

Let Me Tell You a Story: A Journalist's Pursuit of Redemptive Storytelling

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### Abstract

This thesis will explore, and attempt to define, what redemptive storytelling is within the field of journalism. Storytelling is a practice as old as humanity itself. Indeed, it is ancient, originating in the mind of God, the author of the greatest story ever told. Books written by experts in the field of storytelling, as well as scholarly articles, will be utilized. Aside from journalism, aspects of psychology, theology, and philosophy will be included in the consideration of what makes a story redemptive. This thesis also probes the reasons why stories are so crucial to the human experience, and how God uses them for his redemptive purposes around the world.

**KEYWORDS:** redemption, journalism, storytelling

### Let Me Tell You a Story: A Journalist's Pursuit of Redemptive Storytelling

Let me tell you a story — those six words, echoed throughout history, have the power to change the world. Since the beginning of time, men, women, and children have been telling stories, both for survival and for entertainment purposes. From folklore and fairytales to autobiographies and magazine articles, stories are what shape culture.

A journalist is one who listens to, and tells, stories. Furthermore, a journalist has the responsibility to tell *true* stories. The words that a journalist weaves together have the ability to kill or to heal, to build up or destroy. This is because words are powerful. Thus, a journalist who is a Christian has a tremendous responsibility placed in his or her hands. Not only is the Christian journalist to tell *true* stories, but he or she is also to tell *redemptive* stories. But what is a redemptive story exactly?

#### Defining Redemption

According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (2016), the word redemption is a noun that signifies “the act of making something better or more acceptable” (para. 1). Consequently, “to redeem,” the verb from which the noun redemption proceeds, is defined as, “to make (something that is bad, unpleasant, etc.) better or more acceptable” (para.1). The word “redemptive,” then, is the adjectival form of the noun redemption. To meet the criteria for being redemptive, something must “relate to or bring about redemption” (para. 1).

It is essential to remember what redemption means: “the act of making something better or more acceptable” (para 1). Thus, a redemptive story is one that makes something better or more acceptable. While this definition is sufficient for the dictionary,

when applied to reality, it rings a bit hollow. True redemption, biblical redemption (i.e., the work of Christ) does more than make bad things better or more acceptable. It makes dead men live. It makes broken people whole. It has the paradoxical power of turning the world upside down and somehow still making it right. In fact, biblical redemption can be equated with “reversal,” for a “reversal” is “a change to an opposite state, condition, decision” (para. 1).

To explain the Christian view of redemption, the following analogy can be useful. If Jack replaces the worn-out engine in his car with a new one, the car will certainly run better (and more acceptably), but that does not necessarily mean that the car is redeemed. It is still, after all, the same old car. If, however, Jack takes his car to the mechanic at the local garage and he begins working on it from the inside out, fixing all the little problems Jack never noticed, cleaning here, adding a fresh coat of paint there, then Jack has a new car that looks nothing like his old one, because the mechanic redeemed (remade) his car. That is what Christ’s redemptive work on the cross did for all of humanity — it gave all people the opportunity to be remade. Put simply, Christ did not come to make better men; he came to make new men. He came to give them a new story, a new narrative, which would completely change their lives.

### **Redemption and Journalism**

Redemptive storytelling means two things for the Christian journalist: First, the stories that Christian journalists write ought to be excellent, not just good or satisfactory, because they are being written not for their own purposes, but to reflect the creativity and the heart of the Author of Life. Second, the stories that Christian journalists write are to

bring about redemption; they are to actively work to make broken men and women — and thus, a broken world — whole. And that is exactly what stories can do.

Humans tell stories because they are made in the image of God, and God is a storyteller. He is, in fact, the preeminent storyteller. In the New Testament, God is referred to as the “Author of Life” (Acts 3:15, ESV) and the “Author and Perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2, NKJV). The English word “author” is derived from the Greek word “ἀρχηγον” (ar-kay-gone) which can signify “pioneer,” “originator,” or “founder” (Danker, 2000, p. 138). Humans cannot resist the desire to tell stories because stories are not merely connected to their psyches or physical well-being. They are connected to the human soul. Humans are *made* to tell stories.

Ironically, as will be made apparent later in this thesis, very few Christians have attempted to answer the question of why humans tell stories. This is disappointing because Christians should be the first ones to answer this question. This thesis will lay some basic groundwork in this area and attempt to define and explain biblically redemptive storytelling via literary and theological analysis. It will also examine models of redemptive stories that can be found among the media today (comparing and contrasting them with biblical models), comment on the ethic of the Christian journalist, and conclude with a discussion of why redemptive storytelling is necessary in the media culture of this century.

