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**“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”  
THE ROLE OF STORY IN CHRISTOLOGY**

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's  
University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
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## THE ROLE OF STORY IN CHRISTOLOGY

The hymns were there before anyone tried to write a narrative of Jesus' life or reflect systematically about his identity or message. They were inspired by a story that was beginning to emerge, a story that defied simple chronological distinctions between past and present, then and now. Jesus scholars argue over which came first: history or theology? For what it's worth, I think a story preceded them both – and that worship consisted of hymns directed to the Jesus known and experienced through this story.<sup>1</sup>

Growing up in a small community in rural eastern North Dakota, one of my early memories of church was singing familiar congregational hymns in Sunday School, songs like “*I Love to Tell the Story*,” The words and melody were easy to sing and comforting... “I love to tell the story, Of unseen things above, Of Jesus and his glory, Of Jesus and his love. I love to tell the story because I know it's true. It satisfies my longings, As nothing else would do.”<sup>2</sup> But, after reading Powell's eloquent reflection on the importance of story and hymn from the very first days of Christianity, I'm beginning to understand that these stories are not only what carried the first Christian communities' faith, they are also what sustain the faith of many worshipers today. I wonder if theology can really be that simple or do we shortchange ourselves and our faith life when we fail to develop a deeper theological position? I believe the answer is not an either/or, but rather a both/and. We need both the story and the exegesis of that story, and this paper will attempt to show that both are not only valid, but vital in developing a tenable position that tries to answer Jesus' question to his disciples in Mark 8, “Who do you say that I am?”

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1. Mark Allen Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 184.

2. William Gustavus Fischer, *I Love to Tell the Story*, in *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1958), 326.

This paper makes some basic assumptions. The first is its definition of an ontological Christology, namely that “Christology is the theological interpretation of Jesus Christ, clarifying systematically who and what he is in himself for those who believe in him.”<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it subscribes to the Catholic teaching found in the New Catechism of the Catholic Church (80-82) that God is revealed through **both** Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, a reality that continues to grow today through the teaching and preaching of bishops enhanced by contemplation and study of all the people of God.<sup>4</sup> The goal in all of this will be to show how story and a narrative Christology have shaped, and continue to shape, the Christian response to God’s revelation.

### **THE VIEW OF JESUS IN EARLY CHRISITAN COMMUNITES**

Many of the earliest Christian communities, those existing between the time of the Resurrection of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., were rooted in their Jewish culture. These early Jewish Christians were very well-versed in the Old Testament, and those texts and familiar stories had an impact on their Christology. Theologian William Richard Stegner suggests this earliest Christology is found in three early stories, Jesus’ baptism, his temptation in the desert, and the transfiguration. These stories, transmitted orally at first, held meaning and a relationship to tradition that went beyond the obvious elements of the story becoming steeped in meanings in a way similar to parables.

The dominant theme in this early Christology is “Son of God,” in a manner that recalls the sonship of Israel to the God of the Old Testament. It is a sonship based on

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3. Gerald O’Collins, S.J. and Edward G.Farrugia, S.J., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 42.

4. Renew International, *WHY CATHOLIC? JOURNEY THROUGH THE CATECHISM: The Profession of Faith – What We Believe* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Renew International, 2002), 8.

obedience to the Father, in contrast to the lack of obedience exhibited by Israel in their Old Testament desert experience. The perfect obedience of Jesus, the Son of God, carries no rebuke and underpins who Jesus was for the early Christians while it also became their model for Christian life.<sup>5</sup>

It should come as no surprise that Christianity which was born out of Judaism and the Hebraic Haggadic story tradition – a tradition of interpreting the scriptures by narrating legends, folklore, parables, and other nonlegal material that together with *Halacha*, Aramaic “law” forms the *Talmud*<sup>6</sup> – would also hold story and metaphor in high regard. It’s true that traditional rabbinic stories often used metaphor to gain the full import of truth from the stories told.<sup>7</sup> Since both Judaism and Christianity have adopted postures that are open to the future and talk about the desirability of a freedom that comes by living in covenant with a personal God, it seems logical for both to use narrative to not only explain that relationship to God, but also to define their freedom in that covenant somewhat paradoxically; not through independence from God but rather through dependence on the Creator.

The most obvious place to note similarities in the Jewish and Christian stories is perhaps in the idea of the promised Messiah. For Christians, that promise was fulfilled in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ. For Jews, the promise remains unfulfilled. Besides a difference in fulfillment, there is also a fundamental difference in approach as suggested by Professor Darrell J. Fasching, from the University of Southern Florida. He points out the different ways typical Christian and Jewish people might react to the notion of obedience – historically, Christians’ idea of obedience to God has been “unquestioning,” while their

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5. William Richard Stegner, “*Narrative Christology in Early Jewish Christianity*,” Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers, 1998, 255.

6. O’Collins and Farrugia, 100.

7. Belden C. Lane, “*Rabbinical Stories: A Primer on Theological Method*,” The Christian Century, December 16, 1981, 1308.

Jewish brothers and sisters were comfortable with a more iconoclastic view which sees the believer in a relationship to God that has room for questioning... the narrative tradition of *hutzpah*. Fasching believes this openness to questioning instead of total obedience has given the Jews more options to use in resisting evil. His case in point is Nazi Germany and the holocaust. Where Christians often compromised love of neighbor (including the Jews) for the sake of supporting the political reality (even if evil), the Jews used their questioning tradition to find a morally superior position.<sup>8</sup>

Curiously, the idea of a “Messiah-King” Christology seems remote to these early Christians, except in an eschatological sense. They saw a Christ whose coming and ministry would bring the end time, not a kingdom on earth. This Christian Messiah had nothing to do with any kind of Jewish expectation of restoring Israel to political and economic strength.

German Scholar Georg Richter provides important insights for this early Church Christology in his research on Johannine communities based on the fourth Gospel. Previously available only in German, A.J. Matttill, Jr., provided an English translation which shows important Christological and eschatological significance. One of the long-standing arguments among Johannine scholars is the lying side by side of an eschatology that is both present and future. Central to the argument is the person of Jesus as Son of Man or Messiah-King in the present/future eschatology debate. Richter suggests that the present and future eschatologies in John are not mutually exclusive or in fact contradictory. The reality for the believer in the Johannine church may have been more present than future oriented, but what matters is that the Jesus of this eschatology is eternally present, then and

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8. Darrell J. Fasching, “*Faith and Ethics After the Holocaust: What Christians Can Learn from the Jewish Narrative Tradition of Hutzpah.*” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 27:3, Summer 1990, 453

now. Richter claims a proper solution can be obtained only by a critical study of the history of traditions and of theological and ecclesiastical developments within the Johannine communities.<sup>9</sup>

These communities according to Richter embraced a Messiah-Christology where Jesus was perceived as a prophet like Moses who worked signs that continually confirmed his messiahship. They seem more concerned with defending their position that Jesus is the Messiah of God than in a clear defining of last things. John's gospel and the community that ascribed to it were comfortable talking about a future expectation of Jesus' return as well as about an awareness that eschatology has already broken in to the world through Jesus and is present now.

It's also important to remember that the Johannine communities were only one of many forms of Christian community extant in the first century. Each responded to Christologies that appealed to them, and each also responded to their notion of eschatology – last things – as best they were able using the written word and tradition that was available to them. Being close in time to Jesus' ministry on earth, it should not be surprising that many of these communities thought the last days to be imminent. It is probably more surprising to find references to it as a present or far-future event.

