

The Gospel: Story-Telling or Truth-Telling?

They're not mutually exclusive

By William H. Gross www.onthewing.org Jan 27, 2024

“Storying” has become quite popular among missionaries during the past 10 years. Rather than use a formulaic or canned approach to proclaiming the gospel, they say story-telling is more adaptable to (and better received by) a wide range of cultures. It’s less boring and more engaging. The traditional approach focuses on stating propositional truths that are grounded in Scripture. There’s an outline, with four or five main points, introduced in logical order, with supporting verses, and then a call to believe the biblical truths as stated. When this is done badly, it can come across as overly intellectual, impersonal, passionless, and dry. “Your body gives off infrared wavelengths. Do you believe this?”

It’s not one approach or the other, story-telling versus propositional truths. It needs to be *both*. If there’s no conviction, passion, insights, *teaching*, or personal application, then it’s no better than a billboard sign, or broadcasting the gospel with a bull-horn. The gospel is highly *personal*; and it must be personally tailored to the listener — give and take, question and answer. J. Mack Stiles says, “*We teach the gospel with the aim to persuade.*”

Jesus spoke in parables for a reason; it was engaging, even entertaining. The crowds heard his stories with fascination. But they didn’t always understand the spiritual truths which the stories revealed. He therefore went on to explain, to *teach* their meaning to his disciples

And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries [the hidden sense] of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. — Mat 13:10-11 ^{NKJ}

Years ago, a missionary friend gave me an example of the text being used in the field for “storying” the gospel. I read through it all, looking for the key truths that must be believed in order to be saved. Some were missing! The story was engaging; the events were accurate; but the gospel seemed cloaked. I couldn’t (nor do I think anyone else could) respond with saving faith, to what was presented in the story. That troubled me greatly.

And yet, when I present the gospel, I don’t use a canned approach. Instead, I present it as a historical story in modern garb. I put my listener in the story as one of the characters, so they can see how it applies to them personally. I’m not opposed to story-telling, certainly not to propositional truth. But they must be woven together, so the listener is introduced to the biblical Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior — who He is, why He needed to come, and what He did. It’s the *greatest story ever told*; but it’s also *historical fact*. It’s non-fiction. Here are a few links to articles describing the storying technique and its advantages:

Christine Dillon:

<https://www.storytellerchristine.com/books/telling-the-gospel-through-story/>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/evangelism/telling-gospel-through-story.html>

Other Resources:

<https://churchsource.com/blogs/ministry-resources/practical-techniques-for-telling-the-gospel-with-storytelling/>

Missional Advocacy:

<https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/why-communicate-the-gospel-through-stories>

What happens if the story is told at the expense of telling the truth? In 2023, Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi published a book titled, “William Carey – The Father of Modern India.” It’s a fascinating tale of what William Carey did to bring India into the modern world, and to unite a country that has hundreds of languages, and millions of gods. At the end of the book is a representative conversation between Vishal and a Hindu scholar he names R. J. Pandit (a *pundit*). This man decries what Carey accomplished in India. Pandit wants religion and cultural leadership limited to the elite. He claims that Christian egalitarianism — where everyone has access to the truth, in their own language, and can make their own determinations about it — undermines cultural diversity and religious authority.

This man prefers Christian missionaries who tell the *story* of Christianity, rather than declaring the *truth* of Christianity. He felt that the ancient stories of India were so far superior to the story of Christ, that Christianity would be marginalized if truth-claims were left out of the gospel. But if missionaries claimed that the gospel is “the truth,” then Christianity might succeed in displacing the ancient ways of India. This demonstrates the danger of “storying” at the expense of doctrinal truth. Again, they’re not mutually exclusive.

Here’s part of that conversation (excerpts are taken from pages 132-139 of the book):

P: It was not colonialism but Christianity that turned India upside down... Sanskrit and our sages would have kept India united in one culture. That cultural unity would be much deeper than the political-legal-constitutional unity that the British gave us in line with the Bible’s idea of a nation-state...

William Carey damaged India’s traditional culture. Today, it is estimated that at least 100,000 full-time missionaries have come to North India from the South and Northeast. They are transforming grassroots communities where no church existed. Like Carey, many of them also serve the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low. They educate and uplift the downtrodden to try and make them equal to Brahmins.¹ They fire up the hearts of illiterate people with dreams and ambitions that could be exploited by all kinds of disruptive movements... William Carey laid the foundation for breaking India!

V: Panditji, I said hesitatingly, you are a scholar. I am a simple person. But somehow I feel that many Indians would think that the seeds Carey planted were for breaking the *prison* that keeps our people backward. To be honest, even I can’t comprehend why you would refer to the Father of Modern India as “the nastiest Englishman.”

P: Don’t worry, Panditji replied with an air of superiority. Our convent-educated intellectuals don’t understand our history and the damage done by missionary conspiracy. But I can explain my point with a simple analogy. Think of Hinduism as a mighty citadel made of solid stories that enabled Vedic culture to withstand a thousand years of external aggression. William Carey and the missionaries who followed him became the worst invaders because they did not attack us with swords and guns. They followed Jesus’ strategy of the seed and the sower.