### **Who is a Journalist?**

Before beginning an investigation into redemptive storytelling, the role of the journalist must be defined. The rise of social media networks, the availability of the Internet, and the 24/7 news cycle have made reporting and disseminating information much

easier than in previous years. Such progress begs the question: who, exactly, is a journalist? Is a journalist any person who writes a blog, constantly updates his or her Twitter feed, or uploads videos to YouTube? What sets a journalist apart? It is a question that has been pondered and debated in recent years. In his essay “Who is a Journalist?” Jay Black (qtd. in Meyers, 2010) argues that a journalist is best defined by his or her function, or action. He writes, “...I conclude the best characterization of ‘journalist’ is rooted in the performative and guided by the ethical: To be a journalist is to engage in particular activities and to perform them ethically” (p. 104). Gregg Leslie (2009), of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, seems to think otherwise. In an article titled, “Who is a journalist?” he writes:

But making that functional distinction too broad can render it meaningless. If all personal communications become an act of journalism, too many speakers will cynically claim the title of journalist to gain a benefit, evade coverage under a restrictive law, or keep themselves out of court, and the purpose of being a journalist will be lost. (para. 10)

If a journalist is at least partially defined by his or her respective function, then it is essential to discuss the nature of that function. In their essay “An Explanation and a Method for the Ethics of Journalism,” Deni Elliot and David Ozar (qtd. in Meyers, 2010) ask two critical questions. The first question is, whom does journalism serve? The second is, what good does journalism do? In response to the first question, Elliot and Ozar (2010) state that journalism serves the public, which they define as a geographic grouping, or a whole society, and that members of the group or society interact with one another (p. 11). The authors write, “...journalism’s commitment is to serve ‘all the people,’ the society as a

whole, and to relate to that society precisely insofar as people's actions or potentially affect the lives of others in the society" (p. 11). Elliot and Ozar (2010) answer the second question by describing the central values of journalism: provide information the society desires, provide information the society needs, empower others, and build community (pp. 13-15). From this, one can conclude that such a combination of the informational with the inspirational is the goal of journalism.

Furthermore, journalists are to write and report objectively. While objectivity works in theory, it is much more difficult to maintain in reality — one of the ironies of journalism. Every journalist has his or her own particular worldview, something that makes true objectivity difficult. How then does a journalist remain objective, without forfeiting his or her convictions or coming across as apathetic?

In her essay "Conflicting Loyalties and Personal Choices," Jacqui Banaszynski (qtd. in Meyers, 2010) describes the tension a reporter experiences when confronted with a personal ethical dilemma. She writes:

Popular mythology about — and, sadly, sometimes within — news media indicates that these value systems are in conflict: the profession is bound by conventions that set us apart from society. We clutch our notebooks like talismans against emotion, and hide behind the safe shield of conflict-of-interest policies and ethics codes. We observe but don't engage. We record but don't react. We chronicle a situation but don't care about the outcome. The presumption is that we must put down our personal values — perhaps even our humanity — when we pick up our notebooks or cameras. What a misperception. And what a shame. Be-

cause the best journalism is driven by passion — passion for the truth, and passion for society's right to that truth. And passion is a decidedly human trait, one that comes from a deeply personal place. (p. 238)

Journalists are frequently viewed as one-dimensional characters — reporting robots — instead of three-dimensional people who feel as well as think.

Journalists who are Christians must consider why and how they write. Why do journalists write? Why are they compelled to put words on a page day after day? What keeps them chasing stories? Christian journalists write because that is what they were created to do. God is an Author, and in this way journalists reflect God when they write. In addition, journalists write to communicate truth to the world. Bret Lott (2013) puts it this way:

...the created world has a moral order to which we must submit, and through that submission and only through that submission will harmony and beauty and truth even begin to be approached by us who profess to practice art. Furthermore, we do not commit art in a vacuum but are a part of a society — of humanity—at large, and there we indeed have a role in that society, a role that can and will contribute to the harmonization of human activity at large. (p. 34)

Journalists are artists. Writing — storytelling — is an act of creation, an act that is for the benefit of society. While Lott was addressing all writers, not just journalists, his observations apply to members of the press. Journalists do not write in a vacuum. People around the world consume words every day, words that can alter the course of their lives. This brings us to the next question. How do journalists write? This is not merely a question of mechanics, but of attitude.

As mentioned earlier, the job of the journalist is to keep his or her audience informed — a journalist is a public servant. Thus, the journalist must always be thinking about his or her readers, and how to best serve them. What are they most interested in? How can a journalist communicate in a relevant, relatable, and understandable way? All of these are questions a journalist must ask him or herself before sitting down to write.

