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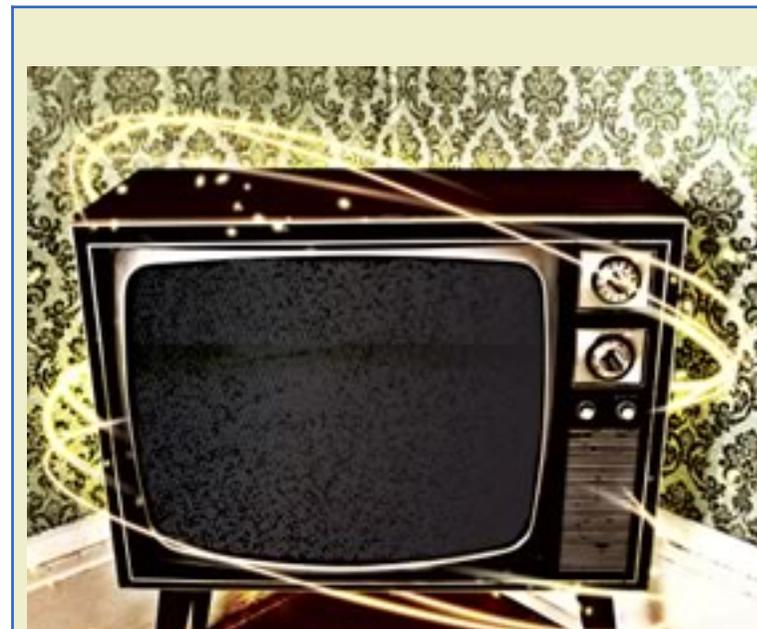
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## Telling the Story for 21st-century Listeners

By Graham Johnston

I love the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. Unfortunately, I grew up in the days before VCRs, DVDs, and cable television. If I wanted to watch this movie as a boy, I had one opportunity each year on the family television at a network's prescribed time. My children would not suffer this injustice; we own the movie. They



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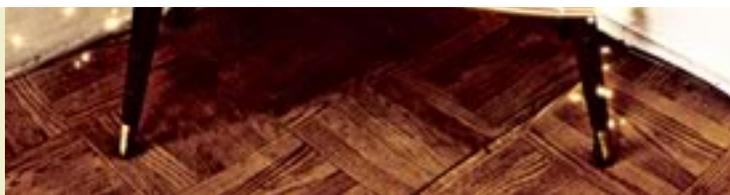
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can enjoy this story whenever they please.

One day, as I was watching *The Wizard of Oz* with them, I noticed that the opening credits took a long time. When the story finally began, I thought, *This movie is slow. How long before Dorothy gets to Oz? It has been black and white a long time; bring on the color.* I also wondered, *Why have I not had these observations before?*



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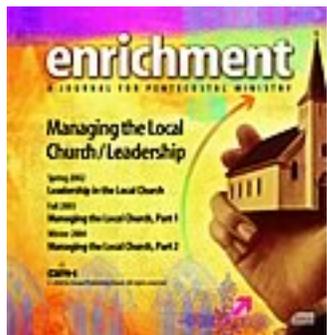
As I became aware that my children were rapidly losing interest, I realized that I was viewing the movie, not through my own eyes, but through their eyes. Then it dawned on me: This story was written for a different generation. *What had worked for me was not working for them.*

Perhaps you have felt this way when relating God's Word in the 21st century. *This is a great message, but it was written for an entirely different audience than mine.* How can we present God's message for this generation?

Some have compared the shift from modernity to postmodernity with gravity; it is all around us. Whatever people might say, the reality is that postmodernism is here. The quicker we accept it, the better off we will be.

Postmodernism creates obstacles that biblical communicators will need to overcome. For many postmoderns, authority is up for grabs. Who has the right to speak? The postmodern world longs for connection, not truth. How can we present God's Word without reducing it to the place where our message resembles a night at the improv?

In a world devoid of absolutes, relativism reigns. What is true and right



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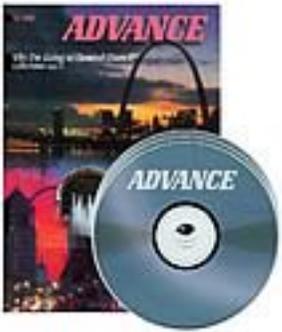


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for you may have no bearing on me. Postmoderns view any form of religious belief and conviction with doubt at best, to out-and-out cynicism. When it comes to preaching, we can continue to speak to the *insiders*, but even with *the committed ones*, business as usual will not cut it anymore.

