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The Story Pastor: A Faithful and Fruitful Identity for Pastors

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE STORY PASTOR:
A FAITHFUL AND FRUITFUL IDENTITY FOR PASTORS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
SECTION 1 - THE PROBLEM	1
Pastoral Identity in Crisis.....	1
How Metaphor Shapes Reality	5
Historical Perspective	10
Identity, Stress, and Pastoral Health	15
Theological Reflection and Analysis	24
SECTION 2 - OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS.....	28
Modern Attempts at Pastoral Identity	28
Pastor as Counselor and Responses	31
Pastor as Leader and Responses	38
Other Proposed Solutions	43
Analysis.....	45
SECTION 3 - THESIS.....	48
The Thesis.....	48
How Story Works	50
Why Story Works	56
The Story of Story.....	61
The Story Pastor.....	69
Analysis.....	73
SECTION 4 - ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION	77

SECTION 5 - BOOK PROPOSAL	79
Query Letter	79
Cover Letter	80
Book Proposal.....	82
SECTION 6 - POSTSCRIPT	92
APPENDIX – BOOK SAMPLE	96
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	175

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ABSTRACT

Pastors are experiencing an identity crisis. Many are not sure how to process who they are and what they do. While old metaphors for ministry—like shepherd or prophet—do not connect as well with today’s culture, new metaphors—like leader or counselor—are not biblically complete. This identity crisis negatively affecting clergy health and ministry. How can pastors pursue sustainable ministries, based on an identity, that is faithful to the tradition and fruitful in the world today?

Story is a paradigm for ministry that shapes pastoral identity. Pastors benefit from thinking of their ministry in terms of story because it is faithful to tradition and fruitful in the world. Story-thinking is a paradigm for ministry that can create pastoral identity and minimize stress and burnout.

Section One defines pastoral identity and examines the elements that shape identity. It explores the way that metaphor relates to identity, and the impact of the identity crisis on clergy health. Section Two identifies and analyzes the dominant pastoral metaphors of pastor-as-counselor and pastor-as-leader, as well as several others, offering critiques of these images. It concludes by suggesting where these images fall short and what is needed to develop a meaningful pastoral metaphor. Section Three presents the theoretical and theological underpinnings of story as a possible solution. Looking first at how story works, and why stories are so effective, the model of the story pastor is presented and evaluated as a paradigm for ministry. Sections Four and Five contain a book proposal for *The Story Pastor*. This book will be written to help pastors think about their ministries and identities through the lens of story. Section Six provides a postscript and suggestions for further research.

SECTION 1 - THE PROBLEM

Pastoral Identity in Crisis

Pastoral ministry has never been easy. It requires engagement with challenging situations and people, involves a wide range of tasks and responsibilities, and is carried out in a very broken world. Yet ministry today is difficult for additional reasons. As Craig Barnes puts it, “only within the last two generations have the clergy been forced to bear an additional burden that is far from light—confusion about what it means to be the pastor.”¹ Many protestant pastors are experiencing a crisis of identity. They do not have clarity about who they are or what their role requires. This lack of clarity harms both the pastors and their congregations.

To begin understanding this problem, one must first understand what identity is and how identity works. At its most basic level, an identity is the way people see themselves in various contexts. It is out of this self-view that people act, react, and behave. Identity Theory psychologists, Peter Burke and Jan Stets, define it as a “set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person.”²

Identities can be conscious or unconscious, but they are very influential for human behavior. People live, feel, and react out of their identities, as if they are parts in a

¹ M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 4.

² Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

story, or roles that they are performing in a movie. Identity happens on three levels.³ First, people have *role* identities related to jobs or responsibilities. Second, people have *social* identities that develop in relation to other people around them. Finally, they have *personal* identities that are chosen or experienced on an individual level. Given these three components of identity, it can be said that everyone has multiple identities. A woman can be a wife, mother, banker, and worship leader. Each of these identities could be considered “smaller ‘selves’ within the overall self.”⁴

Identities are learned and adopted over time, and they are constantly changing. This is because identity is created using a feedback loop.⁵ A person behaves out of an identity and then perceives the response to that identity in their environment. A judgement is then made to interpret the results. For example, if a person believes that they have a lot of power as a supervisor, but no one actually listens to them, then a decision must be made. Either their identity is fine, and the group is the problem, or their perceived identity as a powerful supervisor needs to be reevaluated. The response of the environment provides feedback as to the effectiveness of the identity. The person’s identity can be adjusted based on the reaction of others in a continuous loop of testing and fine-tuning.

Identities can be changed in sweeping ways. Major life changes like a new career or the loss of a spouse force persons to reassess their identity as, for example, a salesperson or a husband. Culture can also change, which may render a person’s identity

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ For a detailed look at the process, see Ibid., 64ff.

problematic. For example, soldiers returning from World War II were welcomed home in a very different way than soldiers returning from Vietnam. The identity of being a veteran is very different for those two generations.

As identities are developed and adapted, problems can arise. The feedback loop can break down, affecting the ability of the person to properly adjust their thinking. Feedback can be hard to read or present mixed signals. One identity can conflict with other identities. In such cases, a person is forced to prioritize one identity over another for that particular situation. There are also moments in life when no established identity is available. Ambiguity of identity can be very stressful.

Pastors are in a time of great change and insecurity related to their vocational identity. A number of pastor-writers have researched this issue. Timothy Laniak says that, “For many, pastoral ministry involves an almost constant identity crisis.”⁶ Martyn Percy writes that today “it is hard to be precise about exclusive roles and tasks, and the concrete nature of clerical identity.”⁷ He calls it “a contemporary crisis in clerical identity.”⁸ Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson write about the depths and the consequences of this crisis: “Pastors don’t know who they are or what they are supposed to be. Perhaps no profession in the modern world suffers from a greater lack of clarity as to the basic requirements of the job. This reveals what is nothing less than a crisis of

⁶ Timothy Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), 26.

⁷ Martyn Percy, *Clergy: The Origin of Species* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 8.

⁸ Ibid.

identity, which surely contributes to the high levels of burn-out among pastors.”⁹ This crisis of identity is serious and will be shown here to have real consequences.

What causes this identity crisis for pastors? The reasons are complex, multi-faceted, and hard to pin down. Some of the problem comes from the culture outside the church. Christian values and beliefs no longer hold privileged status in the West. Societal consciousness and church attendance are both in decline in America. The question is not “What church do you go to?” but, “Do you go to church?” However, the church continues to operate within a modern mindset, as if Christendom still holds sway. Churches mark church health by bigger buildings and fuller offering plates. Pastors are given the difficult task of getting 1950s results in a 2010s world.

Some of the problem relates to the preparation of pastors for ministry. In the early part of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher restructured the theological curriculum at the University of Berlin into four categories: biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology.¹⁰ This division unintentionally drove a wedge between theological study, the Bible, and practical ministry. As a result, “Theology has become ecclesially anemic, and the church theologically anemic.”¹¹ Most seminaries still operate under this same division of curriculum. Pastors leave seminary with a schizophrenic identity that separates the work of the ministry from the theological and biblical traditions that can help define and shape it.

⁹ Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 9.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 5.

¹¹ Hiestand and Wilson, 13.

This problem is exacerbated when seminarians discover that parish ministry is complex and multifaceted, and their training inadequate. The tasks and demands vary greatly day-to-day and week-to-week. One might find they have a strong identity in the pulpit, but that this does not translate well to the hospital room, and is counterproductive in the boardroom. This is worsened when pastors have broken identity-feedback loops. Pastors leave seminary without a secure identity, and ministry presses them in different directions. It is difficult to reconcile all of the roles that must be assumed. Pastors become weighed down by the task of developing, understanding, and switching among diverse identities.

In addition, the feedback the culture gives to pastors proves problematic. Direct feedback is often given only if it is negative. Empty offering plates and bare pews signify to the pastor that their identity needs adjustment. Culture communicates in many ways that it does not value a pastor's work or values. The old ways of expressing pastoral identity do not have the desired effect in this culture. Pastors do not know what to do with the mixed messages in the identity feedback loop. This has created a crisis of identity.

How Metaphor Shapes Reality

Identity theory suggests that for identities to be effective they need to be symbolized.¹² Just as people are given names to be identified, so too, people assign symbols to their own identities. This insight provides a way to think about, and analyze,

¹² Burke and Stets, 13.

the problem of pastoral identity. The process of symbolizing takes shape through the exploration of metaphor.

A metaphor is a literary device where one item is described by comparing it to another. The term comes from the combination of the Greek words “*meta*, meaning ‘over,’ and *pherin*, meaning ‘to carry.’”¹³ In their now classic work on cognitive linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson indicate that, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”¹⁴ James Geary defines it this way: “A metaphor occurs when someone apprehends previously unapprehended relations between things.”¹⁵ Nelson Goodman calls metaphor “teaching an old word new tricks.”¹⁶ A metaphor can be a word picture or image, such as comparing the body to an engine. It can also be a story or parable that acts as a “narrated metaphor,” such as Jesus’ explanation of the Kingdom of God being like a man who went out to sow some seed.¹⁷

Metaphors are helpful because they allow the speaker to gain distance from the object in question, while at the same time bringing the listener closer to the object.¹⁸ Metaphors provide a safe way to talk about complicated or emotional topics, including feelings themselves, and can also help “describe the indescribable.”¹⁹ For example, Jesus

¹³ Trygve David Johnson, *The Preacher as Liturgical Artist: Metaphor, Identity, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 27.

¹⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

¹⁵ James Geary, *I Is an Other* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011), 115.

¹⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 68.

¹⁷ Geary, 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

can describe deeper truths about the Kingdom by talking about simple things that, at first, seem totally unrelated to the Kingdom.

Metaphors are sometimes seen as a secondary use of language. This view of metaphors could be called *substitutionary* or *comparative* because the metaphor only works to say what could be said literally.²⁰ The substitutionary view grew during the Enlightenment as arguments were proposed in the most basic and foundational ways. Metaphor “was a lie, or at least a way for the imagination to obscure the objective interpretation of reality.”²¹ This kind of thinking continued, especially in academic circles, where metaphor was “viewed as a matter of mere language rather than primarily as a means of structuring our conceptual system and the kinds of everyday activities we perform.”²² Metaphors and stories were not so much attacked they were largely ignored. This view has been replaced by the *interactionist* perspective, which sees metaphors as irreducible. Metaphor can say what literal speech cannot. In other words, metaphors can create meaning.

Research confirms that metaphor is fundamental to thinking and communicating.²³ The human brain is fundamentally metaphor-oriented. Humans think in terms of metaphor without even knowing it. For example, Lakoff and Johnson point to the common metaphor of argument-as-war.²⁴ The language that describes an argument

²⁰ Johnson, 32.

²¹ Ibid., 33.

²² Lakoff and Johnson, 145.

²³ Laniak, 34.

²⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, 4.

includes phrases such as: positions are indefensible, weak points of the argument are attacked, criticisms are right on target, arguments are won or lost, and specific points are shot down. As another example, Lakoff and Johnson describe the connection between time and money.²⁵ People spend time, save time, waste time, invest time, budget time, lose time, and borrow time. These metaphors are so fundamental to the way we think about arguments and time that they often go unnoticed.

Because people connect with metaphors from experience, sometimes metaphors break down before they even get started.²⁶ According to Lakoff and Johnson, “no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis.”²⁷ Timothy Laniak notes that, “Metaphors assume cultural competence.”²⁸ For Laniak, a metaphor must at least be understood in its context, if not personally experienced. Whatever the starting point, once a metaphor is connected it can create new connections and ideas. When a metaphor comes “out of our clearly delineated and concrete experiences,” from this position, a person can “construct highly abstract and elaborate concepts.”²⁹ For this reason, the best metaphors are basic and ordinary. They are easy to understand because almost everyone can connect with them. This may explain why the Bible has such a propensity for ordinary metaphors, and also why people today can have so much trouble understanding them.³⁰ What was ordinary and everyday 2,000

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 71.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ Laniak, 42.

²⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, 105.

³⁰ Laniak, 253.

years ago (like shepherding) is now abstract and removed from contemporary experiences. Similarly, what was ordinary in Israel (like a mustard tree) is not ordinary in Pennsylvania. A person can still connect with old metaphors, but to do so, they must do the work of connecting with that culture. Ultimately, metaphors demand work and time to be fully grasped.

While it is not always easy to connect with a metaphor, it is often worth the effort. Metaphors are powerful because they require and stimulate imagination. Figurative language has the power to expose underlying views and values. Metaphor “opens a window onto the inner world of thought and feeling.”³¹ Metaphors that are freshly created or rediscovered have the power to shape views, thoughts, and identities in the future. “New metaphors, like conventional metaphors, can have the power to define reality.”³² They can lead to new and different connections.

Metaphors are more important than mere language because “we base our actions, both physical and social, on what we take to be true.”³³ If a metaphor can shape a view of reality, then it can shape actions. In his book *Metaphors of Ministry*, David Bennett argues that, “Images are powerful. They shape what we see, by highlighting certain features and moving others into the background.”³⁴ He notes that, “The choice to emphasize a given metaphor and to put aside another can set the direction of a

³¹ Geary, 111.

³² Lakoff and Johnson, 157.

³³ Ibid., 160.

³⁴ David W. Bennett, *Metaphors of Ministry: Biblical Images for Leaders and Followers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 199.

community and its leadership.”³⁵ Metaphors create identity by developing language that helps people see themselves differently and explore roles that they may not have imagined. Changing an image can fundamentally change the role a person plays.

Trygve David Johnson develops the connection between metaphor and identity by talking about “root metaphors.”³⁶ These are metaphors that are used frequently and systematically so that they become the predominant way a topic is discussed. Root metaphors are like models or paradigms that become basic to life. These metaphors both become reality and create identity. The process can also work in reverse. An identity can become a metaphor, as the title encapsulates the role played and the assumptions of what is expected.

The problem of pastoral identity is also a problem of metaphor. Pastors are having trouble discovering metaphors that speak to their context and move them to action. Subsequent pages will show that old metaphors are often disconnected from the current culture. Section two will argue that recent pastoral metaphors are not healthy, nor are they biblically and theologically inaccurate. Multiple metaphors leave pastors disjointed in their work.

Historical Perspective

Throughout history, pastors have defined their vocational identity using metaphor. The Bible has several metaphors for pastors and leaders, but one metaphor remains

³⁵ Ibid., 199.

³⁶ Johnson, 30.

central to understanding all others: shepherd. Thomas Oden calls *shepherding* a “pivotal analogy” for ministry.³⁷ Donald Messer notes the staying power of this metaphor historically: “The shepherding image has continued to be a popular and pivotal metaphor in the twentieth century.”³⁸ It is impossible to faithfully describe what it means to be a pastor without exploring this foundational image.

Laniak’s book, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, explores this metaphor. He argues that, “The Bible promotes robust, comprehensive shepherd leadership, characterized as much by the judicious use of authority as by sympathetic expressions of compassion.”³⁹ Unfortunately, shepherding has narrowed over time to mean pastoral care, at the expense of the metaphor’s robust and comprehensive biblical prominence. Few people today have seen a shepherd, but many have at least seen someone stoop down and care for a pet or a child the way a shepherd might for their sheep. People rarely think of the metaphor beyond empathy and care. As Laniak puts it, “There is little first-hand familiarity with the cultural realities that inform the *meaning* of the metaphor.”⁴⁰

To fully grasp the biblical meaning of shepherding, it is important to understand the work of the shepherd, the behavior and use of the sheep, and the environment in which shepherding was done.⁴¹ Israel was a *pastoral* culture in the true sense of the word. Much of the land was pasture-land, and much of their society depended on the production

³⁷ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1982), 49.

³⁸ Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39.

³⁹ Laniak, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42-57.

of sheep and goats. Sheep and goats were critical to society because of their use in sacrificial ceremonies, the production of food and milk, and their usefulness for making clothing. Shepherds had total care of the sheep. They had to lead the sheep and make sure that they had a variety in their diet wherever they travelled, while staying close to fresh water. The shepherd had to make sure the flock did not overgraze the fields or get caught in bad weather. Shepherds had to care for the sheep to protect their value. This included breeding and birthing sheep, finding lost sheep, and taking care of hurt or sick sheep. Finally, shepherds had to protect the sheep from wild animals and robbers. In part, this is why a shepherd had to carry a rod and a staff.

Shepherding was a job that took an incredible amount of foresight, planning, and execution. Shepherds had to be strong leaders. Laniak explains, “This occupation put the shepherd in a constant state of negotiation with an unpredictable physical and social environment. For these and other reasons, the shepherd naturally became an icon of leadership.”⁴² No wonder the shepherding metaphor persists “in a broad variety of biblical texts from different periods.”⁴³ Shepherding is an apt metaphor for the complexity and responsibility of leadership.

Another prominent biblical image for ministry is that of the *prophet*. The word prophet comes from the Greek and literally means “to speak before.”⁴⁴ The prophet’s job was to speak before the people what God had spoken to them. For more conservative

⁴² Ibid., 57.

⁴³ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁴ Marty E. Stevens, *Leadership Roles of the Old Testament: King, Prophet, Priest, Sage* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 31.

Christians, the word might bring connotations of future prediction. Conversely, more liberal Christians may associate prophets with “social activists who worked to establish social justice.”⁴⁵ Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that neither of these encapsulates what a prophet in the Bible does. In fact, “one is struck as well by how rarely the prophets address specific social issues,” and many prophets do not give any future predictions.⁴⁶ Like shepherding, modern thinkers too narrowly interpret the metaphor of prophet.

Brueggemann believes the true role of the prophet is primarily one of perspective. He describes it this way: “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”⁴⁷ Moses worked to call the people out of the mentality of Egypt. God’s message of release pointed to the nation’s sense of entitlement and abuse of the Israelite people who had become commodities to be bought and sold. During the reign of Solomon, another royal consciousness developed within Israel. In this situation, the prophets, like Moses before, cried out against the mentality of abuse and the diminishing importance of God. Jeremiah is “the clearest model for prophetic imagination and ministry,” because he shows emotion, and feels empathy for Israel.⁴⁸ Brueggemann promotes the image of the prophet as one who will proclaim, with boldness and imagination, the alternative perspective of God’s rule. In Brueggemann’s

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

understanding then, Martin Luther King Jr. was a prophet, not because he was fighting for social justice, but because he had a dream of a different reality and he gave voice to that alternate reality. The heart of biblical prophecy is in the critique of worldview, and the political or future implications of that critique follow from it.

The term *priest* is the primary image for pastoral leadership used in the Catholic community, but it was abandoned by the Protestant Reformers who moved away from the image of priest in favor of pastor and preacher. “The term priest was essentially set aside as a dead metaphor, because for the Protestants it simply had too many negative implications.”⁴⁹ The work of the clergy moved from “a priest behind an altar ... [to] ... a preacher behind a pulpit with a Bible in hand, proclaiming the Word of God.”⁵⁰ The clergy were no longer seen as enacting real sacrifices at the altar or of being closer to God. The image of pastor denoted a larger theme of caring for people as a shepherd would. The image of preacher, however, more narrowly denoted a teaching and proclamation role that arose from the Enlightenment search for knowledge and the Reformer’s desire to make the Word accessible and understandable.

In his book, *Clergy: Origin of Species*, Percy makes use of evolution as a metaphor for changes in pastoral ministry. In evolution, a species must adapt to survive.⁵¹ Pastoral ministry has also evolved over time to adapt to its environment. Percy argues that while most accounts of pastoral ministry track the development of ministry in light of changes in theology or ecclesiology, there is a need to acknowledge how contextual

⁴⁹ Messer, 37.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁵¹ Percy, 6.

realities also play an impact. Indeed, all authentic Christian community is “rooted in the soil of its environment.”⁵² Pastoral ministry is shaped by the church, and the church is shaped by the culture. Pastoral ministry has evolved, and with it the metaphors of pastoral identity.

Pastoral identity evolves alongside the evolution of the church. As ministry evolves, so do the metaphors. Sometimes old metaphors will not work, either because they do not fit the current demands of pastoral work, or they are not accessible to the pastors or the culture. It has been shown that people today do not fully understand the pastoral images of shepherd or prophet. Because these metaphors require significant explanation to understand, they are generally misused and inappropriately applied. Pastoral identity requires either new metaphors or the revitalization of old ones.

Identity, Stress, and Pastoral Health

Pastors are experiencing high amounts of stress and burnout, and some are even leaving the ministry.⁵³ The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex and numerous, but pastoral identity is part of the problem. The struggle to clarify identity creates stress that has very real consequence for the health of the pastors and the churches that they serve. To understand this problem, one needs to know how stress works.

⁵² Ibid., 5.

⁵³ Statistics on stress, burnout, and clergy leaving ministry are challenging and often unreliable. Ed Stetzer has pointed out that the commonly quoted statistics, most notably that 1,500 pastors leave the ministry every month, is not a true statistic. See Ed Stetzer, “That Stat That Says Pastors Are All Miserable and Want to Quit (Part 1),” *The Exchange Blog*, October 14, 2015, accessed December 3, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/october/that-stat-that-says-pastors-are-all-miserable-and-want-to-q.html>. For a summary of some denominational statistics, see Dean R. Hoge, and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Press, 2005), 28.

Stress is the body's way of coping with events that change, or threaten to change, the world around it. Robert M. Sapolsky, in his book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, describes it this way, "A *stressor* is anything in the outside world that knocks you out of homeostatic balance, and the *stress-response* is what your body does to reestablish homeostasis."⁵⁴ He uses the example of a zebra on the plains of Africa. If the zebra thinks they hear, see, or smell a lion, then their body goes into a reaction called a stress response. The body goes into fight or flight mode.

The first thing the zebra's body does is to mobilize the body functions that it needs to survive. This happens when the hypothalamus in the brain sends chemicals throughout the body to respond to the stressor. Hormones are released into the blood stream to increase energy and blood flow. Blood pressure is increased so that if the zebra has to run, the body is ready to do so; the energy stores of the body are opened up so that the zebra can sustain running. At the same time there is an "inhibition of further storage" of new energy.⁵⁵ Memory is increased so that the zebra can remember how to run, where to run, and how to avoid being eaten by the lion. The zebra's senses are also increased so that it notices even the slightest change in smell, sound, or vision. The focus of the zebra is sharpened so that they can stay acutely aware of the potential threat. Perception of pain is also blunted. At the same time, the zebra's brain "halts long-term, expensive building projects."⁵⁶ In other words, the body stops doing anything that takes up a lot of energy so that all the energy of the body is available for escaping. Digestion is inhibited, tissue

⁵⁴ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: The Acclaimed Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004), 6. Italics in original.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

repair is limited, sex drive decreases, and immunity is inhibited. All the energy, body processes, and even brain capacity, is focused on survival. The zebra can only focus on the problem.

The process is the same when a person feels a stressor. It might be a difficult job or a broken family relationship, but the brain does not distinguish between those kinds of stressors and lions. People can stress about two kinds of lions: external and internal. External stressors are things outside of the person's control and mind. These include: a new job, health concerns, pain, strained relationships, uncertainty about the future, a person harassing or attacking, or even, of course, actual lions. It can also include the stress of another person, because human beings, like zebras, pick up on and react to the stress of others. Internal stressors, on the other hand, come from inside the person's thoughts or actions. These could include destructive personality traits, undisciplined thoughts and worries, playing out worse case scenarios, suspicions, unhealthy eating and exercise habits, an inability to say "no," people pleasing, or perfectionism.

Stress itself is not a bad thing. It keeps people alive. Stress is helpful when there are actual lions or when there is a crisis at home or work that needs to be dealt with. Stress becomes damaging when people suppress their stress responses, or when a person cannot have a stress response. The body needs to express a stress response occasionally to function. People need to be able to express stress responses to survive dangerous situations. Stress is also a problem when a person does not, or cannot, turn off the stress response. The body was not meant to be under constant stress, and it needs to have periods of recovery. If a person does not let recovery happen, the body can lose the ability to turn the response off.

Stress itself does not make people sick. What happens is that the stress response causes the body to neglect itself and be more susceptible to disease and harm. The blood pressure increases and eventually loses the ability to go back down. Because of limited immunity, a stressed body cannot fight off disease, which makes the person more susceptible to sickness. Long term digestive problems can develop as the body limits that function under stress. Stress has been shown to stunt growth in children.⁵⁷ The body and mind also fatigue more easily because the energy stores of the body are depleted.

If stress is a hyper-attention to, and a response to, the stressors in a person's life, then *burnout* is the opposite effect. Burnout is when the body and mind can no longer respond to stressors. A person's emotions and stress responses shut down. Burnout is often described in literature by how it differs from stress. Researcher Anne Jackson compares the two in several ways.⁵⁸ If stress is over engagement, then burnout is disengagement. Stress affects physical energy while burnout affects motivation and drive. Stress produces loss of fuel and energy while burnout produces a loss of ideals and hope. Stress creates a sense of urgency and hyperactivity while burnout creates a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Roy Oswald clarifies that "Stress taxes our adjustment capacities, while burnout taxes our ability to continuing caring."⁵⁹

Clergy are surrounded by stressors. Clay Werner lists a number of external pressures including church conflict, ministry and family balance, leadership and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁸ Anne Jackson, *Mad Church Disease: Overcoming the Burnout Epidemic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 95.

⁵⁹ Roy M. Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1991), 58.

administration, leadership isolation, compassion fatigue, the unexpected, disappointing results, and anxiety for the church.⁶⁰ David and Lisa Frisbie list internal risk factors including personality type, personal history, health, and the pastor's relationship with Christ.⁶¹ They also list external risk factors including lack of control, pressure to be the best, unclear expectations, conflicts in personality or values, mismatch of job skills and passions, old-school church politics, and lack of freedom to dream.⁶²

Added to this, the role of pastor can itself be a problem because it is often ambiguous. Some of the problem stems from the complicated relationship that a pastor has with his or her congregation. "The pastor is both the spiritual leader of the congregation and also a paid staff member who is accountable to a local church board, to whom he relates as employee to employer. Right from the start the relationship of pastor to congregation is clouded by issues of power, control, and ownership. The nature of the relationship is thus ambiguous."⁶³

Role ambiguity also stems from the sheer number of tasks and responsibilities of ministry. Is the pastor fundamentally a preacher, a CEO, a counselor, or a priest who oversees the sacraments? What if the congregation's expectations differ from the pastor's own expectation? And, to be specific, what should a pastor do on a Tuesday morning in

⁶⁰ Clay Werner, *On the Brink: Grace for the Burned-Out Pastor* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2014), 31ff.

⁶¹ David Frisbie and Lisa Frisbie, *Managing Stress in Ministry* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2014), 63ff.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 73ff.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 58.

his or her study? While some pastors may thrive on the open-ended and ambiguous work of the ministry, others find the work to be a cause of stress in their lives.

The exact scope of how many pastors have a problem with stress and burnout, and the exact extent of the problem is difficult to grasp. No significant study has been done on the percentage of pastors who are stressed and burned out. Patrick McDevitt reports that “Population studies indicating the degree and extent of clergy stress are missing.”⁶⁴ There is little data at this time about how stress and burnout vary, based on church tradition or denomination, location variances such as urban versus rural, or demographics such as gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Furthermore, many of the statistics referencing pastoral stress and burnout are cited from unclear sources, small samples, and studies too dated to be relied on for information about pastors today. Nevertheless, there are some reliable statistics that can be found.

The national Pulpit and Pew study of pastors was completed in the early 2000s. That research included questions related to clergy physical and mental health. The data showed that clergy are “overall positive about their physical and emotional health,” with more than 76 percent saying that their health was “excellent” or “very good.”⁶⁵ At the same time, “ten percent reported feeling depressed some or most of the time, and over 40 percent reported feeling worn out some or most of the time.”⁶⁶ Clergy “often experience

⁶⁴ R.J. Proeschold-Bell and P.M. McDevitt, “An Overview of the History and Current Status of Clergy Health,” *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community*, 40 (3): 2.

⁶⁵ Becky R. McMillan, “The View from Pulpit and Pew: Provocative Findings on Pastoral Leadership in the 21st Century,” (Presentation, SACEM, February 21, 2003), 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

high degrees of stress and burnout,”⁶⁷ and also report a problem in “being able to take time away for rest and spiritual renewal.”⁶⁸

More recently, Duke Divinity School began the Clergy Health Initiative. Since 2008, they have undertaken to survey every United Methodist Church pastor in the state of North Carolina for a 10-year period. These pastors had depression rates in 2008 of 11.1 percent, as compared to the national average that year of 5.5 percent. They also report that “43% of clergy reported having sought mental health services, and in the past year 15% of all clergy reported receiving treatment for depression, anxiety, or stress.”⁶⁹

In 2015, Lifeway Research conducted a second study of 1,500 pastors they had previously studied in 2005.⁷⁰ They asked if the pastors were still in ministry and various questions about how their ministry was going. While they did not ask questions using the specific language of stress and burnout, they did pose a number of questions that reveal significant stress among pastors. Of pastors who had previously pastored churches, 64 percent had experienced conflict in their last church. Lifeway reports that eight out of ten pastors agree that they feel they must be “on-call” 24 hours a day. Pastors experience their job as difficult, with 48 percent often feeling the demands of ministry are greater than they can handle, and 54 percent agreeing that the role of pastor is frequently

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Duke Divinity School, “Clergy Health Initiative,” accessed December 3, 2015. <http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/clergy-health-initiative/learning>.

⁷⁰ Statistics from pages 3-5 of Lifeway Research, “Reasons for Attrition Among Pastors: Quantitative Report,” accessed December 3, 2015. <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Reasons-for-Attrition-Among-Pastors-Quantitative-Report-Final1.pdf>.

overwhelming. About one in five pastors believe that their church has unrealistic expectations of them.

Not all pastors are stressed and burned out, but many are. The impact of this stress and burnout among clergy is experienced in many ways. Stress and burnout will have an impact on pastoral creativity, memory, passion, and relationships. In addition, all areas of a pastor's work are affected by the stress-response process. There are four areas where clergy stress and burnout are having a notable impact: pastors leaving the ministry, pastoral health, pastoral families, and cases of sexual misconduct.

The Pew and Pulpit study did extensive research into why pastors chose to leave the ministry. Researchers Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger report that 21 percent of those who left the ministry reported feeling “burned out, discouraged, stress, (and) overworked.”⁷¹ When asked how important the reason “I felt drained by the demands on me” was on the decision to leave, 58 percent saw it as of “great importance,” or “somewhat important.”⁷² Twelve percent of those who left the ministry expressed their primary reason under the category “burned out; disillusioned; felt constrained; sense of inadequacy.”⁷³ In addition, 27 percent of the ex-pastors studied “left ministry because of troublesome conflicts.”⁷⁴ Conflict was the second most common reason given by pastors leaving ministry, trailing only behind “leaving for another kind of ministry.”⁷⁵ Of those

⁷¹ Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Pastors Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 36.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

who left because of conflicts within the congregation, 83 percent reported feeling “stress due to challenges from the congregation.”⁷⁶ This means that 12 percent left specifically because of stress related issues, while stress was also a contributing element to another 27 percent of pastors who left pastoral ministry.

Stress contributes to poor physical health among pastors. The Pew and Pulpit study reports that while 76 percent of pastors rate their health as “excellent” or “very good,” the same percentage of clergy are either overweight or obese.⁷⁷ This is above the general population in the United States, in which 61 percent were overweight or obese in 1999. Duke Divinity School’s Clergy Health initiative also reports that pastors in North Carolina had higher rates of diabetes, arthritis, and hypertension than the general population of North Carolina. Patrick McDevitt suggests this may be because of stress.⁷⁸

Stress is damaging to clergy marriages and families. Pastor families not only have to deal with the time demands of ministry, but also the feeling of being under the congregation’s watchful eye. According to Lifeway Research, more than one in three pastors agree that ministry demands keep them from spending time with family. More than one in five pastors say that their family resents the demands of ministry.⁷⁹ This represents a serious conflict of identities, when the pastor as father or mother conflicts with the pastor’s vocational role.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁷ McMillan, 5.

⁷⁸ Proeschold-Bell and McDevitt, 2.

⁷⁹ Lifeway Research, “Reasons for Attrition Among Pastors,” 3.

A study in the early 1990s found a correlation between high levels of stress and incidences of sexual misconduct among clergy.⁸⁰ Researchers looked at Southern Baptist senior pastors in six southeastern states and found a strong correlation between high levels of stress and sexual misconduct. When pastors had chronic stress from several sources, they were at greater risk of sexual misconduct.

Pastoral stress and burnout are real problems with disastrous consequences for pastors and churches. The problem is deep-seated in the culture of ministry. Efforts to teach stress-management or self-management will be insufficient for fixing the problems. Deep breathing or exercise will not be enough to reverse these trends, if the underlying issues of pastoral identity are not addressed.

Theological Reflection and Analysis

The pastoral identity crisis has real consequences for pastors and their congregations. Yet the problem goes beyond practical concerns. There are deep biblical and theological issues at stake in this problem. Many of these issues have already been hinted at above.

What is it that pastors actually do? The answer to that question is not simple or easy. For example, pastors regularly preach, teach, lead worship, sit on council, lead meetings, guide the church, do weddings, funerals, and baptisms, and get involved in the community. Add to that list, the personal spiritual practices such as prayer and Bible

⁸⁰ J.T. Seat, J.T. Trent, and J.K. Kim, "The Prevalence of Contributing Factors of Sexual Misconduct Among Southern Baptist Pastors in Six Southern States," *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 47, no. 4 (1993): 363-370.

study, as well as denominational responsibilities, random interruptions and crises, and one can see just how complex pastoral ministry has become.

The Bible provides certain principles for ministry, but it does not define a vocational identity for pastors. However, the Bible does provide multiple examples of pastoral ministry and pastoral metaphors. Paul's ministry is not the same as Peter's, and they are both different than the ministry of Titus. The Bible has numerous examples of pastoral ministry, because ministry is contextual. It varies by person, calling, and location. The hardest part of ministry may be that it takes time to understand it in a particular context. It takes time to marinate in the biblical story until it becomes your own story. It takes time for theological reflection in a certain place to lead to a contextual vocational identity. It takes even longer for that identity to symbolize a nameable metaphor that can become foundational for behavior and action.

Ultimately, the core identity of every pastor needs to be their identity in Christ. It is always Jesus who is the savior in ministry. Anytime the pastor's personal identity takes the place of Jesus, the pastor and the ministry are sure to suffer. When a pastor images their identity, it must be one in which Jesus is glorified.

Perhaps the struggle for identity is an essential part of ministry, in order to drive pastors to find their identity in Christ. Robert Dykstra goes so far as to say that,

The pastoral theologian's, indeed the Christian minister's legacy as professional insecurity is not then so much lamentable as laudable, honorable, even essential to who we are and to what we are called to do. Our identity is somehow found in *not* usually knowing who we are, in *not* always knowing what we are doing. Our identity is sometimes found, as Jesus himself professed, in its occasional loss.⁸¹

⁸¹ Robert C. Dykstra, *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 6.

Elsewhere, Dykstra describes ministry with the phrase “necessarily unstable.”⁸² In other words, the very struggle for pastoral identity and image may be an essential element of the ministry.

Yet ministry’s essential nature as a struggle does not mean it should not be struggled with. Pastors need metaphors that are faithful to the tradition and to the scriptures. At the same time, many of the images that are used throughout the Christian tradition do not speak to the current culture. It is vital that pastors find an identity both faithful to the tradition and fruitful in the world. It must be one that is theologically astute but also contextually minded. It needs to bring together the various elements of ministry and add value to the work of the pastors.

In the future, the struggle to find a clear pastoral identity will only intensify. In her book *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle argues that about every 500 years, human culture goes through a major upheaval where the worldview and structure of nearly everything changes. In these periods, Tickle says that churches have a metaphoric “rummage sale.”⁸³ The church goes through its doctrines and practices and decides what to keep and what to throw out. If she is correct, we are in one of those periods now. Culture and churches are changing in radical ways. The identity of pastors is going to be in flux for some time.

The old metaphors of shepherd and priest do not connect with pastors and their people anymore. The next section will develop and critique the more contemporary metaphors that have been used by pastors in the last 60 years: the pastor-as-counselor and

⁸² Ibid., 5.

⁸³ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 19.

the pastor-as-CEO. These are also inadequate for pastors moving forward. Section three will develop the thesis that the idea of story could be a pastoral identity that is faithful to the past and fruitful for the future.

SECTION 2 - OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Modern Attempts at Pastoral Identity

The previous section identified and described historical pastoral identities. This section looks at the metaphors used for ministry in the past 60 years. By far the two most prominent identities proposed have been the pastor-as-counselor and the pastor-as-CEO/leader. The development of these metaphors is linked to the underlying effort to make the pastor a professional in a post-agrarian culture. In addition, other less prevalent pastoral metaphors such as midwife and the pastor-theologian will be explored. The section will end with an analysis of what is needed in a pastoral metaphor.

Western society has changed in the wake of capitalism and the division of labor. People increasingly live in cities and suburbs where more jobs are available. Fewer families work on, or live on, farms. The West has moved from an agrarian society to an industrialized and service-oriented society. Author Wendell Berry reflects on how these changes have negatively impacted society. In the name of technological progress, people are exploited for what they can produce while being “detached from household and community and made to serve other people’s purely economic means.”¹ Berry argues that a mechanical understanding of the world is detrimental to families, marriages, and society. Mechanical thinking influences larger issues like race and harmful environmental practices because people do not have a sense of connection to nature and others, a sense of patience, or a sense of the value of growth and change.

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2002), 71.

Berry does not specifically analyze metaphors, but he does imply that the move away from an agrarian culture affects the everyday stories that people find themselves within, and narrows the experiences that they have. In an agrarian society, the metaphors that people use for life and work are naturally based on their experiences of working the land and caring for animals. Accordingly, the historically dominant metaphor for a pastor was that of shepherd. The image of a shepherd “made a great deal of sense in a world which was basically composed of rural communities.”² The world today is urban and built on a technological worldview. Most pastors are not familiar with farming and have never seen a working shepherd. Pastors and congregants “no longer think in such personal and natural terms.”³ Agrarian pastoral metaphors are simply unfamiliar to the modern mindset. In fact, agrarian metaphors can be opposed to the modern thinking as it is seen as simple and old-fashioned. People look for and think in more mechanical and electronic imagery.

Alongside this shift toward division of labor and away from agrarian culture, arose the idea of professionalism. Previously, farmers had to be generalists. A farmer needed to know how to manage the farm, but also required the skill to build a barn or a house, fix equipment, or hunt. A doctor needed to know about all kinds of medical diagnoses and treatments as well as how to do things at home or on the farm. In a post-agrarian culture, people began to think about vocation differently. The role of the local doctor became professionalized. They became skilled workers, paid for full time

² Derek J. Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

employment in their vocation.⁴ Professionals have increased education, higher expectations of behavior and attire, and increasingly specialized jobs. Doctors today have special training, academic study, and professional attire like the white coat and stethoscope. Doctors are increasingly specialized in what kind of medicine they do. Even agriculture now requires good education and increasing specialization.

Within this context, pastors have also sought to be seen as professionals in their work. Pastors felt a need to distinguish themselves as professionals to be taken seriously. In the early 1800s, seminaries formed to help pastoral ministry become a learned and noble profession.⁵ At first, pastors had to know the sciences, including “logic, metaphysics, mental science, geology, history, geography, and rhetoric.”⁶ This “professional ideal” also expected pastors to have good manners and be respectable.⁷ Over time, this ideal led to the establishment of many seminaries and degree programs to train pastors, often for ordination. The designation *Master of Divinity* was agreed upon for the basic three-year degree by the American Association of Theological Schools in 1970.⁸ That same year, the Association “voted to authorize its member institutions to

⁴ James D. Glasse, *Profession: Minister, Confronting the Identity Crisis of the Parish Clergy* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968), 26.

⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸ Jackson W. Carroll and Barbara G Wheeler. 1987. "Doctor of Ministry Program: History, Summary of Findings and Recommendations," *Theological Education* 23, no. 2: (1987): 11.

award the Doctor of Ministry degree.’⁹ This degree was considered a “professional” degree because it helped train professionals for the work that they would be doing daily.

Not everyone agrees that pastors are, or should be, professionals.¹⁰ While pastors serve a congregation, they do not serve society in the same way that other professions do.¹¹ They are not licensed by the state for their work, and some pastors do not have specialized training or advanced education.¹² There is also a worry that professionalizing ministry will turn it into a job, and detract from a sense of call by God for the position. Despite these reservations, the professionalization of pastors began to influence the education and the practice of ministry. As the pastoral role became more professional, two metaphors have dominated pastoral ministry: pastor as counselor and pastor as CEO. While these metaphors have helped pastors in their pastoral counseling and organizational leadership of the church, each have also brought new challenges to the role.

Pastor as Counselor and Responses

The first major move to professionalize the pastoral ministry borrowed from the world of psychologists and counselors. Donald Messer comments: “For many, the ‘counselor’ or ‘therapist’ image has surpassed any of the other images as the most

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ For a recent critique, see John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002).

¹¹ Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors*, 328.

¹² The exception is that American pastors are given authority by the state to do legal marriages.

formative perspective about one's task in ministry. Especially for Protestants, the pastoral care and counseling movement has captured imaginations, supplied new identities, and given new purpose and meaning to ministry."¹³

E. Brooks Holifield wrote a book called *A History of Pastoral Care in America*.¹⁴ The subtitle reflects his argument: *From Salvation to Self-Revelation*. His point is that in American history, the end goal of pastoral care moved from the salvation of souls to the self-revelation of people finding their full potential. Pastors saw themselves more and more in the role of helping people to discuss their problems and reach their full potential. Harry Emerson Fosdick went so far as to call the sermon a "group counseling session."¹⁵

The spiritual care of parishioners has been central to pastoral ministry since the early church. Gregory of Nazianzus used the image of a physician to speak of how pastors take care of people's souls.¹⁶ Just as doctors treat physical ailments, so pastors treat spiritual ailments. Pastors are to "bring people to a godly healing of their sin and to a life of righteousness and virtue."¹⁷ Gregory's view of ministry is often referred to as the "physician of souls." It was later referenced by Pope Gregory the Great, who referred to

¹³ Holifield, 45.

¹⁴ E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983).

¹⁵ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 59.

¹⁶ Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 208.

¹⁷ Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classic Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 20.

pastoral ministry as “the care of souls.”¹⁸ The language is perpetuated when Martin Bucer wrote *Concerning the True Care of Souls* in 1500s. Bucer was a leader in the reformation at Strasbourg, and in high demand during the Reformation. He helped design church orders and define pastoral ministry.¹⁹ Bucer’s work also influenced John Calvin, who was exiled in Strasbourg and serving as the pastor to French refugees from 1538-1541.²⁰ There is a long history of pastors focusing on the care of those in their flock.

As the field of psychology developed, pastors began to read and study what they could to inform their care of parishioners. The exploration of psychology among pastors was bolstered by the work of Anton Boisen. While hospitalized for mental health concerns, Boisen saw firsthand that hospitals did not know how to deal with spiritual issues. He further realized that pastors were also not equipped to deal with either the hard psychological problems of people or the difficult cultural realities of clinical settings.²¹ He developed a system where pastors would, as part of their education, spend time in clinical settings with theological reflections. This would later be called *clinical pastoral education*. Boisen’s concept of ministry called on pastors to think of the people they cared for as “living human documents,” who the pastor should read and understand, the

¹⁸ Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, Popular Patristics Series Number 34, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 29.

¹⁹ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), xiv.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

²¹ Dykstra, 15.

same way they did with a biblical text or theological treatise.²² Boisen's work encouraged pastors to be informed by psychology in their pastoral work.

One of Boisen's earliest students was Seward Hiltner.²³ Hiltner took Boisen's concepts, expanded them, and developed them into a central aspect of pastoral education. Hiltner wanted every pastor to have clinical experience as part of their training for ministry. Hiltner's concept was that pastors were shepherds looking for lost sheep. The shepherd should relentlessly pursue and care for their sheep. Hiltner connected the Parable of the Good Samaritan to define shepherding as healing, sustaining, and guiding.²⁴

Seward Hiltner's *Preface to Pastoral Theology* is no longer on seminary reading lists, as it is out of print. Yet, as Andrew Purves says, it "has shaped the mind of Protestant pastoral theologians, especially in North America, more than any other text."²⁵ For Hiltner, "Pastoral theology is defined as that branch or field of theological knowledge and inquiry that brings the shepherding perspective to bear upon all the operations and functions of the church and minister, and then draws conclusion of a theological order from reflection on these observations."²⁶

²² Ibid., 16.

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ Tidball, 224.

²⁵ Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), xxvi.

²⁶ Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology: The Ministry and Theory of Shepherding* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1958), 20.

This definition, written in 1958, marks a key shift in pastoral theology. Instead of starting pastoral theology with biblical or theological claims, Hiltner began with the operation and function of the church, and theological reflection followed. Hiltner has been accused of having a functional pastoral theology rooted in psychology, more than in a biblical and theological perspective.²⁷ This may be overstating Hiltner's own perspective and practice, but it also reflects a real, but unintended outcome developed by those who followed him.

Hiltner's early work coincided with the end of World War II. Soldiers came home from the war and tried to rebuild their families and lives, while at the same time trying to deal with the terrible things that they had seen in the war. Families struggled to deal with the loss of soldiers who did not come home. Many people needed the assistance of psychologists during that time to process these events. This need, coupled with the centrality of psychological training in seminary education, propelled psychology to the center of pastoral ministry. Pastors no longer simply borrowed from psychology, but "counseling began to dominate pastoral theology."²⁸ Pastoral ministry moved from being informed by psychology to, in some cases, being defined by psychology. The physician of souls became the counselor of psyches.

As it became increasingly defined by psychology, the very nature of ministry shifted. As Willimon notes, "A major difference between the pastoral care of previous ages of the church and that of our modern era is the switch from care that utilized mostly

²⁷ For example, Derek Tidball says that Hiltner "sits too loose to the theology to which it claims to be related" because it started with "the operations and functions of the church and minister." Tidball, 22.

²⁸ Tidball, 223.

corporate, priestly, liturgical actions to care that has increasingly limited itself to individualistic, psychologically oriented techniques heavily influenced by prevailing secular therapies.”²⁹ The focus became individual and psychological instead of corporate and spiritual. The goal of the church became people’s mental health, instead of being “people’s maturity in Christ.”³⁰ Churches promoted themselves as safe places for people to heal. Parishioners became personalities in need of therapy and pastors became their counselors. The psychological needs of the people became the driving force in pastoral ministry. Instead of the pastor having boldness to speak truth with authority, they sometimes became what Stanley Hauerwas calls “a quivering mass of availability.”³¹

The connection between psychology and ministry did not happen to the same extent everywhere, but it did influence many pastors. It has certainly helped pastors find language and tools to address relational issues within the congregation. People do have psychological problems and needs. Parishioners expect pastors to be able to respond to these needs through counseling, and knowledge about psychology can be very helpful. It is especially important when pastors need to decide to refer someone to a trained psychologist, if the issue requires professional care.

Defining ministry by psychology was also problematic. The central problem is making the “operations and functions of the church and minister the starting-point.”³² In his book *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, Andrew Purves disputes Hiltner’s starting

²⁹ Willimon, 175.

³⁰ Ibid., 183.

³¹ Ibid., 60.

³² Tidball, 22.

point for pastoral theology, arguing that ministry is not based on a therapeutic interaction. Instead of the parishioner being the starting point of pastoral theology, God should be the “principle subject matter.”³³ Ministry is primarily the work of God which pastors are privileged to participate in. Pastoral theology should be “defined and developed precisely and systematically in explicit use of Christological, soteriological, Trinitarian, and eschatological categories.”³⁴ Pastoral theology, under the influence of psychology, “has largely abandoned the responsibility to speak concerning God.”³⁵ The church must be defined not on the psychological counseling of the pastor, but instead on the life-giving work of Jesus Christ in the world.

Getting the center of pastoral theology wrong led to a warped view of the relationship between the pastor and the parishioner. Henri Nouwen, who was both trained in, and taught psychology, saw the work of the pastor as distinct from the work of the counselor.³⁶ He believed that the counselor’s role could create distance between the pastor and the people, which might lead to an elitist mentality in the pastor or an inferiority mentality for the parishioner. Instead, the pastor should see themselves as a wounded soul ministering to other wounded souls. Nouwen’s point is important in contemporary society because of the prevalence of pastoral isolation and loneliness. His

³³ Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, xiv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

³⁶ See Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979).

perspective is that pastors “do not so much share *of* their loneliness but, by accepting loneliness as an integral part of themselves, share *in* the loneliness of others.”³⁷

Ultimately, the pastor as counselor model suffers from a lack of balance. This metaphor grew at the expense of other biblical images and paradigms for ministry. While it is still influential with some pastors who were trained in this kind of ministry paradigm, others were more influenced by the pastor as leader paradigm.

Pastor as Leader and Responses

In the twentieth century, clergy were increasingly influenced by business models. Some pastors looked to the business world for their models of professionalism. Other pastors have been pushed in that direction by church boards or denominational leaders. As Anthony Blair puts it; “Over the past generation or so, Western Christians have embraced and attempted to sanctify the dominant models of leadership in our society without much reflection and very little critique.”³⁸ Similarly, Leonard Sweet notes the influence of leadership models on the church: “Leadership literature has been a cannibal galaxy in the church for the past forty years, gobbling up everything in its path. The leadership cannibal galaxy is so strong it will be hard for many of you to hear these words. Thinking of your faith in leadership terms has simply come to sound normal.”³⁹

³⁷ Dykstra, 70.

³⁸ Brian A. Ross, ed., *Signs of the Times: Pastoral Translations of Ministry and Culture in Honor of Leonard I. Sweet* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 1.

³⁹ Leonard Sweet, *I am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 24.

Faith and ministry are talked about in leadership and business terms so much that this language and its partner metaphors are not questioned. It is assumed that the pastor is an organizational leader and the chief executive officer of the church. The pastor's accepted role is to develop the organization, change the culture, lead people toward a vision of the future, and rise to overcome challenges along the way.

This move toward leadership and business models for ministry makes sense. "Most of the pastor's time is given to matters of congregational leadership. And this is as it should be. The formation of a living, breathing, visible, corporate sign of the presence of Christ and the advent of the kingdom of God is why we need pastors in the first place."⁴⁰ Among other things, the pastor must manage finances, organize volunteers, plan events, develop vision for a future, and oversee projects. A pastor may complete a three-year Master of Divinity program and never learn about things like budgeting, hiring and firing practices, or preventative building maintenance. Yet these kinds of management and leadership skills can be critical to a pastor's work in the church.

The leadership demands are exacerbated by the level of leadership required of pastors today. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky have described a distinction between technical and adaptive change.⁴¹ Technical change makes small adjustments to current structures and processes. This includes "known solutions that can be implemented by

⁴⁰ Willimon, 277.

⁴¹ See Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1998).

current know-how.”⁴² On the other hand, adaptive change adjusts fundamental understandings and assumptions. These can “only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.”⁴³ Adaptive change requires more robust and critical thinking of its leaders because it requires “mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.”⁴⁴

Many American churches, especially in mainline denominations, are far from thriving. With churches struggling and declining, more and more pastors find themselves serving churches that need significant adaptive change. Pastors cannot simply manage churches in their current state. Churches need to dramatically change to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Over time, pastors began to feel the need to learn about leadership and to borrow from business resources. This began with the early works of Peter Drucker on management.⁴⁵ J. Oswald Sanders was a proponent of the term leadership in the church. In 1967, he penned his classic book *Spiritual Leadership*, which was one of the first books to talk about faith and church in leadership terms.⁴⁶ In 1977, Robert K. Greenleaf published *Servant Leadership*, which portrayed leadership not as an autocratic dictator,

⁴² Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business, 2009), 19.

⁴³ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁵ For example, see Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management*. New York, NY: Harper Business, 1954.

⁴⁶ See Oswald J. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1967).

but as a serving presence in the organization.⁴⁷ Pastors have also published books about leadership. For example, Bill Hybels published *Courageous Leadership*, which discussed leading in difficult times.⁴⁸ Hybels also helped spearhead the trend to have leadership conferences and invite prominent business thinkers to participate.⁴⁹

The resources of business leadership have undoubtedly helped many pastors in their church leadership. Pastors need to learn to lead and they do not gain most of those skills in seminary. Yet thinking of the pastor as a business leader has drawbacks. The core problem with the business model of ministry is the same as the core problem with the psychological counseling model: pastoral ministry moved from being informed by the model to being defined by the model. Principles of business leadership that should not apply to ministry started to cross over, such as defining success by profit and prestige. The goal of the church became growth and financial success. Pastors were judged by full pews and offering plates. Parishioners became resources to be managed and potential givers instead of people in need of love and grace. Performance evaluations, vision statements, and annual objectives pressure pastors to perform so that their churches grow. These results are felt in different ways and at different levels, but they have left an indelible mark on pastoral ministry.

There are several problems with defining pastoral ministry based on pastoral leadership. First, success in ministry cannot be defined in business terms. In his book *In*

⁴⁷ See Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977).

⁴⁸ See Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁴⁹ See Willow Creek, "The Global Leadership Summit," accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.willowcreek.com/events/leadership/>.

the Name of Jesus, Nouwen provides a critique of the pastoral business leader image.⁵⁰ Shortly after he had moved to L'Arche Daybreak in Toronto, Nouwen was asked to lecture in Washington D.C. about leadership in the twenty-first century. Living at L'Arche challenged Nouwen's concepts of success and Christian ministry, and he brought those insights to the lecture. Nouwen reflected on the temptations of Christ to highlight three temptations of leaders: to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful. In contrast, Nouwen argued that Christian leadership should be centered on service and the spiritual disciplines. The primary work of a pastor is to be close to Christ and close to their neighbor. That work cannot be measured in budgets, attendance records, or building campaigns.

The bigger issue is a theological one. The pastor was never meant to be the primary or dominant actor in the church. The church belongs to Jesus Christ, and he will build his church. How many pastors have lost their marriage because they made the church their bride, and never realized that the church was meant to be Christ's bride? Pastors need their ministry to be crucified so that their ministry stops getting in the way of Christ's ministry.⁵¹

Pastors do need to lead, but it is much more important that pastors learn how to follow. This is the argument that Leonard Sweet makes in *I am a Follower*.⁵² Sweet argues that Christian leadership is about following. Jesus does not tell his disciples,

⁵⁰ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989).

⁵¹ Image taken from the title Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007).

⁵² See Sweet, *I Am a Follower*.

“Lead for me.” He tells them, “Follow me.” Instead of training Christians to be leaders, we need to start teaching them how to be good followers who will obey the leading of the Holy Spirit. The relationship of the pastor to the parishioner would then be that of a fellow follower who cares deeply for them on the same journey

Ultimately, the pastor as CEO suffers from the same imbalance as the pastor as counselor. It is a positive image to inform pastoral ministry, but it is a poor image to define pastoral ministry. If business principles define pastors at the expense of other biblical and theological insights, then pastoral ministry is distorted. Neither the metaphor of counselor nor that of leader can handle the weight of ministry on their own without damaging the ministry.

Other Proposed Solutions

There have been other proposed solutions to pastoral identity. Heije Faber imagined the pastor as a circus clown. His view was that pastors were becoming increasingly marginalized in society, especially considering scientific and medical advances. Yet, like a clown in the circus, the pastor had a simple but crucial role. The pastor must mediate “between the breathtaking feats of superhuman grandeur by the performers high above and the awestruck terror of the audience down below.”⁵³ Alistair V. Campbell expanded this image to that of *the wise fool*. He suggested that pastors

⁵³ Dykstra, 71.

should play the role of the fool, because the fool, like the court jester, the village idiot, or the circus clown, “often possesses more wisdom than the wise.”⁵⁴

Most pastoral metaphors are “typically associated with male gender roles”⁵⁵ because throughout most of Christian history pastors were men. In 1996, Lutheran pastor and hospital chaplain Karen R. Hansen proposed a very different perspective. Hansen noticed several parallels between the role of ministry and the role of assisting in the birthing process as a midwife. Both bring new life, and both understand the pain that accompanies the process of birthing new life.⁵⁶

In the last several years, there has been a renewed effort to develop the idea of a pastor-theologian. This work was especially developed in the books *The Pastor Theologian* by Hiestand and Wilson,⁵⁷ and *The Pastor as Public Theologian* by Vanhoozer and Strachan.⁵⁸ Both books challenged the misassumption that pastors only apply theology to the practice of ministry, and that real theology is the work of academic scholars. This division is not true to the history of pastoral ministry. Historically, the terms pastor and theologian were so connected that they were nearly interchangeable.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

⁵⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

⁵⁹ Hiestand and Wilson, 12.

Properly understood, the pastor is a person of study and theological reflection who is a resource and theologian-in-residence for the congregation.

Other, less-popular efforts at pastoral identity have also been made. Craig Barnes described the pastor as minor poet who reads and describes the subtexts of life.⁶⁰ In an article for *The Christian Century*, Barnes also proposed that pastors are sheepdogs who herd people back to the Good Shepherd.⁶¹ Other metaphors for pastoral identity and role include Robert Dykstra's the intimate stranger and Paul Pruyser's diagnostician.⁶² Each of these smaller images is thought-provoking in their own way, and a valuable contribution to pastoral ministry, yet none has gained popular acceptance and truly become rooted as vocational identities for pastors.

Analysis

The crisis of pastoral identity is not a lack of pastoral imagery. In fact, part of the problem may be that there are too many vocational identities for pastors.⁶³ One of the common critiques of both the pastor-as-counselor model and pastor-as-CEO model is that they both borrow more from modern images and knowledge than from biblical and traditional knowledge. Ministry images need to be informed by the Bible and tradition, but they also need to be made fresh and be contextualized over time. The critiques of

⁶⁰ See Barnes, *Pastor as Minor Poet*.

⁶¹ M. Craig Barnes, "The Good Sheepdog" *Christian Century* February 8, 2012, 37.

⁶² For descriptions of these images, see Dykstra, 123 and 126.

⁶³ Glasse, 18.

these models listed above are not that such modernizing and contextualizing are bad, but that the resulting models end up theologically and practically problematic.

These images are not always faithful the pastoral tradition. They are not true to the biblical, theological, and historical understandings of what pastors do. At the core of this problem is the Christological argument. Jesus is the savior in our faith, but too often pastors see themselves as the savior. They become the counselor or leader who has the answers and can save the parishioner of the church. Pastoral ministry can then become functionally atheistic in practice. Pastors should not be the good Samaritan who saves people from ditches. Instead, Jesus is the savior and the pastor needs to act as the innkeeper who cares for people as they heal.⁶⁴

These images are not always fruitful in ministry. In other words, they do not always fit the world and the pastor, or add anything to the ministry. Many of the images have a stigma in Western culture. People are hesitant to see counselors and can be suspicious of business and political leaders. Pastors who rely on these models may end up trying to embody metaphors that the community does not desire.

These images also fall short of coherently integrating ministry. They fail to bring together the different, disjointed parts of ministry into a strong vocational identity. They do not energize the pastor with new insights and a new sense of purpose, nor do they capture the imagination in a way that can change behavior. The images struggle to truly become identities.

The images of counselor and CEO should caution pastors in the future. Metaphors are problematic if they dominate the identity of pastors without the critique of other

⁶⁴ Image often used by Andrew Purves in class and in conversation.

metaphors or biblical paradigms. Pastoral metaphors that are used exclusively, run the risk of being incomplete identities that overlook certain aspects of ministry while overemphasizing others. This imbalance can be stressful to pastors and contribute to burnout.

What is needed is an image that is both faithful to the tradition and fruitful for ministry. A successful metaphor will help connect 3,000 years of pastoral ministry to the reality of the current pastoral context. It will help pastors deal with stress and provide stability for long and productive ministry. Section Three will argue that the metaphor of Story can be developed to overcome some of the weaknesses of these other images and provide a more faithful and fruitful pastoral identity.

SECTION 3 - THESIS

The Thesis

Story is a faithful and fruitful paradigm for pastoral ministry that shows great promise for pastors because it provides an identity that gives purpose and direction for their ministry. Story has the potential to energize and invigorate pastoral ministry for an increasingly difficult world. It is also commensurate with the biblical idea of ministry, and offers insights and encouragement for pastors who are struggling to find meaning in a changing church. Pastors can rely on stories for every part of their ministry work, but they must also learn to think in stories.

This thesis does not represent the first attempt at framing ministry in terms of story. Story has been explored by several pastors. Eugene Peterson's ministry extensively explored the idea of story. In his memoir, *The Pastor*, Peterson discussed planting a church and working to help it acquire a narrative, or story, sense.¹ He said that the "language of worship is the language of participation. And the primary form for this language of participation is story: song and story, conversation and story, poetry and story. But, pervasively, story."² Peterson's ministry was about nurturing a "participatory, narrative language."³

Edward Wimberly explored the idea of "the indigenous storyteller" in the African American church. He stated that, "African American oral culture has always used sharing

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 119.

² *Ibid.*, 124.

³ *Ibid.*

stories in caring situations.”⁴ Wimberly described pastoral care in a local black congregation as “a response pattern to God’s unfolding story in its midst.”⁵ The work is based on a theology that “the purpose of God’s rule is to draw all people and nations into God’s story.”⁶

The Alban Institute has published several works exploring story for ministry. Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones wrote *Know Your Story and Lead with It*.⁷ They try to help pastors understand their own stories and lead authentically out of their own genuine personalities. Larry Goleman edited a three-book series called “The Narrative Leadership Collection” which explored the use of narrative in pastoral ministry.⁸ Pastors were encouraged to see their congregations as living stories, and pastoral responsibility being to nurture and tend those stories.

Most recently, Karen Scheib has looked at story in her book *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of Our Lives*. She calls pastoral care a narrative practice which “attends to the inseparable interconnection between our own lifestories, others stories, the

⁴ Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1991), 94.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009).

⁸ Larry A. Goleman, ed., *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010). Larry A. Goleman, ed., *Living Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Culture* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010). Larry A. Goleman, ed., *Teaching Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010).

larger cultural stories, and God’s story.”⁹ She suggests pastors act as “story companions” who come alongside others in their stories.¹⁰

These works show an interest in what story could add to pastoral ministry. The missing component, however, is a deep understanding of the components of story and how story impacts people. Only by diving into the inner-workings of story can pastors fully grasp how it can be a faithful and fruitful paradigm for pastoral ministry.

How Story Works

Not all music is the same. Songs and styles often sound very different from each other, but what all music has in common is a set of rules, or an understanding of music theory on which creativity is built, including patterns of notes, chords, and timing. Similarly, in stories, the characters, settings, and content of stories vary infinitely, but there are structures, patterns, and principles that remain the same. Christopher Booker notes that, “In terms of the bare outlines of their plots, the resemblances between the twentieth-century horror film and the eighth-century epic are so striking that they may almost be regarded as telling the same story.”¹¹ Stories are retold and modified, but most stories have common elements and forms: they follow certain conventions.

⁹ Karen D. Scheib, *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of Our Lives* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), xi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹ Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2004), 2.

The key to a good story is conflict. Stories are driven by and get their energy from conflict between the lead character or protagonist and the forces that oppose them. “The most important thing we recognise from looking at the hidden structures of the basic plots is the extent to which they all revolve around the same fundamental conflict.”¹² There is always an external conflict. The protagonist, or lead character, must go on the journey, rescue the princess, kill the beast, or find the lost ark. But the “same fundamental conflict” that Booker describes is something deeper and consistent in all stories. The external problem exposes an internal problem.¹³ This is the heart of the story. It almost always involves some variation of the question, “Does the protagonist have what it takes?” Is she good enough? Can he complete the task? Whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, a horror movie or a romance, the story is always ultimately about the change in the character of the protagonist as they rise to the challenges of the journey.¹⁴ They must grow to face the challenges and discover that they do have what it takes. The character starts out incomplete and over the course of the story must grow to overcome the odds.¹⁵ Generally, this is called the story arc. It represents the heart of story because it is also the heart of life. People wonder if they have what it takes to overcome obstacles or achieve success in the world.

¹² Ibid., 216.

¹³ Description of internal and external problems taken from Donald Miller, “Storybrand” (Workshop, Nashville, Tennessee, December 6-8, 2015).

¹⁴ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York, NY: Regan, 1997), 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., 227.

Most stories play out conflict with some combination of the same pattern, often called the hero's journey. A lead character called the protagonist, or group of characters, begins the story with a stable and balanced life. They may not be particularly good or healthy, but their lives have a sense of normal. This normal is upset by an inciting incident.¹⁶ James Scott Bell calls this "the disturbance."¹⁷ The inciting incident starts a journey for the characters to reestablish their equilibrium and get their life back together. This is the major dramatic question of the story: how will this turn out?¹⁸ The incident sets up the object of desire that the protagonist identifies as capable of restoring equilibrium. This might be getting the girl, defeating the boss, or finding the stolen goods.

In most stories, the protagonist meets a guide who tells the hero where to go and what to do. The guide has been through the trials before and has a plan for the protagonist. In addition to an initial guide, the protagonist may also be aided by guidance and help from others throughout the journey. In mythology, this help often included "advice, amulets, and secret agents."¹⁹ These become companions who join in the journey and often have their own subplots or smaller story arcs.

The lead character sets off on the quest for the object of desire, following the plan of the guide, and often with a companion by their side. There is normally a moment of

¹⁶ Ibid., 189.

¹⁷ James Scott Bell, *Plot and Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot that Grips Readers from Start to Finish* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2004), 27.

¹⁸ McKee, 198.

¹⁹ Ibid., 81.

crossing the threshold where the protagonist makes a definitive move to start the journey. For every action the protagonist takes there are unintended consequences.²⁰ The forces against the lead character are stronger than they realize, and the actions of the protagonist have unintended consequences. Some of the forces are internal and deal with the protagonist's own inadequacies such as narrow-mindedness or lack of trust. Some of the forces are found externally, such as a person identified as the antagonist. If the opposition is a group, organization, or idea, then it is normally personified or represented by their leader.

At some point in the story, the quest must seem hopeless and the journey an inevitable failure. This moment in the movies is what Robert McKee calls the negative floor.²¹ Blake Snyder calls this moment the “all is lost moment”, or the “whiff of death.”²² It becomes a moment of choice. The lead character must hit rock bottom, and thereby gain the resolve to finish the journey. There can be no going back after the negative floor. In action movies, the lead character will sometimes appear to die in this moment. There is then a resurrection scene where the hero is shown not to be dead, but to be alive.

The story builds to a final conflict.²³ Joseph Campbell wrote about this in mythology as “the supreme ordeal.”²⁴ This is the epic showdown. In an action movie, this

²⁰ Robert McKee, “Storynomics” (Workshop, New York, October 22, 2015).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat: The Last Book on Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 86.

²³ Bell, 30.

²⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 211.

is the hero confronting the antagonist. It is only after this ordeal that the character can return home. Normally the victorious character returns with some sign of triumph or symbolic action upon their return, typically found in an obligatory scene that has been building through the whole film or story, for example, a wedding, award ceremony, or reunion of family and friends that signifies the lead's return. The guide is regularly present to recap the journey. The lesson is almost always the same: the object of desire was not enough to make the protagonist's life right. The hero also had to grow and change on the journey.

Each story will be unique, but all stories have similar patterns, elements, and conventions. It is amazing, when one is looking for it, how many stories follow the hero's journey. In fact, most stories follow this general pattern. It can be seen in movies and television shows, but it is also how people tell stories about their lives. A person who tells the story of what happened over the weekend will often follow these same conventions. People use these story patterns, they expect them, and they will even go to the movies to see the same patterns played out repeatedly.

The grand story of the Bible follows this pattern as well. At the beginning of the Bible, humanity is the protagonist. The Garden of Eden is a state of equilibrium and norm. The Fall is the inciting incident. The external problem is sin and death. The internal problem is shame and the question of whether human beings have what it takes to fix their relationship with God. The fixed relationship with God is the object of desire. God plays the guide and sets up a plan. The plan unfolds in various covenants, with God's help along the way. The Old Testament is a catalogue of failed attempts and unintended consequences as humanity continues to fail to get relationship with God

restored. The story draws to a standstill, though the prophets speak of a coming change in the story. Humanity cannot save itself. A stronger hero is required.

The incarnation of Jesus is the moment of crossing the threshold. Jesus enters the foreign land as a new hero with his own objective. He will save the people who cannot save themselves. God the Father acts as the guide with a plan and a will. The Holy Spirit is an ever-loyal companion, while the twelve other companions falter and fail. Jesus meets resistance from the protagonists: Satan and the religious authorities. The conflict builds to a supreme ordeal in Jerusalem. It is the ultimate negative floor. Jesus does not just have a whiff of death, He dies.

Then the twist happens. The resurrection moment is an actual resurrection. Jesus is not dead but alive, and all is not lost. Just when the victory is won and just when the obligatory victory scene should occur, Jesus ascends to be with the Father. Instead, the obligatory scene is described at the end of the Bible, but has not happened yet. The hero has left and the action flips back to humanity for a hero. The new hero is the church, expressed in the people who push against antagonists and persecution to continue the work of Jesus until the coming conclusion.

The pastor can benefit from a deeper understanding of story structure. It gives insight not only into biblical stories, but also life stories. The stories of parishioners and churches expose the working beliefs about the identity of the hero, the object of desire, and the antagonists to the story. Pastors who understand story can begin to see these underlying beliefs about life, such as whether the people see themselves as the hero (instead of Christ), or have propped up worldly objects of desire (instead of Christ), or have wrongly identified external problems, while ignoring their own sin. The pastor's job

is to live in this grand story of God's work, as well as inhabiting the smaller narratives of people and communities in their care.

Why Story Works

The question that follows this description of how story works is “why does story work this way?” The answer is multifaceted and is still being researched. Not only is story representative of life, but stories have power to shape and change lives. Human beings live their lives through story. Neuroscience is also discovering that the brain works through story. These discoveries are replacing the belief that story is just human adornment and not to be taken seriously.

Stories have the power to push past the barriers of our opinions and positions, to shape values, and spark action. A shared story can create a unified group or family, while conflicting stories can breed division, hatred, and war. Story has an impact on people because human lives are naturally storied. Life unfolds in time and through seasons, much like scenes in a film. People therefore “comprehend such human actions as being organized in time.”²⁵ In other words, people see life playing out like a story, and therefore, “we understand ourselves and our world by means of story.”²⁶ In fact, there is increasing research and literature in cognitive science that suggests people are *wired* for

²⁵ Dan P. MacAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1997), 30.

²⁶ Hester and Walker-Jones, 1.

stories.²⁷ People cannot “escape the narrative structure of human life. Telling stories is the way to be human.”²⁸ Human beings are storied beings.

Story unfolds in a pattern like the hero’s journey, because story is ultimately metaphorical. Story and metaphor “belong to the same basic phenomenon of semantic innovation.”²⁹ They both create meaning beyond themselves. Leonard Sweet explains that “narratives and metaphors are inseparable. A narrative, or story, is nothing but an embellished and embroidered metaphor. By the same token, we could define a metaphor as nothing but a dense and distilled narrative.”³⁰ He goes on to develop the term “narraphor” as a combination of a narrative and a metaphor and argues that Jesus used narraphors and that today’s preachers should as well.³¹

Stories are metaphors for life. Everyone has had their equilibrium upset in life, and had to work to overcome the imbalance. People identify with that struggle. Screenplay writing teaches that for a protagonist to be effective, the audience must begin to empathize with the character. The audience does not need to like or sympathize with the protagonist, but there must be some trait in the protagonist's character or actions that resonates with the audience and draws them into the story. There must be something of

²⁷ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 130.

²⁸ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 19.

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans., Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), ix.

³⁰ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*

the audience member in the protagonist, or the story will not grab their attention. For this feeling to occur, screenplay writer and teacher Blake Snyder said that early in a film the protagonist must “save the cat.”³² In other words, they must do something very early in the movie to make the audience like them. Ultimately, people listen to stories because they want to see themselves as the hero. They want to watch the film, read the novel, or see the play so that they can live vicariously through the lead character.

Because people want to see themselves as a hero, people define the places where they live and call home with stories.³³ Narrative makes the world a template, informing the way people understand both the world and the individual’s place or role in it. Stephen Crites calls them sacred stories, not because all of them come from God, but because people’s “sense of self and world is created through them.”³⁴ In some way, people are the sum of their stories, and without their stories, people become less human.

Story can help define self and the world, but relatively few writers or scholars are describing the process of how story shapes human beings and their world. James K.A. Smith is one scholar who has written extensively about the interrelation of stories and worldview. He argues that because people are finite and physical beings, they tend to embody their stories and learn stories with their bodies.³⁵ They do not memorize the story as it is told to them, but rather “imbibe the Story as (they) perform it in a million little

³² Snyder, 121.

³³ For a good discussion of the impact of story on place and home, see Edward J. Chamberlin, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?: Re-Imagining Home and Sacred Space* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004).

³⁴ Stanley M. Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 70.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

gestures.”³⁶ For example, people tend to dress a certain way to tell a story about themselves. They also want to associate with people who reinforce their stories. Smith describes the formative actions that people create to reinforce their stories, *liturgies*.³⁷ Culture, like the church, uses behavioral and storied tactics to bring people into a story that defines their behavior.

Modern advances in neuroscience are confirming the power of story in the anatomy of the brain. Human brains are wired for story.³⁸ In evolutionary biology, every part of humanity must have an evolutionary reason for developing. Therefore, stories must in some way be essential for human survival.³⁹ Evolutionary biology and neuroscience are seeking to explore and understand how story works in the human brain. Three aspects of the brain help explain why stories are so important and so inspiring to human beings.

First, the brain daydreams as a survival tool. The brain spends time imagining future scenarios, as well as learning from things in the past. As Jonathan Gottschall describes it, story is where the brain goes to practice life.⁴⁰ Daydreams become stories of playing out different options for actions and predicting unexpected outcomes. This is why

³⁶ Ibid., 110.

³⁷ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: 2009), 24.

³⁸ For a general look at the brain and story, see Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2012).

³⁹ For a look at an evolutionary explanation for story, see Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴⁰ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston, MA: Mariner, 2013), 57.

people think about upcoming meetings, and play conversations out in their heads. It is also why people think of things they should have said, hours after an argument. The brain is retelling the story to prepare for next time. This phenomenon also helps explain why people love hearing stories: they provide an opportunity to escape personal daydreaming and vicariously live and learn from someone else's story.

Second, the brain naturally looks for patterns.⁴¹ There are so many things to see, hear, and experience through our five senses, that at any particular moment, the brain cannot handle them all. In order to compensate, the brain looks for patterns so that it can more readily notice something out of the ordinary. Not only do researchers say that participants naturally try to create narrative relationships between images and facts, but also that story structure increases comprehension of unfamiliar information. People have an overwhelming tendency to create relationships and storylines even when there are none. The brain looks for and hungers for story.⁴²

Third, the brain stores memory based on story.⁴³ The brain does not use a filing system based on topic like a computer might. It stores memories in the form of stories. If a person is asked to remember their grandparents' house, they cannot help but remember the house in the context of something that happened there. This is also why people sometimes add unimportant details when they share a story. Those seemingly trivial details are stored in the brain with that particular story.

⁴¹ Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), 90-98.

⁴² Gottschall, 104.

⁴³ Haven, 118-121.

Story is not just a cultural phenomenon. It is a particularly Christian idea. The Bible is primarily written in story. The liturgies of worship, and the rituals of personal spiritual disciplines, bring Christians into a story that is counter to the stories of the world. Perhaps there is a spiritual reason underlying these biological and social understandings of the draw and power of story? Perhaps God loves and creates stories, and human beings follow in that longing because they are made in the image of God? The pattern of the hero's journey that people continually resonate with and watch for in stories may be a reflection of the human desire for Jesus Christ.

The Story of Story

The power of story has led to a renewed fascination with narrative in the world today. It is not a sudden discovery of story, but a rediscovery. For example, ancient cultures had stories painted on walls and pottery, the ancient Greek religions were based on their mythology, and the Bible contains a significant amount of narrative prose. For most of history, people learned ethics and defined their lives based on stories. However, the Enlightenment changed the view of story. Rene Descartes' rationalist philosophy in the early 1600s established the idea that autonomous reason was the ultimate path to truth. This is sometimes called modern or liberal thinking.

The Enlightenment influenced story in two ways. First, it proposed a large metanarrative to explain life, emphasizing that each person is an autonomous individual, evolution is progress, and science is radically different from art.⁴⁴ This was not so much a

⁴⁴ Terrance W. Tilley, *Story Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Michel Glazier, 1990), 30ff.

rejection of stories, but rather the assertion of an overarching and universal story that could explain everything. Accordingly, the Enlightenment's second influence on story can be seen through the metanarrative of science and progress, which, to be understood and accepted, required personal or particular stories be set aside. Science required objectivity. Scientists had to forget their own story and also see the object they were studying in abstract terms. The scientist needed to be a "disinterested observer, (one not influenced by) subjective beliefs, wants and stories of the agent who makes them."⁴⁵ People were studied as aggregates and averages instead of as individuals. The previous faith metanarratives were viewed suspiciously and eventually rejected. As Darrell Fasching notes, "In the story to end all stories we are told that we no longer need stories—only universal human reason."⁴⁶ Indeed, the Enlightenment left little room for the particularity of stories. Terrance Tilley says it elegantly: "The myth of modernity is *the story that kills stories*."⁴⁷ He adds that, "The myth of the enlightenment is a story that tells us we have outgrown stories."⁴⁸

The Enlightenment metanarrative itself has proven to be a myth. Postmodernity signifies the ways modern master narratives have declined and been abandoned, "including those about the autonomous self, the march of science and progress, and benevolent expansion of wealth and consumer culture."⁴⁹ The last century has shown the

⁴⁵ Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 16.

⁴⁶ Darrell J. Fasching, *Narrative Theology after Auschwitz: From Alienation to Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 90.

⁴⁷ Tilley, 35. Italics in original.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Goleman, ed., *Living our Story*, 2.

United States a Great Depression, two World Wars, Hiroshima, and the brutality of Auschwitz and Nazi Germany. The world still faces problems of poverty, ethnocentricity, and racism. The meta-narratives have failed. Science and its objectivity have done some good things, but it has not always made the world better. Walter Brueggemann points out that this culminated in the 1970s with Vietnam, Watergate, the Civil Rights Movement, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and Robert F Kennedy.⁵⁰ People lost their faith in the inevitability of progress and the hope of the scientific method.

In the resulting reaction, called post-modernism or post-enlightenment, truth has become relative. All metanarratives have been rejected. As the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard argues, “postmodernism is what happens when master stories lose their appeal and become incredible.”⁵¹ People are suspicious of traditions like Christianity and their metanarratives. At the same time, culture is fascinated by, and perhaps obsessed with, personal narratives. Witness the rise of Facebook and Instagram, and the popularity of reality TV. People do not just want music albums and movies, but they also want commentaries and “behind the scenes” access.

Story is on the rise in books, conferences, and the cultural consciousness. This movement is leading to new fields and new approaches in existing fields. Doctors are now trained in story in medical school in order to help diagnose patients.⁵² Lawyers can

⁵⁰ Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes, eds., *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 157.

⁵¹ Quote from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), xxiv, in Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.

⁵² Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2006), 111ff.

now be trained in story to help them make opening and closing arguments.⁵³ There have also been narrative approaches to brain injury rehabilitation that use story to help people rebuild lost stories and lost neuro-pathways due to traumatic injury.⁵⁴ There is an entire field called narrative therapy that uses the principles of story for counseling.⁵⁵ The same principles have been applied to business in the field of narrative leadership.⁵⁶

The move away from story, and subsequent return to story, is of particular interest for this study as it relates to biblical studies and theology. These fields were greatly influenced by the Enlightenment mindset. Brueggemann notes that these philosophical assumptions “have dominated biblical interpretation in the West for the past several centuries.”⁵⁷ The Bible was studied not from a position of faith but from a critical perspective. Scholarship eventually “was reduced to ‘historical criticism,’ the attempt to trace the history of the literature; and to situate each piece of scriptural literature in its assumed place of origin.”⁵⁸ The result “was a Bible that was understood in thin, one-dimensional ways that ‘explained’ the text according to the criteria of Western rationalism.”⁵⁹ The approach was similar for theology. The study of God became the

⁵³ See Philip Meyer, *Storytelling for Lawyers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ See Stephen Weatherhead and David Todd, eds., *Narrative Approaches to Brain Injury* (London, UK: Karnac Books, 2014).

⁵⁵ See Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York, NY: Norton, 1990).

⁵⁶ See Stephen Denning, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

⁵⁷ Ballard and Holmes, 153.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

dissection of God into component parts. These parts were studied not from a position of belief or relationship but a position of objectivity. In both biblical studies and theology, the results were costly for the church. Theology and biblical interpretation became elite studies that were not written for the good of the body or informed by the work of the church.

All of this changed in 1919 when Karl Barth “published his daring and explosive commentary on the Epistle to the Romans.”⁶⁰ Karl Barth refused to study Romans as an objective observer, instead electing to “read the text in an unfettered, ‘naïve’ way as a person of faith who took at face value the deep and radical faith claims voiced by Paul.”⁶¹ Barth was not the first or only theologian to reject the liberal approach to biblical studies and theology, but he was one of the most important. Barth paved the way for scholars to study the story again.

In Old Testament studies, Brevard Childs did “more than any other scholar who has worked to re-situate the texts of the Old Testament within the matrix of church conviction.”⁶² Yale professor Hans Frei did much of that same work for the New Testament. His 1974 book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* argued that the Bible “offers a narrative depiction of reality.”⁶³ He developed his thesis by looking at hermeneutics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As interpreters in this period tried to be more realistic about texts, they moved away from the narrative nature of the Bible and lost

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1972).

⁶² Ibid., 158.

⁶³ Garrett Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), x.

much of its meaning. Frei's work was important because it opened scholarship to the possibilities of a narrative approach to the Bible and theology. Frei further argued that some aspects of a given text could only be understood through narrative analysis. The "narrative meaning is identical with the dynamics of its descriptive shape."⁶⁴ In other words, the shape of a text as story gives it meaning.

Frei was influential to another Yale professor, George Lindbeck. In 1984, Lindbeck published *The Nature of Doctrine*. His book was the first to speak of a post-liberal age in which religion is "a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought."⁶⁵ Faith is a cultural-linguistic system and thereby God is understood in a cultural context and linguistic framework. The Bible is understood similarly. Texts are thick, written and read in communal language, and must be "read and understood in terms of a rich intertextuality."⁶⁶ Doctrine, therefore, is not based in the objective observation of the church, but the language given to the church's experience of God. Doctrines are rules for the imagining of God and world, in our story-telling, pray-acting, and in our common-living.⁶⁷ Lindbeck continued to call theology to the importance of story.

In 1983, a year before Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, Catholic scholar Hans Urs Von Balthasar published the first of his five-volume work *Theo-Drama: Theological*

⁶⁴ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 312.

⁶⁵ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 33.

⁶⁶ Ballard and Holmes, eds., 160.

⁶⁷ Lindbeck, 19.

Dramatic Theory.⁶⁸ His work developed a different way of articulating theology that drew the church even closer to story. Balthasar distinguished two Christian horizons or theological styles. In dramatic theology, the work of God in the world is conceived as something like a play.⁶⁹ Christians are active participants in that drama.⁷⁰ In contrast, epic theology “steps out of the drama to take an external, spectator’s perspective upon the completed play.”⁷¹ The epic is more like the modern or liberal theology that makes for “tidy Christian doctrine.”⁷² His book was an attempt to develop a Theo-drama and to present theology in dramatic categories. What Balthasar imagines as a drama could also be conceived of as a story in which Christians participate.⁷³

The trajectory of narrative thinking has had a lasting impact on biblical studies. Scholars of both the Old and New Testaments have continued to look at the Bible in narrative terms. Bruce Longenecker says that “Narrative analysis of scripture has shown itself to be a vibrant and productive discipline since the 1970s.”⁷⁴ Much work has been done on the Torah and Gospels, since these books are primarily narrative. The writing of

⁶⁸ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. 1: Prolegomena* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988).

⁶⁹ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 53.

⁷⁰ Von Balthasar, 22.

⁷¹ Healy, 54.

⁷² Von Balthasar, 20.

⁷³ For a more recent take on cultural-linguistic theology and the idea of “theodrama,” see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Scripture: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

⁷⁴ Bruce W. Longenecker, ed., *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.

the apostle Paul “has been relatively immune from narrative study for obvious reason: Paul wrote letters, not narratives.”⁷⁵ Yet, as Longnecker and others develop in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, Paul’s writings need to be understood in light of Paul’s story, the church’s stories, and the metaphors and narrative elements that Paul includes. Biblical scholarship has also seen the value of picturing the Bible as one coherent story. For example, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen wrote *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, which portrays the grand story of the Bible and the need for Christians to see their lives as part of that story.⁷⁶

This trajectory has also had a lasting impact on theology. The growing field of Narrative Theology seeks to talk about God, not in terms of doctrines, but in terms of story. The work of Stanley Hauerwas is exemplary. In *Why Narrative*, Hauerwas and co-author L. Gregory Jones note how narrative is not just a fad calling for storytelling. “Rather, it is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions.”⁷⁷ Narrative can help theologians understand and describe how God is known, who Christians are, and the elements of the faith’s major beliefs.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁶ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

⁷⁷ Hauerwas and Jones, eds., 5.

⁷⁸ For a great example of Narrative Theology applied to ethics and community, see the essay “A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down*” in Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 9-35.

The story of stories is that narrative has created the fabric of human existence throughout history. The Enlightenment marked a move away from story, but that trend has now swung the other way. Western culture is now obsessed with stories. Biblical and theological studies are following the trend back to the original pre-modern thinking of the church. Yet in many ways, the traditional church remains thoroughly modern in its thinking. Doctrines and propositions that are so frequently fought over and discussed are born of a world that has past. The future of the church lies in story, which is also where the church began.

The Story Pastor

With this groundwork in place, the principles of story can now be applied to ministry. Imagine the story pastor—a pastor who approaches their ministry in story terms. Henri Nouwen notes that stories are fundamental to Jewish teaching: “The rabbis guide their people with stories; ministers usually guide with ideas and theories. We need to become storytellers again.”⁷⁹ Yet story pastors do not just tell stories. They *think* in terms of story. They see their lives as a story and their church as living a story. They see their communities as participating in an ongoing story. Each of their church members are living out the stories of their lives. Most importantly, the story pastor is guided by God’s story in the world and playing their part in that story.

⁷⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1977), 65.

On one level, the story pastor plays the guide for the church community. The church is the hero that bravely fights for God's story in the world. The pastor uses these stories to shape the culture and to move the congregation forward in its own story. Congregations "commonly tell either safe or weak stories about themselves."⁸⁰ Many established churches are in what narrative therapy calls a "problem-saturated story" where the entire focus is completely on what is going wrong, and they are paralyzed by having so many problems to overcome.⁸¹ As Graham Standish suggested about his own congregation: "The congregation seemed to have been stuck in something akin to writer's block, and my role was to help script a new plot line that would lead to a different kind of resolution."⁸² Story pastors help churches get out of writer's block and onto the next chapter of their story by acting as an "agent of memory" who keeps or chronicles the story.⁸³ At the same time, story offers pastors a way to help stagnant churches by retelling the previous chapters of its story (their tradition and the church history) while also challenging them to write the next chapter (ministry for the future).

The story pastor also gives church members parts to play in the narrative. Members become actors in a story instead of volunteers in an organization, and they are called to go out into the community to tell others the story of what is happening in the church. Parishioners want to see themselves as a hero in a larger story, and they want the same for their church. The pastor also shepherds the members of the congregation by

⁸⁰ Golemon, ed., *Finding our Story*, 28.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸² Golemon, ed., *Living our Story*, 78.

⁸³ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

tending to their stories. The story pastor asks them about their stories and learns their back-stories. He or she helps the parishioners to create new stories.

On another level, the story pastor understands that Jesus is the true hero of the story. The pastor does not have to save the church or have all the answers. Their job is to continue to press the story of Jesus to the center of the church. The story pastor weaves God's story into the narratives of the everyday lives of the congregants. The pastor helps "enable individuals and communities to fashion narratives that weave together divine and human stories into a single fabric."⁸⁴ This happens most obviously in preaching and worship, where the pastor is "Weaving together the divine-human narratives."⁸⁵ It also happens in the connection between worship and pastoral care, which work together "to deepen the connection between God's narrative and our own."⁸⁶ The story pastor understands that true Christian maturity is the process of making Jesus the protagonist of the believer's story.

On yet another level, the pastor is the hero of their own story. They are guided by God and bravely follow the plans of the Holy Spirit. Ministry is full of antagonists. Congregants can be challenging, and it can be draining to deal with sin and brokenness. The world today is also a difficult place to be a pastor because churches are struggling. Pastors are often not appreciated and sometimes not even respected. The pastor's work is full of unintended consequences and their actions and words are not always received the way the pastor intended. The work of the pastor raises questions of inadequacy and

⁸⁴ Anderson and Foley, 53.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 37.

capacity for the work. Yet the pastor must bravely continue following the Holy Spirit. They are guided by the story of God and charged with narrating the things of God for the people.

While there is inadequate space to fully develop the metaphor of the story pastor here, worship leadership can serve as a brief example of how the metaphor plays out practically. The narrative purpose of worship is the experience of God's story. All week, the people of God live in a world that tells them that they are not the people of God. They come to worship to praise God and to embody the story of God. The story is spoken, sung, heard, and even consumed in worship. The goal of any service is to "gather, remember our identity-shaping story, and send one another back into the wider world, allowing that story to shape us as we go."⁸⁷ Worship invites the Christian to remember, experience, and then live into the story of God, and prepares them to go live that story in the world.

The first question a pastor should ask as they design a worship service is, "What is the story of this worship service?" As a story, every service should involve some conflict. This is often a prayer of confession or the challenge of a sermon. The service should include images and metaphors that fit that story. The service is also held together by the soundtrack that carries the theme throughout. Without the thread of a common theme or story, a service can feel disjointed.

Story-thinking leads pastors to be creative in their worship services. For example, a pastor could put together a sermon and preach about the way the Pharisees and scribes

⁸⁷Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 18.

are grumbling about Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them in Luke 15. The pastor could decide that instead of serving communion in the pews she would invite everyone up to gather around the table together so that the experience of communion would better fit the story. This kind of worship service is more coherent and compelling than most worship experiences.

More work needs to be done to flesh out the possibilities of story for every aspect of ministry, but it is clear is that story holds much potential for pastors. Story is critical to the Bible and a central component of the teachings of Jesus. It fits how people think today and how the brain is wired. It makes sense of the practices and experiences that churches and traditions have developed to help Christians embody the Kingdom story. Most importantly, story can be a compelling identity for pastors. Story can take the various aspects of ministry that often seem unrelated, and put them together in the pastor's mind. Story helps the pastor develop a theological perspective on their work, because ultimately it is not their job to create the story. Their job is to tell God's story as it plays out in their churches, their communities, and in the lives of their parishioners. In this sense, the story pastor may be best understood as a story-weaver, gathering and retelling the rich and constructive stories that nurture and shape the Christian life.

Analysis

For the model of the story pastor to be a valuable contribution to pastoral ministry and identity, it needs to fulfill two criteria. First, the story pastor model must be faithful to the Bible and the tradition of pastoral ministry. Second, the story pastor must be fruitful in that it adds to the work of pastors in the current context and milieu of ministry.

The story pastor must also be a metaphor that is compelling enough to be a true identity for pastors.

The sheer number of areas of pastoral ministry to which story relates makes a strong case that this is a faithful metaphor. Story touches preaching, pastoral care, self-care, leadership, counseling, worship leading, outreach, and missions, to name a few. The entire work of the pastor has always been to connect God's story and people's stories. The story pastor is faithful to these traditional elements of pastoral ministry.

Yet there are two ways in which this model is especially faithful to the tradition. First, it resists the role of pastor as savior, acknowledging that the pastor does not have all the answers. Instead, the pastor's work is to encourage and tell stories. The pastor is the guide. They do not have to do the work of the savior or the work of the congregation. Second, it provides a coherent, overall ministry paradigm. The complex work of the pastor has become increasingly disjointed. Ministry is understood in terms of several linked, but distinct, areas such as preaching, administration, and pastoral counseling. The story pastor provides a coherent ministry paradigm as each of these functions can be thought of in story terms. A corollary benefit to both faithful elements may be the decrease of clergy stress and burnout.

The story pastor is faithful to scripture and tradition, but it is also fruitful for ministry today. The case has been made that human beings are fundamentally storied beings. The human mind thinks in stories, and people define themselves by their stories. Western culture is also moving toward a focus on story. Biblical studies and theology can be developed in terms of narrative. Pastors who think in storied terms will be fruitful in this environment. The story pastor offers pastors a way to help stagnant churches move

forward. Story-thinking also unleashes the Bible for ministry. In the modern church, the Bible was used to guide preaching but had little to say about other aspects of ministry like administration or leadership. For the story pastor, the stories of the Bible become compelling narratives for the church to rediscover and participated in as the church continues God's narrative in the world. At the same time, story pastors need to be cautious that story does not become, like counselor or leader, an out of balance and unhealthy image.

The case has been made that the pastoral identity crisis has very tangible consequences as it contributes to clergy stress and burnout. The identity crisis adds to stress by highlighting role ambiguity, dividing ministry into disjointed components, and leaving pastors with an unhealthy self-reliance. Story helps pastors find a role that does not cast them as the hero, but the guide. Success is not all up to them. Their role is to tend to and encourage the story of God in the church. Story connects the disjointed areas of ministry under one paradigm and gives the pastor a sense of wholeness. If story can help decrease stress for pastors, then it can have a positive effect on burnout, pastors leaving the ministry, clergy health, clergy health, and sexual misconduct.

Story can also help pastors how have already been wounded or have stumbled in ministry. Story is healing. When people are hurt, a story can give them a sense that they are not alone and the motivation to stand back up. Story can provide a lens to rewrite a situation that troubles us. For pastors, this means that story can help heal the falls and bruised of ministry by providing a framework to rethink and retell their experiences. For the stressed and burnt out pastor, story is a place to find healing and wholeness by remembering their true part in the story.

The biggest weakness of the story pastor paradigm is that it is not a metaphor *per se*. The story pastor is not an image like shepherd or prophet. As such, it takes more effort to understand and live out of the imagery. Perhaps the image of a storyteller is a stronger metaphor, yet that image brings with it the baggage of being focused on telling stories instead of thinking in story. With that said, the image of story itself is very common to the human experience, and experience with the storytellers of our day such as leaders, novelists, and movie directors, does give a context for the image to catch on.

The paradigm of story is powerful enough that it can become a metaphor for pastors. It can be a unifying and energizing identity for pastors, one that is more faithful and fruitful than the images of business leader or counselor. It can help pastors in the difficult cultural context of today. More importantly, by helping pastors gain a robust and compelling identity, story can help lower stress and burnout and lead to healthy and sustainable ministry. Story pastors will need time and reflection to begin to grasp the possibilities, but the image is rich with possibilities to be explored.

SECTION 4 - ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The previous sections developed a case for the paradigm of story as a framework for thinking about pastoral ministry. The proposed artifact is a popular book written for pastors entitled *The Story Pastor*. While this material lends itself to a number of different media, books are still a dominant source of learning for many pastors. The goal of the work is to give pastors a compelling vision for what ministry would look like if it were approached through the lens of story. To accomplish this, the book has several important elements.

First, the book is a popular book, not academic in tone. The book is accessible and fast-paced, without an excess of footnotes or academic jargon. It also has stories and examples. Each chapter would help highlight key insights by including study questions. These questions could be reviewed individually or discussed in a group. Each chapter will also include several questions for pastors to reflect upon, or journal about, as they apply the principles of story to their own lives.

Second, while the book was imagined while studying the problems of pastoral identity, the book does not address this problem directly. *The Story Pastor* only addresses identity, stress, and burnout out as it is fitting. Instead, the book works to give a compelling and engaging vision of what a ministry of story could look like.

Third, for this vision to be compelling, *The Story Pastor* dives deeply into how story works. Central to this component is the work on “the hero’s journey” and why story follows consistent patterns. Also critical to the project is an understanding of how people think in story and try to embody story in their lives. This is the piece that other books about pastoral ministry and story have missed. Another unique component is the

exploration of the use of story by sports broadcasters. This chapter will help pastors see how to think through every day pastoral situations in story terms.

Finally, *The Story Pastor* contains an entire section that applies the principles of story to the specific aspects of pastoral ministry. There is a chapter for reading scripture, worship leading, preaching, leadership, personal care, pastoral care, and counseling. The chapters are focused and practical, helping readers to think about and approach each area in a way that is informed by story.

The book proposal will be pitched to traditional publishers before considering self-publishing, though self-publishing is an option. Hopefully the buzz and interest around story will help *The Story Pastor* to find a traditional publisher. This material would also lend itself to workshops, keynotes, and online courses.