Journalists, especially journalists who claim the name of Christ, much approach this task keeping in mind their servanthood. June Casagrande (2010) states that writers often have difficulty writing because they are not aware of their audience — they do not craft with their readership in mind. She writes:

The Reader is king. You are his servant. ... Only by knowing your place can you do your job well. ... Here's another way to think of this: Your writing is not about you. It's about the Reader. (pp. 3-4)

This is where all writers must begin, a concept that Casagrande frames as “thy Reader, thy god” (Casagrande, 2010, pp. 4-5). If the reader is not served, the writer will not have a career. Concluding her work, Casagrande again reminds writers:

We can't please all the readers all the time and we shouldn't try. But we don't get to create our readers in our image, either. We don't get to tell them what to value or enjoy. We can write in a way true to our own voice and our own ideas of beauty and substance, and we can hope that some Readers appreciate it. But, even when we aim to serve the narrowest cross section of Readers, we're still working for the Readers we have. We should be grateful that we have them. (p. 166)

This truth is of special significance for journalists who are Christians, echoing the language of Paul in Philippians 2:3-8:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(pp. 1580-1581, English Standard Version)

Journalists who are Christians have committed their lives and livelihoods to a God who left heaven for them. The perfect Creator of the universe became as one of his creations in order to save them. At the Last Supper with his disciples, he washed their grimy, sweaty, smelly feet, a job given to the lowest servant in a household. Jesus did not just humble himself — he humbled himself completely. And this is what writers who are Christians ought to do — wash feet with words, spoken and written. While a publication may not allow God or Christian beliefs to be explicitly mentioned, those who follow Christ may exemplify him in their attitudes, namely how they approach their work. And, because a Christian is called by God to be a servant, Christian writers should also hold themselves to a higher standard in their work. Every word written or spoken conveys a message. As Banaszynski (qtd. in Meyers, 2010) asserts, journalists tell stories that connect the writers and readers as fellow human beings (p. 239). That then begs the question: Why is it that humans tell stories?

### Why Stories?

From the time the alarm clock blares in the morning until the end of the day, humans are bombarded with stories. Television, radio, internet, cell phones, magazines, newspaper headlines, billboards and a host of other sources clamor for attention, all attempting to tell their stories. But more than that, they are extending an invitation to turn up the volume a little louder, to lean in a little closer, or to flip to the next page. Stories have an irresistible pull on the minds and hearts of humanity. But why do stories have such magnetism? The renowned storyteller C.S. Lewis (1982) put it this way in his essay *On Stories*:

Shall I be thought whimsical if, in conclusion, I suggest that this internal tension in the heart of every story between the theme and the plot constitutes, after all, its chief resemblance to life? If Story fails in that way, does not life commit the same blunder? In real life, as in story, something must happen. This is just the trouble. We grasp at a state and find only a succession of events in which the state is never quite embodied. ... But so, in real life, the idea of adventure fades when day-to-day details begin to happen. ... In life and art both, as it seems to me, we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive....But I think that it is sometimes done — or very, very nearly done — in stories. I believe the effort to be well worth making. (pp. 19-20)

Lewis (1982) points out that story matters because narrative is what drives daily life and gives it meaning. Every person on planet Earth lives a different narrative, because each life is its own story. Humans are living stories, and their particular narratives determine

where they live, how they respond to crises, who they worship, why they support various causes, what they love, and when they will finally get around to that pesky little chore they have been putting off.

There are two basic theories of story — the secular view and the theological view. The secular view can be broken down into two theories: the evolutionary biology view and the psychological view. The secular theory of story will be addressed in this section, and the theological theory will follow in the next.

Evolutionary biology posits that humans evolved over millions of years. That is to say, communication methods (especially language) were not the same millions of years ago — or even thousands of years ago — as they are at present. According to evolutionary biologists, at some point many years past, humans began to tell stories as a basic means of survival (because evolutionary biology is based on the foundation of “the survival of the fittest”). Cave dwellers told stories — where to find the best food, or which animals were dangerous — in order to preserve themselves and their families. In her book, *Wired for Story*, Lisa Cron (2012) comments:

Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution — more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to. Story is what enabled us to imagine what might happen in the future and so prepare for it — a feat no other species can lay claim to, opposable thumbs or not. (p. 1)

But stories are much more than mere survival tools, which is where the second secular theory of story comes in.

According to the psychological view of story, humans tell stories for entertainment and comfort. After all, the human race appears to have finished evolving...so why

do we keep telling stories? Cody Delistraty (2014), in his article, “The Psychological Comforts of Storytelling,” asserts that humans tell stories as a means of seeking control over their lives. Stories are like mirrors in which readers see themselves. They present a situation, and the reader is afforded the opportunity to respond. A well-written story allows the reader to picture him or herself in the situation of the main character, be it a work of fiction or an autobiographical account. The reader then begins to think how he or she would confront the obstacle or enemy if faced with the same crisis. According to Delistraty (2014), stories also inform people’s emotional lives. Stories help humans to better understand themselves and one another. For example, in counseling sessions or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, people share their personal stories. Telling such stories is key to the recovery process — words of encouragement and comfort that assure someone that he or she is not alone. Arthur Dorbin (2013), in an article for *Psychology Today*, posits that humans make sense of the world through stories, and that, in sharing stories, humans experience a sense of belonging:

