I have found effective. Read the passage aloud over and over, using a modern-language version so it sounds more natural. After reading the story several times, try telling it out loud. Check the Bible to see what you have left out or added. Record yourself telling the story and listen to it on your MP3 player. Imagine the story as it unfolds before you as if you were watching a movie or video.”<sup>126</sup>

Have participants attempt to tell the story of Jesus Calming the Storm to the group without notes. Group members will listen attentively to the story and try to help identify any important details that were missed or descriptions that were helpful (15 mins.)

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<sup>123</sup> Mark Getz, “Improving Memory for Bible Story Content by Using a Scene-Visualization Process,” *Orality Journal* Vol. 2, Number 2 (2013): 72, [https://christianstorytelling.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Orality-Journal-V2N2\\_0.pdf](https://christianstorytelling.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Orality-Journal-V2N2_0.pdf).

<sup>124</sup> Willis, 48.

<sup>125</sup> Dillon, 62.

<sup>126</sup> Willis, 61.

- *“What does the story teach us about people? About Jesus?”*

Begin mapping out another biblical narrative on their own.

- Dillon: *“The goal is for everyone to end up sounding like the unique individuals they are, not to end up sounding like the trainer!”*<sup>127</sup>
- No two people will tell the same story in the exact same way - Gospels for example.
- Since a story has life, it should be told in a lively manner.
  - The purpose for this is so that participants become more confident in their own ability to share Bible stories and to bring them up in casual conversations.

### **Homework:**

- Continue listening well in conversations and look for opportunities to move them into gospel conversations.
- Share your 15/30 second testimony with someone and be prepared to share your experiences with the group.
- Map out a biblical narrative and be prepared to tell next week.
- Pray for the 5 people you know that need to hear the gospel.

## **Session 5: “Connecting to Personal Testimonies”**

### **Welcome and Introduction:**

- Remind participants of the importance of accountability, of being on time and a willingness to practice sharing stories each week.
- Open with prayer.

**Share storytelling engagements of the past week:** (Please keep responses to 2-3 minutes.)

- *How did it go this past week? Were you able to share your 15/30 second testimony with someone else this week?*
- *Were you able to practice listening well with different people and could you identify any opportunities to move the conversation towards the gospel?* (Remind everyone to listen well)
  - Allow time (30 mins.) for participants to share their experiences of the past week. **(Remember the goal is for them to practice telling stories)**

### **Sharing Bible Stories:**

The importance of being able to share Bible stories in order to connect listeners to God’s Word and to the gospel...and using Bible stories that help tell your story or that help connect with those listening.

“Has some biblical or other story impacted your life in a special way? If so, try to find an opportunity of telling that story to someone else.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Dillon. 136.

<sup>128</sup> Goldsmith, 17.

- Have participants break off into pairs and spend some time telling each their Bible stories (10 mins.) Have partners help evaluate any important details that were missed or helpful descriptions that were told at the end.
- Come back together and ask:
  - *Were you able to tell the Bible story well? Accurately? Did you miss any important details?*
    - *Were you able to tell the Bible story in a unique way or did it feel more rehearsed?*

### **Evangelistic methods in scripture:**

*The Bible provides us with so many stories that can relate to our world and the situations that we all face today. It tells us about God and His goodness, about sin and our fallenness, about creation, and about our purpose here on this earth. The Bible stories communicate the truth of these realities in ways that we can understand.*

*The Bible also provides us with examples of how the gospel was shared with others and I believe that God was intentional in recording these moments with us to show us how we are to communicate the good news with others. Although there are many different examples of evangelism in scripture, we are going to look at just a few today.*

- EX: Jesus' parables, John 4, Mark 5, Acts sermons (2,3,7,10, etc.)

*In each one of these examples, the approach to sharing the gospel involved stories, and many of them related back to Old Testament narratives that their listeners would have likely known and understood. So, they communicated the gospel by building onto the narrative of scripture and from a place that their audience could easily connect with.*

### **Connecting personal testimonies to biblical stories - S-T4T Model<sup>129</sup>**

1. Listen first
2. Tell your story
3. Tell your connected biblical story
  - Demon Possessed Man in Mark 5:1-20
4. Ask if they would like to be changed like the man in the story or if they know a story like that or would like to hear more Bible stories.

### **Homework:**

- Reflect on personal encounters with the gospel that have led to transformation and identify other biblical narratives that may connect well to one's own testimony.
- Practice telling a different biblical narrative or share one of these personal encounters with at least 5 individuals.
- Pray for the 5 people you know that need to hear the gospel.

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<sup>129</sup> Stringer, *S-T4T*, 17.

## Session 6: “Connecting to a Gospel Presentation”

### Welcome and Introduction:

- Remind participants of the importance of accountability, of being on time and a willingness to practice sharing stories each week.
- Open with prayer.