The plan is also to follow up *The Story Pastor* with a book called *The Story Christian*. The second book would apply these same principles to the lives of believers. Pastors could use this book to inspire the church with the same language and lens for ministry and life that was gained through *The Story Pastor*. The potential of a follow-up book for a more general audience may help entice a publisher to express interest in both books.

SECTION 5 - BOOK PROPOSAL

Query Letter

Agency Address

Greetings,

I am writing to ask you to consider publishing my book *The Story Pastor: A Guide to Storied Ministry*. It is a non-fiction book written to help pastors look at their ministry through the lens of story. This paradigm for ministry is compelling and energizing and will help pastors in the various aspects of pastoral ministry. The Story Pastor helps pastors consolidate their work under one paradigm that is fruitful in the world today and faithful to the tradition. The book is about 70,000 words.

I have a cover letter and book proposal available as well as the first five chapters of the book. Please let me know if you would like to view them.

Jordan Rimmer

Cover Letter

Agency Address

Greetings,

It is a difficult time to be a pastor. Old images and metaphors like shepherd or prophet do not connect with ministers anymore, but the pastor is also more than the new dominant images of business leader or counselor. Pastors need a new way of thinking about their work that is faithful to the past but fruitful in the present. *The Story Pastor: A Guide to Storied Ministry* is a non-fiction book of about 70,000 words that is written to give pastors a compelling vision for themselves by exploring ministry through story.

Pastors are looking for help in ministry. There have been several other books that touch on the connection between story and ministry, but they are either about telling stories or about very basic insights from story. What makes *The Story Pastor* different is that it provides a complete paradigm for ministry by diving into how stories really works. *The Story Pastor* teaches pastors to think in story and asks them to consider how story touches every area of their ministry.

There is a market for *The Story Pastor*. Pastors, who comprise a well-defined book-buying market segment, are looking for help in their ministry. Story is also a big buzzword right now that people are interested in. I have had conversations with pastors as I write the book and there is a lot of interest in the topic.

I am uniquely positioned to write and sell this book. I have spent the last three years studying story and metaphor under the guidance of Leonard Sweet through George Fox Seminary. Len has a strong online following and is considered an innovative leader

for the church today. I blog regularly at <http://www.jordanrimmer.com> which gets over 8,000 visits a year. I regularly blog for Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and could blog with George Fox Seminary as well.

I am a Presbyterian pastor connected to a number of resources in my denomination for selling the book. I can present the material at different regional and national events and can publish an article about the material with *Presbyterians Today* magazine.

Thank you for your consideration of my book proposal. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Jordan Rimmer

Book Proposal

Title: The Story Pastor: A Guide to Storied Ministry

Author: Jordan Rimmer

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Overview:

It is a difficult time to be a pastor. Many churches are struggling both to financially support full time pastors and to develop vital ministry in the community. Pastors are under stress from their church contexts as well as a rapidly changing world. What it means to be a church and be a pastor is changing right before our eyes.

The Story Pastor is written to help pastors understand who they are and how they can develop meaningful and sustainable ministry. It is about learning to live a better story and getting your congregation to live a better story, too. It is about getting in tune with the story of the community and fitting the story of your ministry into God's larger story. It is about reading the bible as story that speaks into our everyday stories

The Story Pastor is not about storytelling. It is about story-thinking. It is about learning that the brain thinks in story form. Human memories, choices, and habits are all based on the stories you see yourself living. People dress, drive cars, and even speak in a way that fits their story. When a pastor understands this, he or she can begin to shape and influence the stories of those around them. Sometimes it is from the pulpit where a Bible story is laid out to critique a negative story in our culture. Other times, it is helping a person in pastoral counseling who needs to start living a different role in their marriage or family. People and churches get writers block sometimes. Pastors are chroniclers and editors who keep the story moving.

The Story Pastor develops this by giving a rich and compelling description of how story works and how it influences life. The book then gives specific principles and examples for application. Finally, it goes through the major components of pastoral ministry and describes each one through the lens of story.

In the end, readers will be motivated and rejuvenated to throw themselves into their ministry. Pastors will see their work as a unified effort instead of a choppy hodge-podge of tasks. Most importantly, pastors will have a way to view and approach their ministry which is inclusive of others and inspiring to all.

Purpose:

- Show the power of story for ministry
- Help pastors find an identity in story
- Move pastors beyond preaching and telling stories and into thinking in story
- Help pastors connect every area of ministry into a unified effort for the Kingdom of God

Promotion and Marketing:

Story is a big buzz word right now. People and books are talking a lot about story.

Pastors are also hungry for books that will help them be more effective and feel better about their work.

The book would be promoted using the following:

- The IP address www.thestorypastor.com has already been purchased. In the months leading up to the book launch, this website would be started for blogs and to collect email addresses of those interested in the book.
- The Facebook page for *The Story Pastor* has been claimed as well as the twitter handle @storypastor. Daily quotes and posts from these sites as well as Jordan's personal pages will help get the word out about the book.
- In the weeks before the book release, there would be paid marketing on Facebook.
- In the months before the book release, Jordan would start a podcast to talk about the principles of the story pastor.
- Jordan has contacts at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, George Fox Seminary, and Grove City College. He will try to do guest blog posts for each of the schools as well as inform them of the book release.
- Jordan's own denomination publishes a magazine called *Presbyterians Today* as well as hosting a daily blog for PCUSA. Jordan would pursue writing for both.
- Information about the book will likely spread at various conferences. Jordan's speaking engagements, along with a booth at several conferences, could increase sales.
- Advertising purchased at blogs like Frank Viola, Text Week, or Thom Rainer.
- Send Byron Borger of Hearts and Minds Bookstore a review copy of the book. He does a number of conferences for smaller pastors and for Coalition for Christian Outreach and his book recommendations are effective in increasing book sales.
- Ask Len Sweet and other Christians with large social media following to shout out about the books.

Competition:

- The Narrative Leadership Collection. A three-book series edited by Larry A Golemon including the titles *Living our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation*, *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change*, and *Teaching Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Culture*. Published by the Alban Institute, 2010. These books are collections of essays written by Alban consultants and writers about the possibilities of story for pastors. They focus particularly on applying the field of Narrative Therapy to pastoral ministry.

- *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* by Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones. Published by the Alban Institute, 2009. The book focuses on the value of pastors understanding and leading from their own story. For example, how can pastors be authentic about their own struggles and in so doing help their congregation in their struggles.
- *Pastoral Care: Telling the Story of our Lives* by Karen Scheib. Published by Abingdon Press 2016. This book focuses specifically on pastoral care and how pastors come along side and help people with the stories of their lives.

Uniqueness:

There have been a number of attempts to think about story in various fields. One can find books on narrative therapy, narrative theology, narrative preaching, narrative therapy, and narrative leadership. But each of these books, like the books listed above, are narrow in scope. Little has been done to connect all the aspects of pastoral ministry into one clear paradigm that can energize the pastor for their work. These works prove that there is an interest in story among pastors, but they do not flesh out the model for ministry.

The Story Pastor is written to go beyond insights from story and instead present story as a paradigm for approaching ministry. Story becomes an identity that connects all the unique aspects of pastoral ministry into one whole. It is informed by numerous fields but is presented as a coherent model.

Endorsements:

I have personal contact with and would pursue endorsements from the following established authors: Eugene Peterson, Graham Standish, Leonard Sweet, Donald Miller, Andrew Purves, Craig Barnes, and Walter Brueggemann. I would also suggest Zak

Eswine, Barbara Brown Taylor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, Carol Howard Merritt, and William Willimon.

Book Format:

The Story Pastor is a non-fiction book with fast and short chapters. It includes lots of examples from movies, television, and sports as well as lot of historical Christian examples. Each chapter will end with questions for reflection, which serve to encourage pastors to read and discuss the book in groups. The book will include an annotated bibliography of recommended reading so that pastors can go deeper in the topic.

Chapter Outline:

- Introduction Describes how the author came to think about ministry through story and why it is so needed for pastors today.
- Chapter 1: A Different Kind of Ministry Introduces the power of story and how it is an important ministry paradigm in the Bible. Gives examples from the lives of Nathan and Jesus to illustrate.
- Chapter 2: The Hero's Journey Tells the outline of just about every movie ever made and why stories follow such predictable patterns.
- Chapter 3: Why Stories Work Describes the core of how stories work in life and in the human brain and why interest in story is on the rise.
- Chapter 4: Storied Beings Explores how people base their lives on story by thinking in metaphors and embodying their life stories.
- Chapter 5: The 12 Principles of the Story Pastor Lays out the basic principles that pastors can apply to ministry.
- Chapter 6: Storifying Ministry Looks at the examples of sports broadcasting to talk about how to apply story to everyday events.
- Chapter 7: Reading the Scripture as Story Teaches how to read the Bible as a big story as well as read the storied elements of every passage.
- Chapter 8: Leading Worship as Story Develops how to think about the worship service as an experience of the story of God and how to make the story stronger and more coherent.
- Chapter 9: Preaching as Story Describes preaching through the lens of story as more than storytelling but also thinking of storying even the didactic teaching.
- Chapter 10: Leading as Story Applies story to the pastor's task of leading the organization of the church into the future.
- Chapter 11: Mission, Outreach, and Evangelism as Story Explores how the church can use story to do ministry in the world.

- Chapter 12: Counseling and Discipleship as Story Tells how to help people grow in their lives and in their faith in one-on-one contact through story.
- Chapter 13: Living as a Story Pastor Puts all the aspects of the story pastor together to teach pastors how to live with an identity as a story pastor.
- Annotated Bibliography Shares books for further reading with notes about the strengths and benefits of each work for the pastor.

Intended Readers:

While this book could be of interest to Christians involved in other areas of leadership, it is written for pastors. The author is a young mainline pastor from a reformed tradition. The ideal reader is parallel to the author's life circumstances, though nothing in the content or theology of the book will exclude other traditions or age brackets. The ideal reader profile:

- Pastors
- Reformed or mainline
- Likely denominationally connected
- Potentially a church-planter
- Younger- age 25-40
- Keep up on popular culture such as movies and television shows
- Active on social media
- Follow blogs by as textweek.com, Thom Rainer, Ed Stetzer, Frank Viola, and the Gospel Coalition
- Reads a number of books each year
- Read books by Eugene Peterson, Leonard Sweet, Donald Miller, Jared C. Wilson, and Nadia Bolz-Webber
- Listens to podcasts
- Interested in the Patristics and historical church leaders such as Athanasius, John Chrysostom, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon
- Pastors who attend conferences such as The Leadership Summit and The Festival of Homiletics
- Pastors who subscribe to Len Sweet's subscription website www.preachthestory.com.

Manuscript:

Currently 1/3 of the book is completed in draft form. The book is estimated to be 70,000 words. A manuscript could be completed within 3 months of contract.

Author Bio:

Jordan Rimmer is a Presbyterian minister from outside of Pittsburgh, PA. He is a graduate of Grove City College. He got a Masters of Divinity from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and is pursuing a Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies from George Fox Seminary under the tutelage of Leonard Sweet.

Jordan began learning what it means to be a pastor by watching his father James Rimmer. James spent his career as a Presbyterian minister doing turn-around church ministry. He worked in churches that had been through conflict or had been in steady decline. In these contexts, James had to learn how to change church cultures and develop leaders.

It took a while for Jordan to be willing to be in ministry because he had seen first-hand so many of the challenges of ministry. Eventually, Jordan attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and studied with Dr. Craig Barnes, now president of Princeton Theological Seminary. Barnes has written extensively on what it means to be a pastor in the world today. Jordan was also mentored by Dr. Andrew Purves who has written about pastoral care throughout church history and in the world today. Jordan is now studying with Dr. Leonard Sweet, who has deepened Jordan's thinking about the power of story, the importance of symbol and metaphor, and the future of the church.

In addition to ministry, Jordan also does extensive work in experiential education. Jordan has led groups on ropes course, climbing walls, and experiential activities. These

groups include school groups, at-risk-youth, athletic teams, church groups, and corporate groups.

Jordan's speaking and group experience includes the following:

- Work with over 1,000 experiential education groups of 6-250 people.
- Guest lecture at Grove City College in Entrepreneurship
- Guest lecture at Gannon University on Adventure Based Therapy
- Corporate Teambuilding and training with CellularOne, Perseus House Inc, Davida Dialysis, Erie Steel Fabricating, Family First Sports Park, General Electric, Scott Enterprises, Lake Erie College of Orthopedic Medicine, and The Loyal Christian Benefit Association
- Teambuilding with many athletic teams including St John's University Men's Soccer, Pitt University Women's Soccer, Adelphi University Men's Soccer, Messiah College Women's Soccer, Grove City College Men's Basketball and Women's Soccer
- Spoke to numerous men's groups and youth groups
- Spoke for Rotary Club about bringing teams together
- Taught about resilience in ministry with his father Jim at a retreat for young pastors sponsored by the Presbyterian Board of Pensions
- Taught at a Presbytery event on changes in stewardship in the 21st Century Presented a workshop on "Having Difficult Conversations" for staff and faculty at Slippery Rock University.

Jordan has been building his online presence since April of 2014. At that time, he began to blog at www.jordanrimmer.com, which had over 9,000 visits in 2016. Jordan is also active on Facebook with over 1,500 friends and Twitter with 231 followers.

Jordan is uniquely prepared to write this book. He is a pastor and the son of a pastor, but he has also studied leadership and teambuilding and been a public speaker. He has been training in issues of pastoral identity for his entire ministry. All of that experience, reading, and thinking has led him to propose ministry in terms of story.

Publishing Credits:

Jordan contributed several activities to *The Revised and Expanded Book of Raccoon Circles* by Jim Cain and Tom Smith. Published by Kendall/Hunt 2007. Jordan has also self-published several devotionals and resources for his own church including:

- *The Advent Hours Experience*- a liturgy of hours for the month of December compiled by Jordan Rimmer with his father.
 - <http://www.jordanrimmer.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Advent-Hours-Experience-by-Jordan-and-Jim-Rimmer.pdf>
- *Christmas Reflections from Church History*- This is a compilation of quotes and creedal statements from throughout Christian history concerning the incarnation and birth of Jesus.
 - <http://www.jordanrimmer.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/AdventinChurchHistory.pdf>
- *Through the Bible, Through Lent*- This devotional gives an introduction to every book of the Bible, a text from every book of the Bible, and a reflection on how that text points to Jesus.
 - <http://www.jordanrimmer.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/ThroughtheBibleThroughLentFinal.pdf>

Future Projects:

Three projects are in works for the author following *The Story Pastor*. One of them is a direct follow up to *The Story Pastor*. The other two are distinct from this work but are still written to the same basic audience.

- *The Story Christian: A Guide to Storied Living*-This will be a follow-up to *The Story Pastor* that will apply the principles of story to the lives of the believer and the work of the church. The book could be used in church-wide campaigns so that the pastor could share the language and principles of story with their congregations.
- *From the Mouth of an Ass: Learning the Importance of Inadequacy in Ministry from Balaam*- This book is a biblical philosophy of ministry based on the story of Balaam and his donkey. Balaam learns one of the most important lessons and then forgets it later in the text—ministers need to be humble and listen to God
- *Creative Communion*- This book will look at the sacraments of baptism and communion and talk about how pastors can creatively communicate about and celebrate the sacraments. Most of the book will be specific communion experiences for churches to use.

In addition to these books, the material of *The Story Pastor* lends itself to keynotes, workshops, and online courses. It could also be developed into a series of follow-up books on deeper application of story to specific aspect of pastoral ministry. For example, a book could be written expanding the chapter from *The Story Pastor* about preaching.

SECTION 6 - POSTSCRIPT

This research began with my interest in pastoral imagery and metaphor. I spent the first term of the program studying how pastors view themselves and their work and how that view might impact their practices and their health. I was interested in this topic for two reasons. First, I was influenced by Dr. Andrew Purves and Dr. M. Craig Barnes during my time at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. They each challenged me to think about what it means to be a pastor. Second, I was studying the field of semiotics in this program with Dr. Leonard Sweet. My newfound fascination with symbol and metaphor led me to think about pastors in terms of metaphor.

I had previously heard Donald Miller talk about story, and I was interested in what pastoral ministry might look like through the lens of story. Josh Sweeden, my advisor, encouraged me to explore story during my second term. I found that research incredibly helpful, not just for aiming my research, but also in my own ministry. Story started to become my personal paradigm for ministry. As my large bibliography exemplifies, I started to read anything about story that I could get my hands on.