John Lennon once famously quipped that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Lennon didn’t know which would go first — rock ‘n roll or Christianity. Lennon imagined a world without religion and other institutions that stifled human potential. What he and others had not recognized is that it is not possible to live without some overarching narrative that provides legitimacy to sustaining institutions. It is that which gives coherence and meaning to life’s experiences. The celebrity phenomenon underscores the human need to connect, to be part of something larger than ourselves, to have an identity. We need to be part of a

narrative, no matter how shallow or manipulative it may be. We understand life through stories. We cannot live without them. (para. 8)

Lastly, Delistraty (2014) argues that humans tell stories as a way of finding purpose in their lives, making order out of chaos, and significance out of randomness — stories are a type of “existential problem-solving” (para. 8).

### **Stories and Faith**

The previous theories claim that stories are simply products of neurological hard-wiring, and nothing more. But there is still more to be said, and this is where the second view of storytelling, the biblical view, comes in to play. And for journalists who claim the name of Christ, this is significant.

In his book, *The God-Shaped Brain*, Dr. Timothy R. Jennings (2013) discusses the ways in which different views of God affect overall mind and body health. The human brain is a powerful organ, one that controls every aspect of bodily life. Philosopher Renee Descartes (1637) is often quoted as saying, “I think, therefore I am,” meaning that because human beings think, they exist (para 1). This saying, however, could be interpreted quite literally: as humans think, so they are. The strength of human belief is incredible. People can, in fact, think themselves into being sick (Jennings, 2013). Jennings (2013) writes:

Our brains are constantly in a state of flux. Moment by moment new neurons are developing and new circuits are being laid down, new axons and dendrites are forming for the facilitating of new messages to the neurons. At the same time, unused connections are removed, dormant nerve tracks are pruned back and

unused neurons are deleted. Incredibly, our beliefs, thoughts, behaviors, and even our diets change our brain structure, ultimately changing who we are. (p. 11)

How humans think shapes them as people. Very few Christians have attempted to answer the question of why humans tell stories. This a bit ironic since the Christian faith is translated to us in stories. John Walsh (2014), in *The Art of Storytelling*, writes that 75% of the Bible is written in story format — there are more than 525 stories in Scripture (p. 126). Furthermore, of the remaining 25% of Scripture, 15% is some form of poetry, and 10% is devoted to analytical reasoning (p. 126). Walsh (2014) writes:

The Bible reflects different ways people receive and remember information. The various writers of Scripture wrote to either story thinkers or analytical thinkers.

The Gospels were written in stories. To this day, they appeal to the story thinkers in our society. The Epistles are analytical and appeal to that type of thinker. Both need to be read and studied, but the appeal is different. (p. 21)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is called the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14, ESV). Christians, because they have been redeemed by Jesus, are God’s words to the world — living stories. Humans cannot escape the desire to tell stories because stories are connected to their souls. Jennings (2013) explains:

If God is the originator of all creation, then he is the wellspring that the parameters, blueprints, and foundational designs for life arise. God’s very nature, essence and being is the source code of life, health and happiness, the template on which life is built. (p. 22)

Everything that humans do — working, resting, creating, feeling, telling stories — comes from the Imago Dei. Humans were created in the image and likeness of God;

therefore, it is no surprise if they engage in some of the same kinds of activities that God does.

In the work, *In the Beginning was the Word: Language, a God-Centered Approach*, Vern Poythress (2009) asserts that language itself is divinely derived. Throughout Scripture, God speaks: he uses words. He also inspired men, via the Holy Spirit, to tell his story. From his study of the Scriptures, Poythress (2009) has concluded that humankind uses language because humans are made in the image of God (i.e., God speaks, thus humans do). Language itself is even a reflection of God's Trinitarian character. Poythress' (2009) theological theory of language provides a firm foundation for an investigation into what it means to tell redemptive stories as a journalist.

For Poythress it begins with the opening words of Scripture: "In the beginning God created...." (Gen. 1:1, ESV) This is the beginning of God's redemptive story. The first thing that readers of Genesis understand about God is that he is a Creator. From the outset, the author of Genesis wanted his audience to understand that God is creative. But how did God create? The story continues in Genesis 1:3: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (ESV). In order to create, God spoke. He used words. God continues speaking creation into existence (Gen 1:4-25, ESV) until He decides to create man (and woman). In Genesis 1:26, God declares, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...." (ESV). The author of Genesis then explains, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27, ESV).

In the second chapter of Genesis, the author focuses on the creation of Adam, the first man, recording that God "formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into

his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7, ESV).

Next, God creates Eve, the first woman, from one of Adam’s ribs: “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Gen. 2:21-22, ESV).

Theologians throughout the ages have debated about what it means for men and women to be made in the image and likeness of God. Some believe that the answer lies in the physical, while others maintain that the concepts of image and likeness are purely spiritual. Poythress (2009) reasons that one aspect of being made in God’s image is humanity’s use of language (p. 29). God uses words in His acts of creation, and He creates human beings that also use words (unlike the animals):

Human language and human use of language come about only because God has created human beings with certain capacities, and those capacities reflect capacities in God himself. That is, God is the “archetype,” the original. Man is an “ectype,” derivative, creaturely, but still imaging God. (Poythress, 2009, p. 29)

Not only do stories help humans to survive and to relate to one another, but they also afford humans the experience of transcendence. By way of story, humans are able to step from their own world into another, be it real or fictional. When reading a newspaper or a novel, something curious happens. The reader is lifted from the realm of the ordinary and the finite into a new dimension. They are able to examine the thoughts and feelings of others and interact with them. This desire for transcendence is crucial to the human experience, a desire that is neither purely physical nor emotional, but spiritual. Poythress (2009) affirms this idea, in that storytelling offers some form of transcendence for both

the tellers and the hearers, a type of transcendence that mirrors the transcendence of God (p. 94).

### **The Storyteller's Stories**

If humans tell stories because they are made in the image of a divine Storyteller, then it is important to understand what kinds of stories that Storyteller tells. According to A.S. Byatt (2009) of the *New York Times*:

The Judeo-Christian culture is founded on a linear narrative in time. It moves forward from creation through history, to redemption in the Christian case, and looks forward to the promised end, when time and death will cease to be.

(para. 11)

For those who follow Christ, faith is wrapped up in story: the redemption story, the ultimate reversal. Poythress (2009) writes:

Redemption by Christ is a story. It is a story of something that really happened in history, in space and time. Because it is at the heart of God's purposes for the world, it is the one central story. So, in the end, all other stories about working out human purposes derive their meaning from being related to this central story.

(Poythress, 2009, p. 206)

For the journalist who follows Christ, redemptive storytelling not only becomes important, but a necessity. In order to follow the example of the true redemptive storyteller (Christ), the stories that Christian journalists write must draw upon elements of his story. In short: a redemptive story must point toward Christ, sometimes indirectly so.

### **Old Testament Case Study: The Book of Esther**

The Book of Esther is a storytelling model for the journalist today. It combines sound storytelling with redemptive elements and journalistic technique.

An orphan growing up in poverty, the young Esther is taken into the king's palace, made a queen, and saves her people from certain death. Her story has the makings of a redemptive one because it is a story of reversal. While every story in Scripture is part of an overarching redemptive narrative the Esther story is unique because it has one aspect that sets it apart from many other biblical stories (especially in the Old Testament): the author of the book never mentions God by name.

A close examination of the book of Esther reveals that it has the makings of a redemptive story, in that the author of the story chronicles a reversal of fortune for the young queen, and a defeat of the enemies of the Jews.

As the author of the book tells his readers, Esther was an orphan, raised by her cousin Mordecai. Presumably, Esther and Mordecai were not wealthy, because they were Jews living under the Persian regime. After the dismissal of Queen Vashti by King Ahasuerus, Esther, along with several other virgins from the city, is taken to the king's palace in order to try out for the position of queen. Following a year of beautification, Esther spends a night with the king, and is selected to be queen. This is a reversal of fortune like no other, one that is quite painful at the outset. The young Esther is plucked from her home and is forced to compete with other women for the affections of a king: furthermore, she has to lose her virginity, highly prized at that time in history. If she was not selected as the queen, she would be forced to spend the rest of her life as part of the king's harem. So when the king does choose her, she rises from a life of relatively safe anonymity to being the wife of one of the most powerful, volatile men in the world.

Not only does Esther experience a reversal of financial fortune, but she also spares her fellow Jews certain death. Haman, Ahasuerus's chief advisor, hates the Jews, especially Mordecai, Esther's cousin. Out of his bitterness and hatred, Haman plans a mass execution of all the Jews residing in the Persian kingdom. When Mordecai discovers the plot, he urges Esther to save her people. The king, however, does not know that his queen is Jewish. Esther, at the climax of her story, has a decision to make. If she comes before the king uninvited, she risks being condemned to death — and she has not been summoned by the king for a month. But if she does not speak to her husband, her fellow Jews will perish. After fasting for three days, Esther enters her husband's throne room and invites him and Haman to a banquet. The two men come and enjoy themselves, and Esther invites them back the following day. As the second banquet draws to a close, Esther exposes Haman for what he is, and the king is enraged. Shortly thereafter, Haman is executed, hung from the very gallows he had built for his nemesis, Mordecai. The king repeals Haman's execution declaration, and the Jews are even given the opportunity to serve vengeance to their enemies: they kill and plunder them. The Jews have gained the victory.