V. Can you explain that to me, please?

¹ *Brahmin*: the highest of the four Hindu varnas, the priestly or sacerdotal class — the social and cultural elite.

P. Carey was like a little parrot that brought forth the fruit of a banyan tree and perched on the walls of our citadel. Other parrots followed him. They dropped those seeds on the wall. Most were eaten up by insects and birds. A few germinated but died without soil or moisture. A few seeds, however, fell in cracks where enough dirt had accumulated. Those dark and inaccessible spots allowed the seeds to take root... We tolerated it because we like greenery... Some of the roots eventually struck water and nourishment... By the time the caretakers decided to pull out the plant, it was too late. It couldn't be uprooted without knocking down the wall...

The missionaries who brought the Bible to India knew that they were bringing a seed that had torn apart the Holy Roman Empire. It had transformed Europe; and they were confident that it would demolish the citadel that had kept our culture intact.

V. What are you seeing that makes you so militant?

P. My researchers have just uncovered a conspiracy that will make India unrecognizable within a generation or two.

V. What's that?

P. Some Indian missionaries are preparing to turn every local church, in every village, slum, and town, into a university classroom.

V. That is impossible!

P. Not really. Their plan is to follow the Wikipedia model, to create a curriculum online. They call it a BA in Nation-building, or BSc in nursing or agriculture. Such high-quality curricula, created by experts from around the world and based on the Bible, will be made available online to everyone. Many universities are induced to use them. The classes will be held in churches. Every church will be equipped with an Academic Pastor who will invite ten to fifteen students to come to the local church, Monday to Friday, for four years, to earn a BA or BSc. The lessons and professors will be online, on DVDs, and in books. Students will be able to use their phone, iPads, and tablets, to take lessons and talk to teachers and experts...

V. So why is this dangerous? ...

P. Can't you see that every illiterate mother will go to the church in her neighborhood asking for volunteers to help her children with their homework; every widow will go to the local pastor asking him to send two or three volunteers to fix her roof. A church may be meeting in a mud hall with a thatched roof, but it will become the center of university-level education and service that fights hunger, poverty, and disease. Their aim is to transform whole communities.

V. This sounds like a revolution! No wonder you are worried.

P. Missionaries like William Carey established universities, but now most American missions have little interest in higher education. In fact, some have turned against basic literacy. They dislike terms such as illiterate. They "honor" illiterate people as "oral learners," and ***prefer to give them stories, not university degrees.***

V. What brought about this change in missionary strategy?

P. Some of their theologians started teaching that their old strategies of transforming oral dialects into literary languages, translating the Bible into languages that no one reads, and then teaching people to read their own vernaculars, delays the coming of God's kingdom. Americans want to speed up God's timetable. They believe that as soon as they finish telling bible stories to these tribes and castes that have not heard about Jesus Christ, the end of this [modern era] will come, and Jesus himself will return to establish his rule for a thousand years. That would be a wonderful fairy tale ending!

V. You seem to be happy about this new strategy of Western missions.

P. Even illiterate parents know what is good for their children. They want their children educated. The new missionary strategy gives Hindu missions the chance to take over the task of educating illiterate people. We can teach them *our* sacred Scriptures. There is something else that helps me sleep a little better these days.

V. What is that?

P. Fortunately, Western missionaries are very different now than William Carey's generation. ***They present Christianity as a story.*** This is good for us, because anyone can see that Hindu stories are so much better than Bible stories. The Gospels have just a few short parables. They are called *parables* to clarify that they are not true stories. The incidents did not actually happen. Most of the Bible was never written as a story. *William Carey's generation read it as real history, not as stories.* That is why James Cameron based *Avatar* on the story of Ram,² not Jesus.

Earlier missionaries damaged us because **they presented Jesus as the Truth.** They branded themselves **not as storytellers but as "witnesses,"** telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That implied that missionary teachers were bearing witness to the truth, while Hindu preachers were storytellers, peddling myths.

Defining the conflict as Truth versus Myth was the single most important factor that enabled Christianity to destroy Greco-Roman mythology. Because of its passion for the Truth, Christianity came with universities, and claimed that it explores history and geology, physics and chemistry, biology and archaeology, because it is committed to pursuing truth. Fortunately, their *new* strategy is a game-changer in *our* favor. A conflict between stories — ours and theirs — suits us.

V. So, do you mean that, after all, you have no reason to fear?

P. No! No! We have an immense challenge before us. These new *Indian* missionaries who are planning to turn every thatched-roof church into a university classroom are using the latest technology, even though their worldview is old-fashioned. They are as interested in truth as in service. American missionaries may want to protect our culture, including our illiteracy as "oral learning," but these *indigenous* missionaries have become dangerous. They are unabashedly committed to changing our culture.

The story must only be a vehicle to convey the counter-cultural truth of Jesus Christ.

² Rama (or Ramacandra) is the seventh avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu.