

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN A COMIC BOOK CULTURE: “PARABOLIC EVANGELISM” AND THE USE OF STORIES IN EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY

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***Abstract:** Stories play a fundamental role in conveying value and meaning in postmodern societies. Stories are powerful because they go beyond simply conveying information. They invite us into an intimate encounter with the author’s narrated world. Contemporary theologians recognize how pervasive story is in the Bible. Various schools have sought to understand and articulate how story influences our understanding of the Bible and its application for daily life. This paper argues the parables of Jesus serve as an appropriate model for using story to communicate Christian ideas in our contemporary age. The parables of Jesus were not simply interesting stories. Instead, they were stories used to address his audience and challenge them to assess their lives and make a response to the truth conveyed by the parable. This paper further argues that comic books have the distinct potential to serve as modern parables. The comic book medium invites readers not only to enjoy fictional worlds, but also leverage the parabolic nature of story by addressing the reader directly with philosophical and spiritual content conveyed by these comic book stories. This approach, termed ‘Parabolic Evangelism,’ serves as one strategy among many in using the creative arts for Christian mission.*

***Keywords:** EVANGELISM, NARRATIVE, STORY, PARABLES, POSTMODERNISM, COMIC BOOKS, POP CULTURE, ART*

***Statement of Original Unpublished Work:** By submitting this document to the Editor in Chief of CJSCF I am making a Statement of Original Unpublished Work not submitted to another journal for publication.*

Thesis

Stories are an important vehicle for truth in postmodern cultures. Comic books and graphic novels enjoy an increasingly influential role as contemporary stories of imagination, goodness, evil, and justice. This paper analyzes the role of narrative in comic books, graphic novels, and sequential art and determines whether using narratives is an appropriate approach of evangelism. This paper proposes an evangelistic approach called “Parabolic Evangelism” modeled after the storytelling method of Jesus in communicating the gospel and calling people to respond in salvation.

Stories and Reality

Henry John Pratt, in his article “Narrative in Comics,” argues that narrativity is the defining characteristic of the comic book medium (Pratt 2009, 107). According to Pratt, “The default phenomenology of comics reading entails looking for the stories they tell” (107). Pratt goes on to explore the various dimensions of comic book narrative, noting both literary and pictorial elements that combine in a hybrid art form distinctive to its own medium (107-08). The power of comic book narrative, however, is that it is more than putting words and pictures together to simply tell a story. Comics offer an interactive experience; they are powerfully affective artifacts of a culture. Pratt argues the comics medium has the potential to engage readers in a way that exceeds even classic literature,

Narratives told in comics have abundant potential to be expressive of the artist’s particular point of view. The simplicity of the medium entails that comics can offer an individual voice and foster an intimacy between artist and reader that meets the level of literature—or even exceeds it, since comics reflect the artist’s visual as well as verbal sensibility. Close connections between artist and reader in a pictorial narrative medium are hard to come by, and it is with good reason that we value their occurrence in comics. (Pratt 2009, 115-16)

1. Pratt identifies the creator of comic books as the artist. Readers unfamiliar with comic books should note most comic books are created by a team of people including a writer, penciller, inker, colorist, and letterer. When a person reads a comic book created by a team of people, each person contributing to the book adds layers of meaning and sensibilities for the reader to consider that goes beyond the simple relationship between artist and reader as communicated here by Pratt.

Pratt identifies here a profound aspect about comic books: they invite us into an intimate experience of an artist's narrative world.

Interaction on this level is particularly compelling for postmodern audiences because of the value story plays in understanding truth and reality. In his book, *Story as a Way of Knowing*, Kevin M. Bradt explains the postmodernism fascination with story as a vehicle for truth and meaning (Bradt 1997). Bradt's work begins by examining the epistemological shift away from the scientific certainty of the modern age. Bradt points to the atrocities of the twentieth-century and the findings of quantum physics as powerful challenges to the certainty promised by modernism (Bradt 1997, 90). Bradt writes of the modern era, "By discovering 'objective truth,' science and its handmaid, technology, were supposed to release humans from their fears and superstitions, cure disease, and usher in a utopian age of unmatched progress and achievement. Instead science rewarded modernism's search for ultimate reality and truth with mixed blessings" (90). Bradt notes the record of world wars, famine, disease, and societal breakdown undermined the utopian promises of modernism (90). Likewise, the findings of quantum mechanics and new scientific discoveries undermined the unitary explanation of reality down to the subatomic level (90-91). Quantum physics had immediate epistemological implications that led scientists to adopt a 'perspectivism' in conceptualizing reality (91-92). With these new developments, Bradt concludes postmoderns soon conceived reality as "various, multiple, ambiguous, highly subjective, dependent on one's point of view and perspective. Hence, for any conversation about nature and reality in the postmodern world to be intelligible, it must include context and perspective as part of its parameters" (91-92). Therefore, according to Bradt,

The language form favored by postmodernism as paradigmatic of its understanding of truth, knowledge, and reality is story. This is because story, by its very nature and definition, explicitly acknowledges its own truth as fictive, that is "made up," constructed, fabricated, "something invented by the imagination." Story does not claim to represent or reflect any external objective reality. Rather, the modality of story's language wholly "constitutes" and "mediates" a narrative reality that is first, last, and always an imaginative one. Thus, story knows that if it has any claim to truth, it is to an analogical truthfulness only, not any empirical factuality. The truthfulness to which story invites is completely unverifiable according to any external norms or objective standards. That truthfulness is also clearly delimited by the specific partiality of its own context and perspective and by the subjectivity of its participants. (Bradt 1997, 100-01)

I propose that Bradt's explanation of the postmodern fascination with story makes evangelism challenging for evangelical Christians because of the

fundamental disagreement on the nature of truth between those Christians who argue truth is derived from the supra-historical metanarrative offered by the Bible and postmoderns who favor personal stories that are “individual, unique, and particular” and historically situated in their description of truth (101). This paper argues that evangelical Christians can use stories in evangelism in ways that bridge this divide.

Stories and Evangelism

This paper proposes an approach called “Parabolic Evangelism” modeled after Jesus’ method of using parables. As will be demonstrated below, evangelical Christians argue Jesus used parables as a bridge from the historical, cultural, circumstantial interaction with truth of his listeners to the supra-historical notion of objective truth presented by the metanarrative of Scripture. “Parabolic Evangelism” takes this approach offered by Jesus in the Gospels as a model for contemporary evangelistic ministry. Evangelists in the evangelical tradition can challenge listeners to consider truth as an objective reality with soteriological implications by using contemporary stories as a bridge to the metanarrative of the Scripture.

Some evangelical Christians argue that stories contain themes addressed by the Christian doctrine of redemption. For example, in his book, *The Stories We Tell*, Mike Cospers explains,

We tell stories that reveal the deep longing of the human heart for redemption from sin, for a life that’s meaningful, for love that lasts. We tell stories about warriors overcoming impossible odds to save the world. Stories about how true love can make the soul feel complete. Stories about horrific, prowling villains carrying out a reign of terror, only to be vanquished by an unexpected hero. Stories about friendships that don’t fall apart. Stories about marriages that last. Stories about life, death, and resurrection. (Cospers 2014, 34)

Cospers’ point seems to address more than simply redemption from sin, unless, as Cospers argues throughout his writing, Christian redemption includes the resolution of brokenness experienced on every level of life.

Cospers’ argument for the redemptive aspect of stories also can be found in non-evangelical sources. For example, author Chimamanda Adichie provides an example of Cospers’ point from a feminist point of view. Adichie explains stories provide an opportunity for understanding ourselves, one another, and our world in ways that highlight brokenness and longing for resolution (Adichie 2009). She argues “stories matter; many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess, to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken

dignity” (Adichie 2009). From Adichie’s perspective, stories have the power to describe and contribute to what is wrong with the world. Adichie’s goes on, however, to make an important redemptive point in her conclusion: “When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise” (Adichie 2009). Here, Adichie is not pointing to the Christian idea of paradise or heaven, but rather to the general idea of resolution that is likewise emphasized by Cospers’s evangelical understanding of redemption.

The common ground enjoyed by both Cospers and Adichie demonstrates how stories can be used as an evangelistic device for evangelical Christians attempting to engage postmoderns. Though postmoderns reject the notion of metanarratives, evangelical Christians can use contemporary stories to find common ground without undermining their conviction concerning the metanarrative of Scripture. “Parabolic Evangelism” affirms the common emphasis on story held by both evangelical biblical theologians and postmodernists while avoiding the categorical mistake some theologians make in separating story from an external referent, the propositional mistake other theologians make by simply telling the story of the Bible instead of arguing for its transcendent authority, and evades the aversion postmoderns have towards evangelism by highlighting the common longing for resolution upon which many stories are built, particularly the Christian ones.

The potential problem with using stories as a mode of evangelism is evangelists can share Christian stories without engaging in evangelism that aims for conversion. Therefore, in using story, Christians engaged in evangelism must aim for what Leighton Ford describes as “a collision of narratives” (Ford 1994, 14). According to Ford, a ‘collision of narratives’ occurs when God’s story connects with our story and forces us to reconsider our lives,

God’s story touches my story and your story, and a collision takes place. People encounter stories that call their own stories into question, and they are forced to consider: *What if my story isn’t the whole story? How should I respond?* In the process of reconsidering their own lives, they become caught up in the Story of Jesus, and they are *changed* [emphasis original]. (Ford 1994, 14)

Parables, and the “Parabolic Evangelism” model argued by this paper, are a type of storytelling that provides Ford’s “collision of narratives.”