The Esther narrative is a redemptive one because it is a story of reversal, and there are three major reversals in the book. In chapter 2, the young Esther experiences a reversal of fortune: the poor orphan is taken in to the king's palace (Esther 2:5-9, ESV). Haman plans to kill Mordecai and be honored by the king — except Haman is the one who is hung (from his own gallows, no less), and Mordecai is the one who is honored (Esther 5:9-14; Esther 6:1-14; Esther 7:7-10, ESV). Lastly, when the king revokes the declaration of annihilation, the Jews slaughter their enemies (Esther 9:1-19, ESV). In a

modern reprint of his popular Puritan-era commentary on Esther, Matthew Henry (1985) writes:

The name of God is not found in this book...But, though the name of God be not in it, the finger of God is, directing many minute events for the bringing about of his people's deliverance. The particulars are not only surprising and very entertaining, but edifying and very encouraging to the faith and hope of God's people in the most difficult and dangerous times. (p. 1121)

The book of Esther never mentions God, but he is the ever-present context through which the story is understood. The book highlights the themes of reversal and victory in Esther's story, themes that are found time and again in the books preceding Esther's in the biblical canon.

So how does the story of Esther impact modern journalism? Fast forward several thousand years and hundreds of revolutions of thought later — God is not here. As German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1882) declared years ago: “God is dead...And we have killed him” (para. 2). Nietzsche was not talking about the literal death of God, but the idea that the Christian faith and absolute truth was no longer relevant to modern thought, nor morality (1882). His ideas have thoroughly pervaded modern life, and in no place has it been more obvious than in the world of journalism and mass media.

Because of significant advances in technology and communication, news is spread every hour of every day around the globe. Industry giants like CNN, Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* have reporters stationed in all corners of the Earth, continually updating RSS feeds, blog posts, and websites. Through these, death, chaos, and destruction are fed into homes, restaurants, and other places of business every day. To say

that there is a bleak spin on the news would be an understatement. Good news rarely makes headlines, which prompts the question, “Where is God?” Answering this question is the job of the Christian journalist. Chad Walsh (qtd. in Ryken, 2002), in his essay, “The Advantages of Christian Faith for a Writer,” discusses how Christian writers approach their task with a different set of eyes:

If the Christian faith provides the roomiest dwelling; if Christian eyes can see more and see it more exactly, it should follow that the truth a Christian writer can portray will somehow get through, because it will ring true even in men who consciously reject the faith that offers the new eyes. (p. 173)

Redemptive storytelling, then, is not solely about content — whether the name of Christ is mentioned or not. It is about the angle which the content takes in telling a story. Christians view the world from a redemptive angle — that although this world is indeed broken, it will one day be made whole. Sorrow will turn into joy. Reversal will happen.

### **New Testament Case Study: The Parable of the Prodigal Son**

Christian storytellers can learn from the greatest storyteller of them all: Jesus. In the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels, Jesus speaks to his hearers in parables. The Oxford English Online Dictionary (2016) defines a parable as, “A simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson, as told by Jesus in the Gospels” (para 1). While Jesus could have spoken deeply spiritual truths in deeply spiritual terms, he chose not to. Instead, he decided to teach people about himself, and the kingdom of God, through stories that captured the imagination.

Perhaps one of the most famous redemptive stories Jesus told is that of the Prodigal Son. Found in Luke 15:11-32, it is the story of a young, impertinent son who demands that his father give him his inheritance while his father is still living. Once the father acquiesces, the son then leaves home, squanders all of his father's money, and winds up working on a pig farm. He is starving and penniless. One day, the son becomes disgusted with himself and decides to return to his father, hoping that his father might take him back as a hired servant. As the son walks toward home, his father — who is a long way off — runs to him, throws his arm around him, and kisses him. The father then calls for a robe for his son, a ring to be put on his finger, and shoes to be put on his feet and kills a prime calf in celebration. The father's eldest son, however, is not quite as joyful as his father. He refuses to celebrate his brother's return, and complains to his father about the special treatment. The father responds, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:32).

Jesus, in telling this story, wanted to illustrate the truth of the redemption reversal. An ungrateful son hits rock bottom, a slave to his own desires. But when the son returns home, his father treats him like a prince. The father would have been justified in turning his son away, or in making his son a servant. Yet, the father embraces his son, filth and all, and restores him to his place in the family. And when his oldest son refuses to join in the rejoicing, the father still invites him in. In telling this story, Jesus did something radical. Departing from cultural and religious conventions, Jesus, with his words, painted a picture of his Father: God, Yahweh, the one the Jews professed to worship. Darrell Bock (1994), in his commentary on this parable, writes, "The action breaks all Middle Eastern

protocol; no father would greet a rebellious son this way. But as is often the case in Jesus' parables, the twist in the story makes the point" (p. 260).

Even though the son sinned against the father, the father was not waiting to punish the son upon his return home. Instead the father allows the son to collapse in his arms and welcomes him back into the family. Bock (1994) writes:

First, repentance means an absolute reversal of status. The lost son has become a family member again. The father's acceptance of the penitent son is total. This is God's grace. This is why God pursues sinners. ... The parable is truly a story of reversal. It is the hope of such a reversal that causes Jesus to seek the sinner. The potential of God's grace drives him to love others and actively pursue them.  
(pp. 261-262)

With this in mind, it is important to note that journalists who write redemptive stories write for two sons. There are sons who want nothing to do with the redemption reversal and there are sons who are seeking a better way. Knowing this, journalists who are Christians have to invite both in. These journalists must write in a way that welcomes all readers and extends redemption to all.

### **John McCandlish Phillips: A Reporter with an Eye for Redemption**

John McCandlish Phillips is one example of a Christian engaged in journalism. An employee of one of the most prestigious news outlets in the world, Phillips served as a reporter for the *New York Times* from 1952 to 1973 (John McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute, 2014). What set Phillips apart from the rest of his co-workers was not merely his talent, but his faith. Peter Duffy (2008), of the *New York Times*, wrote of Phillips, "In the secular temple of the big-city newsroom, Mr. Phillips conspicuously placed a

Bible on his desk, calling it ‘a statement I made of who I was and where I stood’” (para 3). Duffy (2008) also wrote that Phillips’s most famous article, “State Klan Leader Hides Secret of Jewish Origin; Klan Leader Here, Hiding the Secret of His Jewish Origin, Preaches Anti-Semitism,” was an investigative piece that exposed Daniel Burros, the Grand Dragon of New York’s Ku Klux Klan, for being an anti-Semitic Jew.

Written in 1965, the article is a glimpse into the life of Daniel Burros, a young man of 28, who has risen through the ranks of American Nazism and become the leader of New York’s KKK. Phillips describes Burros as a highly intelligent man, totally committed to Aryan ideology — to wiping out Jews, African Americans, or anyone else who does not have blonde hair and blue eyes. After citing Burros’s credentials, Phillips shocks the reader by revealing Burros’s Jewish background. Burros’s parents are Jewish, and Burros himself had a traditional Jewish bar mitzvah at the age of 13.

When Phillips confronted Burros at a barbershop in Queens, New York, Burros threatened to kill him (this is chronicled in the article). After issuing the threat, Burros added, “I’ll be ruined. This is all I’ve got to live for” (para. 12). As the article is written in a feature style, Phillips devotes much time to tracing Burros’s fascist history. At the conclusion of the article, Phillips asks why Burros does not give up his activities. Burros informs him that he enjoys the danger and excitement of his position. But Burros adds that when young people approach him about joining an organization such as his own, he sometimes tells them not to. Instead, Burros tells them that they have “their whole lives ahead of them” and that his life has been “irrevocably stamped by his long record of right-wing associations, street arrests, convictions, fines and imprisonment” (para. 65). After the article was published, Burros committed suicide.

According to an article written by Tony Carnes (2013) for *Christianity Today*, when Phillips interviewed Burros, he offered him the chance to repent. In 1973, Phillips left the *Times* in order to devote himself to full-time ministry in New York City. After his death in 2013, the King's College in New York City created the John McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute in his honor. The institute's website quotes Phillips as saying:

The irreducible, elementary, primary, essential requirement of news is that it be factually accurate. The journalist who is a Christian will be as accurate and balanced and fair and faithful to facts as possible. That journalist will not lie, will not distort, will not make things up, and will not embroider the story for effect or state it out of balance. (qtd. in "The Life and Legacy of John McCandlish Phillips, 2014, para. 4)

Uncompromising in his convictions, Phillips left a legacy of redemption — both in and out of the newsroom — that lives on even after his death.

### **The Parts of the Redemptive Story**

The example of a reporter like Phillips can serve as a helpful model, and we now turn our attention to the elements that make up a redemptive story. Adam Gopnik (2012) of the *New Yorker* writes in his article, "Can Science Explain Why We Tell Stories?":

Good stories are strange. What strong scientific theories, even those crafted in pop form, have in common with good stories is not some specious universality. It's that they make claims so astonishing that they seem instantly very different from all the other stories we've ever heard. Good stories are startling. (para. 8)

Whether or not someone thinks the Christian narrative is true, it is, at its foundation, a good story. Looking at both the Esther story and the parable of the Prodigal Son, one

can see that a redemptive story has two major themes: brokenness (the fall of man) and hope (Jesus' sacrifice, the promise of future glory). These elements are the essence of redemptive content. In fact, both brokenness and hope in and of themselves constitute a redemptive reversal. Mankind's sinful state is a perverse reversal of his original condition. Jesus' atoning death is a reversal of man's fallen state. Therefore, in order for a story to be redemptive, it must touch upon both of these themes, because they explain the human condition. In his speech titled, "Speaking the Truth without Mentioning God," given to the governing board of the World Journalism Institute, Robert Drake (1998) said:

...we work out of the truth of God — the truth about who we are in our being, that we are created and we are fallen and we are redeemed in Christ. ... Whichever response we offer, we speak always out of the rule that God has over our lives.