There are other Old Testament parallels in the baptism, temptation, and transfiguration stories of the early Christian communities. The words of the Father in both the baptism and transfiguration recall the story of Isaac and Abraham in Genesis 22. Clearly the New Testament stories recall an Old Testament Father and Son story that can be now applied in a new way to the Father and sonship of God and Jesus. Another Old Testament

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9. Andrew J. Mattill, "Johannine communities behind the fourth gospel: Georg Richter's analysis." *Theological Studies* 38 no 2, June 1997, 296-7

scene is recalled when the Father says of Jesus that he is not only his son, but also that his followers should listen to him. The quality of listening required by God recalls the leadership of Moses in the desert. Clearly, the New Testament describes a Messiah as the new Moses whose words should be obeyed.

These three early stories attest that the first Christian communities were concerned about who Jesus was, naming him “beloved Son of God.” While rooted in Old Testament history and covenant tradition, it is also clear that there is a new interpretation and meaning. The Old Testament people’s failure of obedience becomes a perfect obedience in Jesus. The failures during temptations of the Jewish people is replaced by complete rejection of the same temptations by Jesus. The Israelites symbolic baptism in the Red Sea on their escape from Egypt is now Jesus’ baptism in the Spirit, and the transfiguration story includes the new reality of listening to the new law of Jesus. These stories contain much more than their surface suggests. They contain the essence of a Son of God Christology that is new, and was the contribution of Jewish Christianity to the Church.<sup>10</sup>

### **FORMALIZING A CHRISTOLOGY**

It wasn’t until the period of the Patristic Fathers, usually designated from 100 C.E. to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 that theologians began to formalize thinking about the nature of Jesus. A principal contributor in the period was Irenaeus of Lyons, who not only defended the Christian faith against Gnostic interpretations, but who also argued persuasively for the need for both Scripture and Tradition in the early church. Irenaeus’ contention was that only by using the apostolic tradition of the faith could one be sure of authoritative teaching. In fact, Irenaeus stated emphatically that the “teachings of the apostles, which secure the salvation for those who accept them, are made known through the public teaching

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10. Stegner, 262.



of the church.”<sup>11</sup> It seems logical that the faith stories of the early church also became part of the public ministry of the church, not a secret oral tradition that open to Gnostics alone.

In an article in the journal THEOLOGY TODAY from April 1978 entitled “Chalcedon Revisited,” theologian George W. Stroup, III claims that the formative church Councils at Nicaea and Chalcedon gave the church its first comprehensive Christology. The documents produced in 325 and 451 answered the “Who do you say that I am?” question with a Jesus who is eternal and of the same substance as God the Father, and also made of a nature that is both fully divine and fully human. While that question was answered satisfactorily for the people of that time, Stroup says the same answer has continued to be used over the succeeding centuries. He wonders if there isn’t more that needs to be added to the definition, something that uses material from the culture of a more modern time.

His question reminds one of a similar idea proposed by Karl Rahner, i.e. that Chalcedon was a work of faithfulness from another time and culture that is still relevant, but may really be the *end* of one conversation and the *beginning* of another.<sup>12</sup> That is the conversation Stroup and others want to begin. He says,

Despite its “two natures” language, Chalcedon affirmed, against the Nestorians, the oneness of the man Jesus. There are not two minds, selves, or sets of intentions rattling around in Jesus Christ. But as long as the “person” is understood in terms of the categories of nature and substance, there is no way out of that impasse. The only solution is to interpret the personal identity of Jesus Christ by means of the more dynamic categories of history and narrative.<sup>13</sup>

Stroup says the way we learn to know people (including Jesus) is by telling stories about them. Those stories typically will use history and narrative, rarely (if ever) the idea of

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11. Alister E McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 42.

12. Karl Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” *Theological Investigations I*, Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press (1963) 150.

13 George W. Strop, III, “Chalcedon Revisited,” *Theology Today*, April 1978, 63.

“being.” Stories of Jesus tell us who he is. These stories might be historic as recorded in Scripture, or they might be contemporary stories of God’s work in the world today. No one story, not even the Resurrection story, can tell everything about Jesus. In fact, even a story as central as the Resurrection is informed by the stories that precede it. Without the preceding stories the Resurrection would mean less for Christians.

A narrative Christology allows Stroup the opportunity to enter into conversation with Chalcedon. It helps find an answer to his Christological question, “What do we mean when we say that Jesus is God in Christ?” (II Cor. 5:19) As he notes, Nicaea and Chalcedon are the Church’s earliest and best examples of interpreting the claims of the Christian community in the context of the contemporary world. But is Chalcedon the end of the conversation or, as Rahner insists, just the beginning?

Stroup suggests that it would be good for theologians to remember Nicaea and Chalcedon as the starting points as they question and apply thoughtful interpretation continuously in the context of the contemporary world. Or, more succinctly, the hermeneutical task of understanding and interpreting the claims of the Christian faith is constantly changing as the encounter of Jesus by people of faith is ever new. New language and a new idiom are called for in our time to answer the question of Dietrich Bonhoeffer recalled in Stroup’s article, “What is bothering me incessantly is the question [of] what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.”<sup>14</sup> What Stroup calls the unfinished narrative of Christ’s mission and Resurrection finds completion in one’s personal history. That has significant pastoral implications for clergy and lay ministers today.

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14. Ibid, 53

## MODERN SUPPORT & CHALLENGES FOR STORY CHRISTOLOGY

Support for the value of stories in helping to form a clearer Christology of Jesus comes from a number of modern theologians. This paper will look to specific insights proposed by Stanley Hauerwas, Karl Rahner, Terrence Tilley, and Robert Kreig. Before any of these modern theologians however entered the conversation, other religious thinkers including the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard had already found and talked about the value in story.

In Kierkegaard's *PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENTS: JOHANNES CLIMACUS*, the story's narrator talks to a fictional colleague about a follower of god being "amazed and able to gather others around him who in turn are amazed by his story."<sup>15</sup> Further on he says, the faith story can become the *occasion* for the follower to receive the *condition* of belief. For Kierkegaard, the concepts of occasion and condition are central to his explanation of how God can be experienced as validly by later generations as those in the first generation who experienced revelation first-hand. Hearing and re-telling the faith stories is a central way for second (and later) generation followers to be introduced to faith.

Story and narrative Christology gained increased prominence in the 1970's and 1980's especially with theologians Terrence Tilley, Stanley Hauerwas, and Robert Kreig. Tilley, in his book *STORY THEOLOGY*, claims metaphorical language is central to most faith stories. This language is commonly expressed in two ways, through ritual observances (such as the Eucharist) and through the faith stories of the believing community.<sup>16</sup>

Stanley Hauerwas provides important detail about what stories provide in the

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15. Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments: Johannes Climacus*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 65.

16. Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1985), 4-5.

religious experience, why their contribution matters, and how they make contributions that otherwise would be missing. He claims it is easy to recognize a story when we hear it, but when we are asked to explain what a story is, it becomes trickier, largely because of the multiple functions stories are meant to provide. Some stories are short-lived jokes while others are mythic tales containing the core of the very culture out of which they were formed. Sometimes we listen because we know the ending and the listening gives comfort, other times we listen to learn something new. There are times when a listener will dismiss the story as fiction, “just a story” and other times when the story rings truer than real events of our recent history. That’s the kind of reaction one would expect from the core stories of religious experience. They are the material one uses to test experience and judge the truth of the community in which one lives.

Hauerwas goes further when he says stories are the things that allow us to make sense of the personal mysteries of ourselves. Quoting Sallie TeSelle, he writes, “We learn who we are through the stories we embrace as our own – the story of my life is structured by the larger stories in which I understand my personal story to take place.”<sup>17</sup>

In the introduction to *WHY NARRATIVE? Readings in Narrative Theology*, Hauerwas asserts that narrative theology can make various claims about its value, including the use of stories to explain human action, explain the structures of human consciousness, depict the identities of human or divine agents, and account for the historical development of traditions. While some think narrative is valuable in and of itself, others claim that it may not be enough. In fact both are true. This is yet another example of the need for “both/and”

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16. Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1985), 4-5.

17. Stanley Hauerwas with Richard Bondi and David Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 78.

statements in theology. Something more may be needed to tie understanding to the narrative (story), and finding that missing piece can be one of story theology's challenges. Story must contain meaning and truth.

In an essay co-authored with David Burrell, Hauerwas includes four criteria for testing the truthfulness of narrative, a "truth-testing" that provides the elements needed to make the narrative understood and meaningful. Any story we adopt, or allow to adopt us, must display the power to release us from destructive alternatives, provide ways of seeing through current distortions, give room to keep us from having to resort to violence, and create a sense for the tragic to help understand how meaning can distort power. These stories will be judged by the effect they have on the people who allow them to shape their lives.<sup>18</sup>

Hauerwas contends that in order to live morally, we need a story with enough substance to sustain moral activity in our world. Another name for those substantive stories might be "faith stories." Hauerwas doesn't claim that the stories with which Christians and Jews identify are the **only** stories that teach skills for truthfulness in the moral life. In fact, different stories will lead to different ways of living and understanding life. But what they do well is to demand that believers be faithful to the God who has been faithful to them, i.e. the covenant with God for Israel and (for Christians) the cross of Christ. Religious faith comes to accepting a certain set of stories as canonical. In short, we discover our human selves and our relationship to God more effectively through these stories, and we use them to judge the adequacy of other schemes for humankind.<sup>19</sup>

The big question for Hauerwas is this, "Which story best helps me to know myself

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18. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, ed. "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," by Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell in *WHY NARRATIVE: Readings in Narrative Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989, 185.

19. *Ibid.*, 188-190.

and God?” That story must be able to take the believer out of his own self-deception and allow him to approach truthfulness. It also must give him the tools to replace the “grammar of God” (often universal and generic) with a name for God. The Christian salvation story is a personal one that requires a personal, relationship with a saving God who can be named. This big question is one that can only be answered on a moral level. The answers to the questions, “Who is God?” and “Who am I?” can provide the skills needed to form truthful and moral lives.<sup>20</sup>

Karl Rahner, in a chapter in his *Theological Investigations* entitled “The Two Basic Types of Christology,” offers insights that can help inform the discussion about stories or narrative Christology. Rahner’s two types of Christology are “saving history,” a type a Christology viewed from below and a “metaphysical type,” a Christology developing downwards from above. While Rahner doesn’t call either story, his saving history Christology is close to a narrative Christology in that it relies on the man Jesus and his earthly mission. Rahner claims the point of departure for either Christology, but especially for saving history Christology, is in a return over and over to the quite simple experience of Jesus of Nazareth. His grounding in the Christology is the simple experience of the man Jesus and his Resurrection. For many Christian believers, that experience is encountered first and often most powerfully through Scripture stories. Even Rahner’s metaphysical type of Christology, starting with the pre-existent Logos descending from heaven to become man, achieves a visibly historical dimension<sup>21</sup> that is often described in story.

Rahner claims the incarnation is not as much an event in space and time as it is God entering into the human order to have his own personal history of love within it. To

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20. Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 79-81.

21. Karl Rahner, “The Two Basic Types of Christology,” in *Theological Investigations XII*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1975, 221.

achieve intelligibility and to justify its story, Rahner's Christology is forced to return repeatedly to the historical dimension of Jesus' saving ministry. Rahner's return to historicity feels different than other historical Jesus efforts, and one may ask, "What's different?"

## **THE HISTORICAL JESUS QUEST AND FAITH STORIES**

The recent quest for the historical Jesus by members of the Jesus Seminar and others provides a challenge to the idea of using story to deepen faith. The Jesus Seminar doesn't find many of the stories Christians use in telling their faith story to be authentic. If they didn't happen, the question then becomes can they be believed?

Marcus Borg is a theologian who has been associated with the quest for the historical Jesus and the Jesus seminar. According to Mark Allen Powell, Borg's theology is based on a personal response to Jesus at the deepest level. He is most interested in the kind of person Jesus was, using an interdisciplinary approach that includes sociology, anthropology, and the history of the study of religions.

In an on-line piece titled "Me and Jesus – The Journey Home," Borg traces his own spiritual journey starting with traditional Christian roots, through stages of doubt and deconstruction, to a more personal and adult understanding of Christianity he calls "relationship." He sees Christian claims about Jesus not as something to believe, but some-thing to be lived. He doesn't call Jesus God in this piece, but he does assert that to be Christian "is to be part of a community that tells these stories and sings these songs. It feels like home."<sup>22</sup>

Borg is undoubtedly sincere, but he misses something vital that Luke Timothy Johnson finds in his book *THE REAL JESUS*. Johnson says the Jesus Seminar

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22. Marcus Borg, "Me and Jesus – The Journey Home, The Fourth R, Vol 6:4, July/August 1993, 9-10. ([www.westarinstitute.org](http://www.westarinstitute.org) accessed 10/20/2006)

quest is asking the wrong questions. Christian faith is not based on the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ's power in the present. The Christians' memory of Jesus' ministry is not dependent on the right interpretation of early (historic) experience as much as it is on the presence of the resurrected Jesus in the world now. That presence adds to their faith stories continually as they are told.

Johnson doesn't look for discrete pieces of historical meaning. Instead, he finds a "narrative epitome, an abbreviated form of the 'story of Jesus' that is applied to the lives of believers."<sup>23</sup> The meaning of the real Jesus is not found in history, it is found in his obedience to the Father right through to the end to his ministry; death and Resurrection. His approach fits comfortably in a Christology that brings together the three elements of Scripture and Tradition, historical research, and contemporary thought. All three are enhanced by the explicit use of narratives about Jesus – or faith stories.<sup>24</sup>

### **LIVING ONE'S STORY IN FAITHFULNESS**

Faith sharing has become an essential element in many a Catholic Christian's formation, especially as believing adults. Churches use it in settings as diverse as catechesis for RCIA candidates and catechumens (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and in-home small group gatherings. In the American Church, many of these latter gatherings follow a structure designed by the organization, Renew International.

As a leader in both RCIA and Renew, I have seen first-hand that both rely heavily on the faith stories of each participant, regardless of the depth or sophistication of those experiences. The important criteria here is these stories must be real and have touched the

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23. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 143.

24. Robert A. Krieg, *Story-shaped Christology: The Role of Narratives in Identifying Jesus Christ*. (Mahway, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988), 152.



participant in a way that added to his or her faith life. I can't imagine these sessions without faith stories. Without the humanizing element of story they would be lifeless discussions at best. The training materials for Renew leaders offer the following insight:

Faith sharing refers to the shared reflections on the action of God in one's life experience as related to Scripture and the faith of the Church. The purpose [of faith sharing] is an encounter between the person in the concrete circumstances of his or her life and a loving God, leading to a conversion of heart.<sup>25</sup>

One must ask if there is a danger in this faith sharing of becoming more interested in telling the story than in uncovering the truth of that story. Renew International seems aware of that possibility when they say the sharing must be balanced with the Churches traditional both/and balance of Scripture and Tradition. It also expands its current structure by including specific cross references to the new Catechism of the Catholic Church.

So it's not **just** telling our story, it's knowing the foundation that story sits on that makes it important. We're asked to share more than an opinion, we're asked to share real faith, a faith seeking understanding like Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* definition of theology from the 11th century.

## TELLING OUR STORIES IN A NEW AGE

Twenty-first century western culture doesn't tell its stories in the traditional ways any more. The idea of oral transmission has been supplanted by a culture of blackberries, cell phones, and blogs. We listen to our stories in media rooms instead of family rooms. In fact, the whole notion of family for many in the West seems an outdated tradition. How do we keep our stories alive and transmit them from one generation to the next when even basic notions like reading are being challenged, and how do we keep our faith stories alive when church attendance and membership are both declining? I maintain the solution is still

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25. Renew International, *Why Catholic? Journey Through the Catechism: The Profession of Faith – What We Believe* (Plainfield, NJ: Renew International, 2002), ix.

found in stories containing meaning and metaphor. Our way of telling them is changing, but they **are** still being told. I'll use two examples to make that point – the first is from the media world, the second is from the unlikely arena of the business seminar.

Krista Tippett's religion program on public radio, *Speaking of Faith*, might have been considered a prime candidate for the most unlikely to succeed award when it was first launched. Religion coverage in the media, other than Sunday morning broadcasts of televangelists, was almost non-existent. What could this new program offer that could expect to gain any kind of loyalty from audiences?

In her book, *Speaking of Faith*, Tippett offers some answers. Not surprisingly, those answers have a lot to do with storytelling on the radio. She says

I'm sometimes part of conferences of panel discussions where "virtue" and "morality" and "character" are addressed almost as abstractions. How can we define such things in a pluralistic society, the questions begin, and how support them? These conversations always only come alive when people start telling their stories – stories of children being changed by adults who care; of groups of colleagues making a difference in a particular corporate culture; or role models and teachers and friendships that altered perspectives and lives. Human relationship – which begins with seeing an "other" as human – is the context in which virtue happens, the context in which character is formed.<sup>26</sup>

It's those stories that became the program, and audiences have responded enthusiastically. One of the guests Tippett has interviewed is writer, Bruce Feiller, whose book *Walking the Bible* attempted to show the Bible as a "living, breathing entity" not an "abstraction gathering dust."<sup>27</sup> An unexpected outcome of writing the book was Feiller's becoming convinced of the power of religious stories to mirror a journey he believes the entire American population has been on since the tragedy of 9/11. The story Feiller told on the radio that day was of three cultures, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, all sharing a common ancestor in Abraham but also all sharing in an almost genetic, age-old spirituality as well. In trying to unravel this .

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26. Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith* (New York: Viking, 2007), 188.

27. *Ibid.*, 205

Abraham story, Feiller discovered hundreds of competing versions all trying to be heard. He wondered what light could be shed on the 9/11 tragedy by recasting these stories.

This begs the question, “so what?” Is it enough to listen to others telling their stories, or must we also have opportunity for conversation in order to come to some kind of consensus? At the very least, the media offers a broad pulpit to start the conversation. Building consensus will need to start locally – perhaps as small as in the individual family.

Tippet seems content to let the first step in the process be the telling of stories. But her own first-person approach to religion and ethics won’t leave it there.

I believe we have too often diminished and narrowed the parameters of this quest [for God and ultimate things]. We’ve made it heady or emotional and neglected to take seriously the flawed, mundane physicality, the mess as well as the mystery, or the raw materials with which we are dealing.<sup>28</sup>

Those raw materials are expressed in our faith stories.

Another unlikely place where stories may be shared is in the modern-day phenomena of business seminars. Such a recent gathering was sponsored by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Spirituality titled “Working on Purpose.” Its intent was to provide participants with tools to use in a spiritual approach to retirement (or the “second half of life” according to the workshop presenter). A cornerstone of the workshop was the book *Claiming Your Place at the Fire* by Richard Leider and David A. Shapiro, the title of which was derived from the tradition of gathering in a circle around a fire at the end of the day to share stories. We don’t do that anymore. In fact, the idea of anything shared – meals or stories – at the end of the day seems very foreign in our modern culture. Instead, we attend seminars where information and personal stories may be shared in an attempt to reclaim our stories, sense of place, vocation, even our meaning. One might ask, “What have we lost?”

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28. Ibid., 133

One of the book's longest chapters deals with the importance of nurturing the flame of our identity. The way to do that, according to the authors, is to recall our stories.

Deep in our souls, we all want to live in a story larger than ourselves. For each of us, the real story is personal and purposeful: to know what we are here to do and why. Søren Kierkegaard wrote this in his journal: "The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die."<sup>29</sup>

That quote should remind us to be attentive to our purpose and to also know that we are part of a story much bigger than just our own. Leider and Shapiro contend the question really being asked in our souls is the age-old, existential one, "Who am I?" The Christian cannot answer that question outside of relationship to a personal Triune God, and only one of the persons in that Triune God has lived as one of us. That is the Son who asks each of us to answer "Who do you say that I am?" from Mark 8. As this paper has attempted to show, that answer must be shaped by each person's stories lived in the larger faith community that shares our values.

### **CONCLUSION: RITUALS, STORIES, REVELATION AND THE CHURCH**

Most practicing Christians will answer Jesus' Christological question from the Gospels, "Who do you say that I am?", in a community of believers called Church. It is there they will hear Scripture proclaimed by ministers of the word, reflect and learn from Scripture stories through homilies, and re-live those most significant stories in ritual observances of those events that the church calls sacraments.

Since Vatican II and its document *Lumen Gentium*, the official view has shifted from

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29. Richard J. Leider and David A Shapiro. *Claiming Your Place at the Fire: Living the Second Half of Your Life on Purpose*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2004, 24.

a Church that emphasized structure and hierarchy to one that points to the Trinitarian mystery in its various names for itself. The Church reflects God the Father when it is called “The People of God,” the Son when it is called “The Body of Christ,” and the Holy Spirit when it is called the “Temple of the Spirit.”

*Lumen Gentium* then gives a new definition of Church. The old definition of a congregation of all who profess the same Christian faith, celebrate the same sacraments, function under the legitimate leadership of pastors is replaced by a new definition of Church as Mystery. Its mystery is the result of the action of the Divine in the world, and that mystery has three distinct qualities. It is divine, transcendent, and salvific.

Krista Tippett has an important insight about mystery to add here.

Mystery is the crux of religion that is almost always missing in our public expressions of religion. Mystery resists absolutes. It can hold truth, compassion, and open possibility in relationship. If mystery is real, even more real than what we can touch with our five senses, uncertainty and ambiguity are blessed. We have to live with that, and struggle with its implications. Mystery acknowledged is, paradoxically, humanizing.<sup>30</sup>

The purpose of this mystery called Church is to be an instrument for salvation of the world. That salvation is effected in a multitude of ways, including the Scripture and Tradition of the Church, Sacraments, and even the stories of the people being saved. Church fulfills God’s plan of reconciling all to Christ and can only be understood in its relationship to salvation.

So if most Christians will answer questions about Jesus’ identity in a community of believers called Church, what will that gathering look like? This reflection by the Catholic writer, Henri J. Nouwen answers that question well.

**Telling the Story of Jesus:** The Church is called to announce the Good News of Jesus to all people and all nations. Besides the many works of mercy by which the

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30. Tippett., 232

Church must make Jesus' love visible, it must also joyfully announce the great mystery of God's salvation through the life, suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. The story of Jesus is to be proclaimed and celebrated. Some will hear and rejoice, some will remain indifferent, some will become hostile. The story of Jesus will not always be accepted, but it must be told.

We who know the story and try to live it out, have the joyful task of telling it to others. When our words rise from hearts full of love and gratitude, they will bear fruit, whether we can see this or not.<sup>31</sup>

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31. Henri Nouwen Society, DAILY MEDITATION FOR NOVEMBER 7, 2006, [www.mailto:email\\_lists@henrinouwen.org](mailto:email_lists@henrinouwen.org), accessed on-line on November 7, 2006, taken from Bread for the Journey by Henri J. Nouwen.

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