Comic Book Stories and Evangelism

Comic book narratives can serve as modern day parables. Grant Morrison introduces his book, *Supergods*, by reflecting on the nature of comic book stories. Morrison writes,

We live in the stories we tell ourselves. In a secular, scientific rational culture lacking in any convincing spiritual leadership, superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations. They're not afraid to be hopeful, not embarrassed to be optimistic, and utterly fearless in the dark. They're about as far from social realism as you can get, but the best superhero stories deal directly with mythic elements of human experience that we can all relate to, in ways that are imaginative, funny, and provocative. They exist to solve problems of all kinds and can always be counted on to find a way to save the day. At their best, they help us to confront and resolve even the deepest existential crises. We should listen to what they have to tell us. (Morrison 2011, xvii)

Notice several elements Morrison ascribes to comic books that corresponds with Cospers: they speak to our fears and longings, they deal with the mythic elements of human experience, they are hopeful, and they offer us solutions to our problems and deepest existential crises. As a result, Morrison recommends we should listen to what comic book stories have to tell us with the same urgency as evangelistic Christians arguing we should listen to their stories.

B. J. Oropeza highlights the potential theological aspect of comic book stories, "While the characters themselves might not always speak outwardly about religion and the Gospel, their storylines make implicit, and sometimes explicit, points about theology" (Oropeza 2005, 4). Oropeza continues,

We can perceive a prime example of how superhero stories cross over mythical, religious, and ideological boundaries in the theme of a *restored paradise* [emphasis original]. The concept itself contains prominent subdivisions related to theology and myth: angst for a paradise lost, commissioning of a savior, the epic battle of good versus evil, and the pursuit of immortality. (Oropeza 2005, 4)

Comic book stories detect something wrong with the world and offer a solution to this problem. Therefore, they provide a valuable opportunity for Gospel ministry by pointing to the solutions offered in the Christian doctrine of redemption. The comic book medium, however, faces a unique challenge in communicating the Gospel in that they are more likely to settle into Geivett's category of 'narrative.' One can produce a comic book as a distinctively Christian narrative, but as Geivett warns, "As with any narrative, it would be possible to enter imaginatively into the narrative of Christianity without actually believing the propositions that are constitutive of that narrative" (Geivett 2005, 50).

Darby Orcutt, on the other hand, offers a positive appraisal of narratives in comic books, especially for their religious implications. Orcutt argues that comic books provide a unique, immersive experience that forces the reader to engage

with the story as co-creators by providing the narrative flow to the comic narrative left out by the gaps and spaces left between panels (Orcutt 2010, 97). Orcutt contends that religious narratives solicit this level of involvement as well, but in terms of identification and relationship (98). Therefore, Orcutt concludes,

Religious narrative generally connects with its audience differently—and much more deeply—than can most other narrative, in part because it partakes of non-linguistic metaphors that may “speak” more directly to the inherently metaphorical nature of human cognition: again, like comics. (Orcutt 2010, 99)

The problem with Orcutt’s analysis is that although comic books offer the unique advantage for the reader to immerse themselves into its narrative and act as a co-creator, it leaves the authority in the reader’s hands. Therefore, the reader is not challenged by the text, but rather conforms the text to his own liking. The reader is able, then, after having immersed themselves in that narrative world, walk away from it without being challenged and remain unchanged.

A Proposal: Parabolic Evangelism

In this paper, I propose a solution to this problem modeled after the parables of Jesus called “Parabolic Evangelism.” Parabolic Evangelism is a type of evangelism using narratives organized according to the structure and purpose of Jesus’s parables to challenge readers to reconsider their worldview and call them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. In this way, Parabolic Evangelism is both apologetic and evangelistic.

According to Darrell L. Bock, parables were an important apologetic, evangelistic, and discipleship tool for Jesus, “The use of these instructional stories was one of the most basic elements of Jesus’s teaching. The bulk of the parables treats themes tied to describing the kingdom, the return and its associated judgment, or the behavior of the disciples” (Bock 2002, 630). Parabolic Evangelism seeks to do the same thing using narratives. The Parabolic Evangelist describes the kingdom through the content of the story by creating a world injected with Scripture and ordered according to a Christian worldview that addresses the reader rather than letting the reader remain passive. In this world, the evangelist is able then to use fictional elements as a way of pointing to biblical truths relevant for the reader’s thought and life. This approach mirrors what Jesus did in using parables in that by leveraging stories and hypothetical situations, Jesus was able to draw out implications of biblical truth which challenged the disciples’ thought and behavior. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall’s compendium on the Gospels explains this strategy used by Jesus. They note that Jesus did not provide all the answers for his hearers, but instead used

parables as a way to shock his audience into making theological connections on their own,

[Parables] typically omit unnecessary descriptions and frequently leave motives unexplained and implied questions unanswered. They usually are taken from everyday life but they are not necessarily realistic. Because of hyperbole or elements of improbability they often are pseudo-realistic and have elements that shock. (Green, McKnight, and Marshall 1992, 594)

Thus, truth does not require historically accurate, scientifically verified accounts to be apologetic or evangelistic. Instead, by leveraging the ‘shock’ value of hyperbole and pseudo-realistic stories, the parabolic evangelist can use fiction to challenge fact.

Parables also offer a biblical corrective to Orcutt’s view of reader as co-creator. Green, McKnight, and Marshall acknowledge the active role of the reader to deal with the unexplained motives and implied answers, but the difference from Orcutt’s approach to narratives is the divine authority parables carry coupled with the ‘shock’ of their extraordinary elements challenges the reader to search for a correct meaning and its implications rather than supply one. In this way, parables, according to Jerram Barrs, “address [those] who are present” (Barrs 2009, 103) rather than passively allow the reader to enjoy an interesting story. Therefore, parables naturally serve as a bridge from the fictional world to the real world of the reader by requiring reflection on their worldview followed with an ethical response based on the truths the parable exposes. Green, McKnight, and Marshall explain, “Parables frequently cause a hearer to pass judgment on the events in the story and then require a similar judgment about religious matters. Often the parables require a reversal in one’s thinking” (Green, McKnight, and Marshall 1992, 594). They continue, “Most parables are theocentric in that they focus on God, his kingdom and his expectations for humans. Consequently, the parables are often invitations to changed behavior and discipleship” (594). Parabolic Evangelism seeks to create a fictional world that is both theocentric and ethical, and therein soteriological. By organizing the fictional world with an explicit (or implicit) focus on God coupled with the ethical implications of this reality, the reader is required to meditate on and consider how that narrative world exposes certain truths and the implications of these truths on the reader’s real world, particularly in relation to the existence of God, the reality of sin, the nature of grace, and the offer of forgiveness in the Gospel through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the Parabolic Evangelism model serves as a middle ground between the various models explored above and their potential problems. Parables invite a reader into a narrative, but parables also carry the authoritative and ethical dimension of an account in that they challenge the reader to respond. The reader of a parable is not left, as Gilbert states, ‘pressed against the window, looking in’

at the world of the Bible without any requirement to believe (Gilbert 2010, 107). Rather, the jarring nature of a parable forces the reader to reflect on his own world and respond, either positively or negatively, towards the existence of God and His grace. In this way, Parabolic Evangelism challenges the reader to consider not only the immediate story, but also respond to the overarching, biblical Story.

Conclusion

Parabolic Evangelism can use any genre or medium. This paper is concerned with applying Parabolic Evangelism to the comic book genre as an avenue for the Gospel. Using Parabolic Evangelism in comic books is more than retelling the Bible or making gospel tracts in comic book format. It is more than transforming Jesus and the twelve disciples into superheroes. It is more than finding redemptive themes in the latest issue of Batman. Parabolic Evangelism is an opportunity for creatives to embrace their identity as being created in the image of a Creator God by inventing original narratives that address the reader with the urgent implications the Gospel demands. By creating narrative worlds and fictional stories *ex materia*, the Parabolic Evangelist reflects God's creation *ex nihilo*.

The parables of Jesus were stories told within the religious and cultural context of his contemporary hearers that did more than simply illustrate spiritual truths or renovate Old Testament stories into narrative format. The parables of Jesus were fictional stories based on a theistic worldview that challenged the nonfictional world of his hearers to reflect on the reality of the existence of God and the ethical fallout from sin. In the same way, the Parabolic Evangelist creates narrative worlds within the framework of a Christian worldview and highlights ethical twists and drawn out implications that force the reader to consider the consistency of their worldview in reference to the existence of God and the Gospel.

Parabolic Evangelism affirms the metanarrative of Scripture while avoiding the abstract textualism of narrative theology. Likewise, Parabolic Evangelism affirms the metanarrative of Scripture while avoiding the evangelistic apathy of biblical theology. Parabolic Evangelism offers a third way of using story without simply recalling biblical accounts in narrative format or offering a fictional world for the reader to explore without being challenged to respond to the Gospel. Parabolic Evangelism is not the only way of doing evangelism. It does not replace the priority of preaching or the urgency of personal interaction. Instead, Parabolic Evangelism is an opportunity for creatives to leverage their gifts for the mission of the Church. Parabolic Evangelism simply offers another opportunity to become all things to all people, another opportunity to live out the evangelistic example of Jesus, another opportunity to put all things, including our creative gifts, under the Lordship of Christ.

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