Some people reject the rules that God has over their lives in their stewardship, their group action, how they trade their belongings, how they sell them, and how they seek justice in the courts. Others take on the cultural task in a manner that speaks out of God's truth as they perform those cultural tasks. Our work therefore will often be different not because God is specifically introduced as subject matter, but because by following God's guidance, by following his rules we end up thinking differently, and sometimes we even end up creating things which look different. ... God is not necessarily mentioned every time we perform the task that we are doing, but he is surely introduced as the source and the guide of what we do when such issues are raised. (para. 37-39)

### **Brokenness**

A journalist who is a Christian cannot fear reality. The world is corrupted by sin, riddled with tragedy and heartbreak. Frankly, the world can be an ugly place in which to live. Christian writers are not called to paint a word picture of a utopia: they are called to describe the world around them as it truly is. Christians are realists, not idealists. Yet, Christian journalists and writers should not leave their readers without some flicker of hope. And John McCandlish Phillips, in his aforementioned article, does both of these things. His portrayal of Burros showcases the evil and brokenness that are alive and well in the world. And, even though Burros would be considered successful by other members of the Klan, he still does not possess hope or peace, as evidenced by his claim that his position is all he had to live for, and his subsequent suicide after Phillips exposed his Jewish heritage.

### **Hope**

It is at first difficult to discern any real hope in Phillips' story on Burros. But Phillips, whose eyes were trained by redemption, sees it. Somewhat ironically, in the article, Burros is the one who offers hope, or a way out: he states that he sometimes advises youth away from fascist organizations. Phillips sees this light and wisely ends his story with it. Not only this, but Phillips personally offered Burros the hope of the gospel (not cited in the article), even though his own life had already been threatened.

In addition to Phillips, Flannery O'Connor is an example of one writer who was fully committed to redemption. Though O'Connor was not herself a journalist, her writings have had significant impact on readers for many years, in her book, *Mystery and Manners, Occasional Prose*, O'Connor (1969) writes:

My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. . . . Redemption is meaningless unless there is a cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause. (p. 33)

Though O'Connor's words were written years ago, they are congruent with American culture today. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014), the Christian share of the U.S. population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%. According to the report:

One of the most important factors in the declining share of Christians and the growth of the “nones” is generational replacement. As the Millennial generation enters adulthood, its members display much lower levels of religious affiliation, including less connection with Christian churches, than older generations. Fully 36% of young Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25-33). And fewer than six-in-ten Millennials identify with any branch of Christianity, compared with seven-in-ten or more among older generations, including Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers. (para. 19)

### **Conclusion**

In a society that is increasingly post-modern, truth has become subjective and relative. Traditional objective journalism done as a public service may be fading into oblivion as news reverts to paradigms that were common during America's early years — news that is highly personal, non-objective and partisan.

When truth is relegated to the backseat, hope goes along with it — which is why it is important that journalists who are Christians make an effort to tell redemptive stories. In his essay, “In Praise of Stories,” Daniel Taylor (qtd. in Ryken, 2002) says stories are an antidote to the spirit of the age:

When we reward writers who tell us only conventional things in conventional ways we contribute to the decline of a civilization — and a kingdom of faith — which desperately needs good stories. We foolishly settle for stories—on the screen and on the page — which tickle us, instead of demanding those which interrogate us... We use feeble stories to kill time, when there are so many available that redeem the time. We must insist, in a cynical age, that there is such a thing as a good story. We should identify and prize the good stories from the past, and we must fulfill our responsibility to tell new ones. (p. 425)

While Taylor is not explicitly addressing the practices of the news media, his observations speak to the current state of journalism. Reporters and readers alike have settled for less than best, less than truth.

The purpose of journalism should be to inform and inspire, to give the world stories that redeem the time. As John McCandlish Phillips said in an interview with Terry Mattingly (2000):

Journalism at its best pursues the facts about certain situations in which evildoers are at work and assembles those facts and judges them fairly. It's not a crusade, so much as it's a responsible gathering of a body of evidence that, when it's finally presented, is so persuasive that evil must skulk, retreat or be subjected to strong public remedy. (para. 15)

Journalists have a high calling, and Christian journalists have a higher calling still. They are the watchmen on the wall, the heralds, and the messengers. Without journalists, the world would be a very disconnected place. Journalists who endeavor to follow Jesus know that there is more to their work than just words. Indeed, they are working for the Word. They are striving to tell his story: a redemptive story.

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