### Share storytelling engagements of the past week: (Please keep responses to 2-3 minutes.)

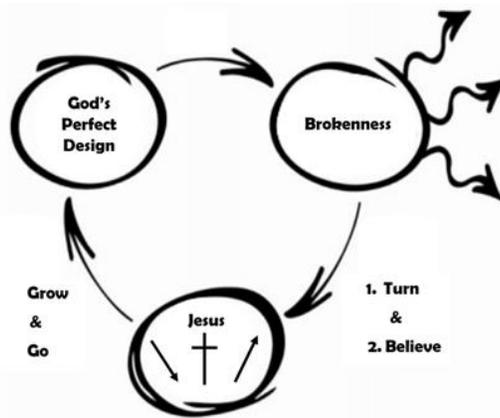
- *How did it go this past week? Could you think of any other biblical narratives that might connect well with your personal testimony?*
- *Were you able to practice telling a different Bible story or a personal testimony with a few other people? (Remind everyone to listen well)*
  3. Allow time (30 mins.) for participants to share their experiences of the past week. **(Remember the goal is for them to practice telling stories)**

### The 4 responses to the gospel as found in Acts 17:32-34.<sup>130</sup>

- Red – Don’t want to hear it.
  - *“And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.”* (Acts 17:32a)
- Yellow – Would like to hear more.
  - *“While others said, ‘We will hear you again on this subject.’”* (Acts 17:32b)
- Green Lights – Ready to accept Christ.
  - *“However, some men joined him and believed...”* (Acts 17:34)
- Already a Christian

### The 3 Circles Method (Draw on board)

*Now that we have talked about the significance of stories, of listening well, and of being able to connect our personal testimonies with Bible stories, I wanted to finish up this training with a helpful gospel presentation that simply tells the story of the gospel in a way that is easy for you to present and easy for your listeners to follow. So, here is the 3 Circles Method.*



<sup>130</sup> Received in a training with E3 Partners.

Have participants practice presenting the 3 Circles Method in pairs. Then, have one or two participants present the gospel using this method in front of the group.

**Homework:**

- Complete post-test survey and schedule post-test interview.
- Practice sharing 30 second testimony followed by a gospel presentation via the 3 Circles Method with 5 people.
- Check in on each other and continue to encourage one another to have gospel conversations.
- Pray for the 5 people you know that need to hear the gospel and look for opportunities to share the good news with them.

## APPENDIX C

## PRE/POST-INTERVENTION MIXED METHODS SURVEY QUESTIONS

Please print your name here: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years as a Christian: \_\_\_\_\_

**DIRECTIONS:** Please fill out this survey and turn back into me or email me a Word document numbered 1-20 that indicates your answer to each question.

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Indicate how often each of the statements below is descriptive of you.

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1. Do you think about having meaningful dialogue with others?	1	2	3	4
2. How often do you notice stories being told in casual conversations with others?	1	2	3	4
3. Do you rely on telling stories in casual conversations with others?	1	2	3	4
4. How often do you tell stories about yourself?	1	2	3	4
5. Do you feel confident in your storytelling ability?	1	2	3	4
6. Do you enjoy listening to stories told verbally?	1	2	3	4
7. Do you feel like you are able to have meaningful dialogue with those around you?	1	2	3	4
8. How often do you have conversations about spiritual matters with others?	1	2	3	4
9. Do you ever initiate spiritual conversations with others?	1	2	3	4
10. Do you feel motivated to have gospel conversations with others?	1	2	3	4
11. How often do you think about sharing the gospel with others?	1	2	3	4
12. Do you feel confident in your ability to share your own coming to faith in Jesus (Personal Testimony) with others?	1	2	3	4
13. How likely are you to participate in gospel conversations using storytelling?	1	2	3	4

14. What are your current motivations for sharing the gospel?

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15. What kind of barriers exist that hinder these types of conversations?

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16. Do you feel that these barriers come more from within yourself or from others?

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17. Have you had any prior training in evangelism? If so, please briefly describe experiences.

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18. Describe a time when you shared your faith story (testimony) with someone else.

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19. Define the gospel in a few sentences.

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20. Could storytelling be a beneficial component to initiating gospel conversations in your life? Why or why not?

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## APPENDIX D

## POST-INTERVENTION QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**“Storytelling for Evangelism”  
Post-Study Interview Questions****Post-Study Interview**

1. How does the use of storytelling connect with our postmodern culture?
2. What are some of the greatest barriers to having gospel conversations in today’s society?
3. How do you feel about your ability to share your personal testimony in everyday conversations?
4. How does storytelling connect with scripture?
5. How has this training influenced the way you think about and practice evangelism?
6. In what ways has your experience in this training affected your confidence in being able to initiate gospel conversations?
7. In what ways has your experience in this training affected your motivation to initiate gospel conversations?
8. What has been most valuable to you about this training?
9. Do you have any final comments about this training or its effect on you?

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