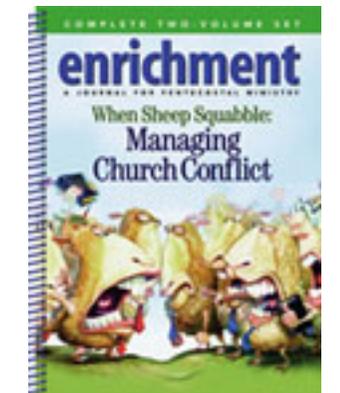
## PREACHING IS TELLING A STORY

When it comes to preaching, one of the scariest observations some of us will make is that we are emulating the preaching style we grew up listening to. This style has long become obsolete to most contemporary listeners. Here is a test. Have someone listen to a recording of the first 3 minutes of one of your sermons. Then pause it. Does the listener want to hear more or has he heard enough? Do you know what is the kiss of death to preaching? When listeners say in their hearts early in your sermon, *I know where he is heading, and I have heard it all before.*

I am amused when people say that preaching in the 21st century is dead: “We live among a generation raised on television and movies; they will not tolerate preaching these days.” No, what they will not stomach is preaching that is boring. So what do movies possess that the average Sunday message does not? *Story*. Not stories as in illustrations, but *story*.

Robert McKee is a leading expert on film screenwriting. He is famous for his seminars on scriptwriting. I appreciate his definition of *story*: “The creative demonstration of truth.” McKee states, “Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing — they dramatize. Audiences are rarely interested and certainly never convinced when forced to listen to the discussion of ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

For me, the creative demonstration of truth — God’s truth — is usually how I summarize outstanding preaching. I believe we are living in the age of story. People are responsive to messages in story form. So what does that look like and how might we incorporate our sermons into story?



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## DEVELOP TENSION

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When I was a teenager, the movie, *Jaws*, kept moviegoers in cinemas and away from beaches in droves. *Jaws* held people on the edge of their seats and offered them an occasional chance to jump completely out of them. Imagine if, before the music commenced, a narrator said, “You are about to witness a huge shark running amok and terrorizing a coastal town called Amity. You will witness people being eaten alive — a woman, an old fisherman, Quint the shark hunter. But do not worry. Before the movie is over, Sheriff Brody will blow up the bad shark. Now sit back and enjoy the movie.” Why did they not include this narration? Simple. One of the keys to holding a person’s interest is *tension*. This is why we want to see the story unfold as it happens. We do not want to know how the movie ends at the beginning.

A lack of tension equals boredom. Robert Cialdini, a social psychologist at Arizona State University, states, “Mysteries are powerful because they create a need for closure.”<sup>2</sup> Certain kinds of preaching place a premium on dispensing information and facts. In the first couple of sentences, the preacher sums up the entire message. This approach does bring clarity. The speaker, however, has tipped his hand. His listeners know what is coming; the tension is gone. As a result, people tune out. Let’s face it, people require more than just facts.

In this moviegoing (and storytelling) generation, when you spill the beans in the first minute, the average listener is wondering why the curtain has not fallen and why people are not streaming to the exits. It is over. The story is finished. We can go home now.

Fast-forward to the end of *Jaws* and time how much longer the movie extends *after* the shark is defeated. Answer: About 30 seconds. Why? Because what follows is *anticlimactic* —the story is over. The tension has been resolved. *Story* creates tension that draws listeners in by creating a need for closure.

## ANSWER THE BIG QUESTION

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After the shark is dead, all is right with the world once again. We know that the storyline is finished when the movie answers the big question driving the story. I will call this the *over-arching question* of the story.

“Excuse me,” you might say. “I do not recall a question being posed at the beginning of *Jaws*?” But this question *was* in the opening scene. As the opening credits are rolling, two partially intoxicated young people scamper off from the others to take a swim. What appears to be a tranquil midnight dip turns into a terrifying attack by an unseen creature of the deep. This scene raises an over-arching question in the minds of viewers: *How do we stop this creature so we can be safe again?* Once the question has been answered, the story is over.

Here is another key component to a story: Story is usually launched by a question, a crisis, or a dilemma, not an answer. One over-arching question drives the story to its conclusion. What does this have to do with preaching? Every biblical passage, be it an epistle or narrative, possesses a story.

Recently, I was assisting a young pastor with her handling of Psalm 51, which relates David’s journey and ultimate restoration after his adultery with Bathsheba. What is the over-arching question that this text addresses? The answer: What do we do when we blow it big time? The text addresses the steps of acknowledging our wrong and confessing it, leading to spiritual restoration. Therefore, the question *arises out of the text and context* in the same way that, “How are we going to stop the shark?” arises out of the story of *Jaws*.

## TELLING THE STORY

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Preachers can take a page out of the journalist’s book. A journalist receives news of an event and writes down the facts. But when he reports it, the journalist examines the facts to find the story.

A young woman, age 22, who dies in a plane crash represents the facts. That she was pursuing a degree in community health to work among AIDS orphans in Western Kenya becomes the story. Every biblical passage contains ideas and content. In these ideas and content is a story that is as relevant to people today as it was back then.

## CREATE DISEQUILIBRIUM

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The reason this is critical to effective communication is because of how people listen. The mind can listen in a passive state. For example, my wife says, “Do not forget to put out the garbage.”

I nod while watching the ballgame on television, “Yeah, yeah, I’m on it.”

One minute later I cannot even recall her speaking to me. I can repeat her words immediately afterward, but they do not stick in my brain. When we listen in a more active mode, however, information moves to an entirely different place in our brains.

For example, if my wife says, “If this garbage is still here when I return, you are sleeping on the couch,” this engages me, and I interact with what I am hearing. How does that happen? The answer: by *creating disequilibrium*. When people experience disequilibrium — something that stirs and shakes them — they suddenly become engaged in the process because the tension they feel gets their mental cogs turning.

One mistake preachers commonly make is creating an intellectual dilemma that is divorced from reality. For example, the classic medieval question is: How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? To which, the classic response is, “Who cares?” Sometimes, we frame a message around an issue such as, How did David defeat the Philistines? or What is the proper understanding of the immutability of God? These issues will be met by a collective yawn from all in earshot.

The over-arching issue needs to connect with the lives of the listeners and their world. Anything short of that spells disinterest. Learning for learning’s sake will only draw in a small percentage of people. Most

people begin to actively listen when the relationship between what you are preaching and its application to their everyday lives becomes apparent.

With disequilibrium in preaching comes some concerns. Don Carson, in his book, *How Long, O Lord?* deals with the problem of human suffering. Carson introduces his writing with a series of tragic events, all of which conclude with the question, "Where is God?" One of these vignettes details the events surrounding a pastor who is mowing his lawn one day only to have his tranquillity vanish when a large truck accidentally rolls over a 2-year-old boy and crushes him. The issue is clear: How could God allow this to happen?

Some pastors immediately object. "I cannot begin a sermon with that illustration. There are people in my congregation who have lost children. It hits too close to home, and it would prove too painful." This is the point. When you introduce a message from God's Word, ask yourself, *Is this raising a question that people are asking: Where is God in all of this?* If it does, you have disequilibrium. Now you have people engaged not only because they have an intellectual curiosity, but also because it is an issue that grips them where they live. They feel it in their gut. And, yes, discomfort and unease come with it as well. But will people hang on the edge of their seats to hear what this passage might say about this matter? Yes. Again, McKee declares regarding movies, "The writer shapes story around a perception of what's worth living for, what's worth dying for, what's foolish to pursue, the meaning of justice, truth — the essential values."<sup>3</sup>

Second, people will appreciate your attempt to bring clarity to a difficult issue of life. It is more comforting for them when you address difficult issues than when you ignore these issues. After awhile, your listeners will develop confidence that God's Word is able to address the real crises of this world and of their lives.

## CREATE A GAP

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In their book, *Made To Stick*, the Heath brothers write about George Loewenstein's *gap theory*. Loewenstein maintains that curiosity happens when we feel a gap in our knowledge. The Heath brothers state, "One important implication of the gap theory is that we need to *open* gaps before we close them. Our tendency is to tell people the facts. First, though, they must realize that they need these facts."<sup>4</sup>

In creating a gap, the speaker functions much like a computer program. He creates a folder in the listener's mind that provides the message a place to reside. Presenting a situation or conflict creates this space so the listener will want to hear what the speaker is about to say. To present the facts first may be bringing the cart before the horse.

In the past, explaining why facts are important to the listener and what he could do with the information came toward the end of the message. People assumed that the Bible and preaching had take-home value. Today, the speaker needs to create a gap, or risk that the average listener will disengage with his message at the start.

Some might also argue that we do not want to infuse too much of the real world into our messages. People, however, have grown weary of platitudes and clichés emanating from the pulpit. Listeners are weary of dribble and endless words that avoid the true issues. I ask: Does the Bible provide real answers in a real world? If people are asking this question and the Bible is clearly addressing it, why should we be intimidated to journey there? Here is another question: Is our corporate worship a place where we escape from the harsh realities of our world, or is it a place where we confront those realities in the strength of God's Word? I think you know my answer.

## **ALLOW THE MESSAGE TO UNFOLD**

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After you have determined the over-arching question, built tension into your message, and established disequilibrium in your listeners, allow the message to unfold. In effect, you are moving away from a *deductive* model of preaching (telling the listeners the main idea at the start) to

an *inductive* model (allowing the message to come to light gradually).

In my perception, 20th-century pulpits were largely deductive. A pastor gave his listeners the main idea of his sermon up front and then the body of the message fleshed out the details of the biblical concept he presented. Let's examine why this model is no longer the most effective way to communicate God's Word in the 21st century.

Suppose we asked: "Fifty years ago why would a person listen to what the pastor had to say in a sermon?" We could come up with several responses. First, if the pastor was speaking from the Bible, that was enough. Second, the pastoral role came with built-in authority. People trusted their pastor and were inclined to believe what he said. Third, the church itself carried weight; it was viewed and accepted as a credible moral compass. Preaching came with inherent authority. We cannot claim this today.

Postmodernism is largely a crisis of authority. The average person believes (whether he can articulate it or not) that he does not know who or what to trust anymore. As a result, a person defaults to: "I will trust myself."

The singer, Jewel, summed up this idea in the chorus of her song, "Trust your heart, your intuition and it will lead you in the right direction." So, people today believe that because the preacher says so does not make it right; because the Bible says so does not necessarily make it right either.

The strength of the deductive model is the clarity it brings when one states something upfront such as, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." But the problem remains: What if the average person does not believe this? When a person makes a statement, the listener must say, "Okay, I agree with that" or, "No, that has not been my experience."

If a pastor launches into his message with a statement about God, there is a high probability that many of his listeners

*immediately disengage* because they are saying no in their hearts. You might be thinking, *Doesn't this create tension? Tension is good, right?*

The tension I mentioned earlier comes because people want to resolve an issue. This tension lies in suspending judgment to see how things may turn out. Once the speaker declares his hand at the start, the tension is gone except for the annoyance the listener may feel toward the speaker for wasting his time and for being perceived as arrogant.

On the other hand, if one does not begin with a statement, one may begin with a question. McKee says, "*Curiosity is the intellectual need to answer questions and close open patterns. Story plays to this universal desire by doing the opposite, posing questions and opening situations.*"<sup>5</sup>

Speaking inductively takes an indirect form that allows the listener to process what the speaker says and, thus, suspend any judgment. An inductive approach works best when *listener receptivity is low*. If one wants to communicate to seekers or even believers who have doubts and misgivings, the inductive approach works best. In the opening question, the preacher suggests to the listener, *I respect you enough to allow you to figure this out without my having to tell you point blank*. An inductive approach does not tell the listener what to think or believe. Instead, it invites the listener to explore the subject with the speaker. It declares, "Let's figure this out together."

This approach neither compromises the integrity of God's Word nor the sensibilities of the contemporary listener. The preacher needs to invite the listener to journey with him as the over-arching question unfolds the message, allowing the listener to make up his own mind. In short, stories inform people, not by stating facts, but by taking people on a journey of discovery. Preaching can do the same.

## END WELL

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I have detailed how one needs to begin his sermon by raising an over-

arching question that will drive the message to its conclusion. Another characteristic is that every story possesses a beginning, a middle, and an end. Some might say, “Don’t all sermons have these?” Not necessarily. There are ends and there are ends. In the same way, every airplane flight will end at some point, but there is a difference between a clean landing and a crash landing.

What makes a good ending to a story? First, the message needs to adequately address the over-arching question. This is where the message needs to come to rest. For me, it is helpful to think of a closing argument in a court case. The court will not allow the lawyer to introduce new evidence into the case while he is making his closing argument. If he is to present evidence, he needs to put it forward in the body of his argument. The *conclusion* is the opportunity to gather all the threads and begin to make a statement. Listeners have had opportunity to grasp how the speaker came to arrive at this point. If the conclusion fails to correspond to the over-arching question, listeners will be confused and annoyed. Let’s go back to Jaws.

The opening scene established the presence of a threat. The story cannot end until the people in Amity deal with the threat. The opening makes it inevitable that people will challenge and defeat the shark, or they will die trying. The opening scene and the concluding scene are connected in such a way that one cannot begin the story until he is clear where to end the story.

Thus, the basic element of *story* remains *one clear idea that becomes the story’s destination*. If one cannot articulate the main idea of his message in the conclusion using *one clear sentence*, then the force of *story* is lost.

## DEVELOP THE PLOT CONTENT

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Last, we need to examine what comprises the middle section or the body of the message. In *story*, we call this the *plot*. Every good storyteller must maintain the balance between two elements that are in dynamic tension — *content* and *progression*. Content is the use of

information and vivid detail. If the storyteller fails to convey enough information, people will either not believe the story or lose interest.

Suppose I begin a story by saying, "A guy goes into a store to buy something." Vague and uninteresting; it lacks detail and content.

In preaching, good communication requires substance. People want to see the connection between the story (where one is leading the listeners) and the details of the text (what the Bible says) so they are convinced that the speaker is not just making it up.

Discriminating audiences demand content. The mind craves order. Once the speaker establishes tension, listeners will be following the content or storyline, so it needs to make sense. The body of the message develops the plot by revealing details in the biblical passage. These details give evidence that the story is indeed a biblical message.

## PROGRESSION

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The second required element to the plot is progression — flow and mobility. The listener loses interest if the speaker bogs the story down in too much detail.

On one hand, people long for content, but pace is also critical. How many times does a story fall flat because what seems so intriguing to the speaker means nothing to the listener? Preachers can suffer from this disease while sitting alone at their desks pouring over commentaries and Bible dictionaries. Preachers need to monitor the pace of their sermons based on what the listener needs to know to draw a reasonable conclusion to the tension that he has raised.

People tend to watch moving objects. Take a ping-pong ball. It is almost humorous to observe a group of spectators at a table tennis game. Lay that same ball on the table and they lose interest.

Mobility in communication is the key to holding people's interest. The difference between a pond and a stream is mobility. Streams move;

ponds stagnate. Streams intrigue; ponds disinterest. We like to put our feet in streams; we are afraid to put our feet in ponds. Good preaching produces streams; dull messages become ponds.

Regarding tension, how does one know if content and progression are well-balanced in one's message? I often ask, "When Jerry Seinfeld is creating his monologues at home without anyone else around, how does he know his material is funny? How does he know what will make people laugh?" The answer is intuition. He knows intuitively what is funny and what is not. He has honed his feel for comedy over years of performing before live audiences. This is where storytelling (and preaching) becomes an art. The preacher begins to develop a feel for the amount of detail that is required, yet enables the story to progress at a pace that will not cause listeners to lose interest. This is why editing makes the movie; the same is true in preaching. Trace the plot and keep on course. The payoff comes when the preacher reaches the conclusion and listeners are pleased that they journeyed with him to discover truth from God that will help them find their place in this world.

## CONCLUSION

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Do you recall the movie *Apollo 13*? I knew how it ended because I knew that the three Apollo astronauts did not die in space. What made the film gripping was not a surprise ending but the unfolding storyline. I had no idea of the effort required by NASA control and by the astronauts in the *Apollo* spacecraft, using only limited resources, to secure their safe return. To see this drama played out before me was so engaging that when the capsule safely re-entered the atmosphere, I was celebrating as tears came to my eyes. The scriptwriters told the story in such a way that these astronauts became real people; their lives mattered. The story made the events come alive. The movie transformed a nostalgic bit of news into a story that inspired me to act with courage and hope.

Each week, I take an ancient passage some thousands of years old, full of wisdom and grace, and form it into a story with meaning and relevance for people today. My challenge is to bring God's story to

people so ancient history becomes undeniably good news.

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## Endnotes

1. McKee, Robert, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: HarperEntertainment, 1997), 113,114.

“Storytelling is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action. A story’s event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea ... without explanation. Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing — they dramatize. Audiences are rarely interested, and certainly never convinced, when forced to listen to the discussion of ideas. A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events; failure to express a view of life through the pure, honest consequences of human choice and action is a creative defeat no amount of clever language can salvage.”

2. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made To Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007), 81.

3. McKee, *Story*, 17.

4. Heath, *Made To Stick*, 85.

5. McKee, *Story*.

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