During the third term, I went back to the problem again. I struggled to decide whether the problem I was exploring was stress and burnout or whether the real problem was pastoral identity. After a number of conversations with classmates and my advisor, as well as working the seminary's dissertation process, I realized that the real problem was pastoral identity and the stress and burnout were real-world consequences of that problem. It was also during this term that I decided to do a Track 02 dissertation so that I could begin a nonfiction book about being what I was then calling "a story pastor."

The third term also presented one of the biggest challenges of this research. It was difficult to make the problem of pastoral identity a real and specific problem that is measurable and has tangible results. This challenge was exacerbated by the lack of good statistical studies on clergy stress and burnout, as well as the prevalence of poor statistics. Many of the commonly quoted statistics on how many pastors quit every day or assumptions about how many pastors are stressed are inflated and unreliable. I did a lot of work to give and properly represent reliable statistics.

In the fourth term, I returned to the study of story. I went to two different workshops for that term—Robert McKee’s Storynomics and Donald Miller’s Storybrand. Each of these were indispensable learning opportunities about how story works and how to apply story to organizational issues. This term crystallized the thesis of this dissertation.

I learned almost as much in the writing process as I did in the research process. I had to learn to be succinct and leave the right points out of the final copy. I originally drafted a written statement that was 3,600 words over the word requirement. I had to leave out a lot of material that I thought was good but was not critical to the main argument. I was proficient at editing the content, but I was not good at line-editing. I am so glad that I hired an editor for this process.

I also learned two differences in writing. First, I learned the difference between academic and popular writing. I prefer to be fluid and informal in my writing. When I wrote in an academic tone, I sounded forced and clunky. For a time, I was working on both the written academic statement and the book sample. I eventually figured out that I

could not switch back and forth between the two without confusing my writing voice. In both styles of writing, I am working to get better on my syntax and tone.

Second, I learned the difference between writing and editing. These need to be distinct steps in the writing process. I wrote slowly and without flow when I tried to edit as I was writing. I learned that it is much faster to cover the screen when I am writing so that I cannot see what I am writing. I can later go back and clean up what I have written, but the writing flows better if I am doing it without editing.

I was most surprised in my research by how vast the possibilities are for storied ministry. I knew that story could add something to pastoral ministry, but I was not expecting story to have so much to say about all areas of pastoral ministry. I also was surprised how fundamental story has become for my own ministry. I can genuinely say that not a day of ministry goes by where I do not intentionally think about story. I watch for stories, tell stories, and use story language.

There is much more to research on this topic. There needs to be a national study done on stress and burnout among clergy. How many clergy are stressed? How stressed are they? How part does identity play in that stress? What are the effects of that stress and burnout?

I have only begun to flesh out how ministry can be informed by ministry. I am working, as I continue writing the book, to apply story to every aspect of ministry. Further research needs to be done about applying story to the individual Christian's life. How can the church use story for discipleship? I also believe that seminaries and denominations could benefit from story.

I am excited to continue writing my book and potentially find a publisher. I would like to do more speaking in the future on the topic. I have also felt called by God to do more writing and to see part of ministry as being a pastor to pastors. I am excited to see where my story goes from here.

APPENDIX – BOOK SAMPLE

The Story Pastor: A Guide to Storied Ministry

By Jordan Rimmer

Introduction

The book in your hands is about story. Before you begin, you should know that it came out of my own story. I should have had an advantage when I started ministry. I am the son of a pastor. I have been involved in parish ministry all my life. I guess I did know what to expect more than other pastors did. But here is the funny thing—after being around ministry my whole life and a great seminary education, I quickly realized that I did not know what I was doing. More than that, I did not know who I was as a pastor.

At first I tried to be super-pastor. I thought I could do it all. I thought I could grow my church, be the best preacher in all the land, and be the kindest and most helpful spiritual guide in the history of Christendom. I emulated others whenever I could. I tried to sound like Karl Barth, TF Torrance, Walter Brueggemann, and Barbara Brown Taylor. I tried to lead like Andy Stanley, Bill Hybels, and Pat Lencioni. The problem was that I was not any of those people. I got really stressed in my efforts to be all these other people. Eventually I burned out. Actually, my church burned out too. They could not take the pace that I tried to set, and neither could I. It is best as a pastor to let Jesus be the savior. Saviors in our faith get crucified.

I also struggled with the ambiguity of the job. I was a solo pastor in a small church. There was nobody to guide me as to what to do in my office on a Tuesday morning in October. My week and my job was a blank canvas and I did not know what I was painting. Who are pastors? What do they do? What drives them? Questions I always assumed I knew the answer to, suddenly become radically immediate.

I have been the pastor of my church for nearly seven years now. At first, I was part-time at the church while I was in seminary. The attitude and outlook of the church were going well enough that, when I graduated from seminary, I was asked to stay on and see if the church could grow to the point that it could sustain full time ministry. We needed to grow our attendance and giving to pull that off.

I know firsthand that being a pastor is hard. Some of the challenge is because of where the church is in the West today. The church is struggling to find its purpose. Resources are spread thin. The church is not respected anymore. And pastors have the curse of vision. We can see what the church could be, which only makes where the church is look so much worse. We can also see that the way we have been doing church is doomed, yet our churches are trapped in the good old days. They think that if only it was the 1950s again or the 1980s again when they had more people and more money, then the church would be fine. The truth is that those days are growing smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror.

We pastors can feel so alone and underappreciated. The days of free haircuts and complimentary meals for pastors are long gone. Many pastors feel the sting of churches that fight paying a living wage because “they can’t afford it.” We wonder, was this really God’s call for my life? Our work is so important. We do the work because we believe

that Jesus is the hope of the world. And when we look around we see a world that is desperate for him—a world full of fears, doubts, and hopelessness.

As I looked in the Bible and the tradition for a sense of who I was and what I was doing as a pastor, I found some good starts. Pastors have always tried to think about themselves using metaphors. The Bible had images like shepherd, prophet, and priest. The problem is that those seemed so foreign to me. I have driven past sheep but I have no idea what a shepherd does on a daily basis. I have heard of prophets, but I have never seen one in Western Pennsylvania. I am not a priest and did not connect with that word either.

Pastors of the last 60 years have identified themselves as counselors or CEOs. I am not trained in counseling and do not think that a person's psychological health is the same as their spiritual health. I am not sure the business models are biblical. I have learned from reading about business leadership, but I do not think that a church is a business. I also worry that the comparison with business leads to an unhealthy push for results. We can be tempted to do everything we can to fill pews and offering plates, but is that true ministry? Are we building God's kingdom or our own? And, let's be honest, nobody wants a counselor today, and people do not trust big business. Not only do I not like these images, but the culture does not like them either.

I struggled to know who I was and what I was doing in ministry. Was there a metaphor that connected with me? What could I do to bring some coherence to my ministry and to inspire me and my congregation? Was there an image that would be faithful to the tradition of pastoral ministry but also fruitful for the world in which I minister?

We pastors want to find our place in this new world. This is uncharted territory for the work of the pastor. Through every turn of the ages, pastors have had to think about their work in new ways. We are in a new chapter. This chapter is very different from the previous chapters. We need a new story of what it means to be a pastor. And I am convinced that *story* can be that new story.

It took a long time, but I slowly fell into the image of *story* as a paradigm and identity for my ministry. I think it began by hearing Donald Miller talk about his book *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. Miller shares the experience of writing his life into a movie called *Blue Like Jazz*. In the process, he learned about how story worked and what made a good story. He also began to realize that he wanted to live a better story with his own life.

I am not the first person to think about ministry as story. As I started to think about pastoral ministry through the lens of story, I began to see this kind of thinking in pastors like Eugene Peterson and Frederick Buechner. In both *The Pastor* and *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Peterson refers to pastoral ministry based on story. Buechner makes a similar argument in a sermon called “The Two Stories,” in *Secrets in the Dark*. More recently, the Alban Institute published a 3 volume set edited by Larry A. Goleman called *The Narrative Leadership Collection*. In 2016, Karen D. Scheib wrote *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of our Lives*. Each of these works has influenced the book you are holding.

These books, among others, have focused primarily on either storytelling in preaching or in pastoral counseling, based on a special kind of counseling called *narrative therapy*. My use of story is different. I don’t tell that many stories. I am not a

storyteller, instead, I am a story-thinker. I think in stories, and I see the world in terms of stories. I think about my life, my ministry, my church, and my parishioners through the lens of story. This book is about learning to think like that.

My dissertation for my Doctor of Ministry at George Fox Evangelical Seminary under Leonard Sweet gave me a great opportunity to flesh out this image. I researched the ways that identity and metaphor work, the history of pastoral metaphor, and its effect on stress and burnout. I also did research by attending training with the best story people in the world. It is this immersion into how story works that opened my thinking about story as an identity and paradigm for ministry. The result of that study is the book you are holding.

My goal for you in reading this book is that you would be immersed in the huge and far-reaching possibilities of story. I want this book to mess with you, to haunt you, and to stay with you. To do that, I need to guide you into the depths of how stories work and why stories work. Chapters 1-5 immerse you in the world of stories. Chapter 1 introduces the power of story and shows story as an important ministry paradigm in the Bible for the prophet Nathan and for our savior Jesus. Chapter two describes the “Hero’s Journey” which is the outline of just about every movie ever made. Chapter three describes the core of how stories work in life and in the human brain. It also looks at how culture moved away from story during the modern era and how it is coming back with force. Chapter 4 explores how people base their lives on story by thinking in metaphors and embodying their life in stories.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn toward the practical. Chapter 5 lays out the 12 principles of the story pastor. These will help you think about your ministry through the lens of the

information about story presented in the previous chapters. Chapter 6 is about “storyfying” ministry. The chapter looks at the examples of sports broadcasting to talk about how to apply story to everyday events.

Chapters 7 through 13 take the principles of the story pastor and apply them to specific areas of pastoral ministry. Chapter 7 teaches you how to read the Bible as a big story as well as read the storied elements of every passage. Chapter 8 develops how to think about the worship service as an experience of the story of God and how to make the story stronger and more coherent. Chapter 9 describes preaching through the lens of story as more than storytelling but also thinking of storying even the didactic teaching. Chapter 10 applies story to the pastor’s task of leading the organization of the church into the future. Chapter 11 explores how the church can use story to do ministry in the world. Chapter 12 tells how to help people grow in their lives and in their faith in one-on-one contact through story. Chapter 13 takes all of the different areas of pastoral ministry and puts them together. This final chapter teaches pastors how to find their identity as a story pastor.

I will warn you—it takes some time to marinate in story before you start to think this way. I doubt you will read this book today and be a story-thinker tomorrow. Story has to settle slowly. It may give you some insights immediately, but it will be a long process before story becomes a paradigm for your ministry, or even a part of your vocational identity. For this reason, I understand that this will not be a metaphor for everyone.

Let me encourage you, though. I think story has power. As you will see, story is fundamental to how people think and how the world works. It is faithful to the biblical

and theological tradition and it is incredibly fruitful in our world today. I have found that it helps to unify my seemingly disjointed ministry. I am praying it can do the same for you.

Chapter 1: A Different Kind of Ministry

The Challenges of Ministry

Stories have always entertained and motivated people. Some of the earliest cultures that we know of had stories painted on their walls and on their pottery. Ancient writings are not laws or treatises. They are stories. As children, we learn the welcome of the words “Once upon a time,” and the invitation of “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” Children can listen to the same stories again and again, just like adults can watch their favorite movie again and again. Story can be an escape from the real world.

Stories can also shape the real world. If something happens to us, we are driven to tell others that story. If I asked you who you were, you might start with a few facts—name, age, job, birthplace—but soon you would have to start telling stories about your life. Why is that? I think it is because we are fundamentally storied-beings. Our stories define us. We live to create stories. We naturally tell and hear stories. This is why Facebook and Instagram have become so popular: we can present the stories of our lives through pictures and status updates.

Stories make us human and shape who we are. We love the stories found in books, movies, and TV shows. Stories captivate us. They also spread in ways that facts do not. We retell good stories faster than we forget good statistics.

Story defines place as well. You don’t just remember your parents’ house or your old neighborhood. You remember the things that happened there. Perhaps you have had the experience of asking directions from someone who has lived in a place for a long time. They will tell you turn right by the old Five-and-Ten or turn right at the place where

the old tire swing tree used to be. Why? Because when we drive around, we are driving through our memories, and our memories are based on our stories.

The Christian faith is based on story. Most of the Bible is written in story form. Even the books of the law are primarily filled with stories about how Israel got the law. In the Bible, the law is rooted in story.

The core of the Christian faith is not a set of beliefs. It is a story. It is the story of our loving God who reconciles the broken relationship with his creation. He sets apart the people of Israel, then sends his Son into humanity. Jesus dies to defeat sin and death, and establishes his church to spread life and hope until he comes again. The church then develops a set of practices related to spiritual disciplines, worship, sacraments, and community. The purpose of these practices is to help God's people engage with the story

Pastors long ago realized that a well-placed and well-told story can drive a point or a sermon home. Pastors collect stories for just such occasions—from movies, books, their own lives, or the lives of others. We mine the world around us for sermon material. However, pastors have only understood the tip of the story iceberg.

There also used to be a component of the church called *testimony*. People would share stories of how God was at work in their own lives. Most churches have moved away from testimony. Perhaps people are shy to share because they believe that they don't have the cool testimonies of people who write books or speak at conferences. Most Christians have relatively boring stories—no suicides attempted, drugs abused, or murders witnessed. But therein lies the problem. The church has mistakenly trained Christians to think that the only valuable and compelling stories of God at work in the

world are the extra-ordinary ones. We must help them understand that God is the God of everyday stories and that God's work in our daily lives is something to testify about.

Over time, we have made Christianity a faith of facts instead of a faith of stories. Pastors need to learn how to not just tell stories, but how to think about life and ministry in terms of story. There is a lot more story-iceberg below the surface. I will show you how it informs every area of pastoral practice.

Nathan's Story

Let's start by looking at a particular moment in the Bible when a Christian leader told a story that made a big impact. Allow me to set the scene. David's beheading of Goliath is now legendary and his many victories have piled up like driftwood on the beach after a storm. After waiting for his turn, and being constantly threatened by Saul, David finally gets to fulfill the role he was anointed for years before. He has become a great warrior. Now, David is king.

But in 2 Samuel 11, the time of year comes when kings normally go to war. One would expect David to be excited to be back to the familiar war-path, but on this particular spring, David does not go to war. Instead, David remains in his new palace in Jerusalem and sends his right-hand man, Joab. The text does not say why he does not go to war. Perhaps he is enjoying the comfort of kingship. Maybe he feels that he has seen enough war for a lifetime. Perhaps he is finally dealing with what must have been a serious case of post-traumatic stress disorder. Whatever the reason, the warrior king of Israel is moping around his palace.

One day, while walking around on the roof of the palace, David looks down to see a woman bathing. He watches her bathe and decided he likes and wants her. David takes this beautiful woman into his bed. But then he has a problem. The text implies that perhaps he got her pregnant. So in order to get out of this situation he sends the woman's husband to the front line and then makes sure he is abandoned to be killed by the enemy. David has the guy whacked in a style that would make The Godfather, Michael Corleone, proud. Bathsheba mourns her husband for the set time she is supposed to mourn, but then she immediately marries David and has his child.

This angers the Lord, and should anger us, too. In response, God calls a prophet named Nathan to go to David and tell him that he shouldn't have slept with that married woman and killed her husband. Imagine for a moment that you are Nathan and your job is to go talk to the king. It has been at least ten months since this has all started. We know this because the child has been born. David has gotten away with his sin for a long time. Who wants to be the one to confront David for killing a guy and getting away with it? Nobody. Because you could very well be the next person he kills and gets away with it. You never want to be the one to confront a murderer, let alone one who is very good in battle and has so much power that no one else is calling him on the behavior. How do you confront the murderer-king David and keep your own skin?

We turn to 2 Samuel 12:1-7 to see Nathan's genius response:

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for

the man who had come to him.” Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. (2 Samuel 12:1-7 ESV)

Nathan tells a story—the story of a man who steals a lamb. David is totally sucked into the story. He is engaged emotionally, and he expects the story to have a good and just ending. David sees himself in the story. He wants to see himself as the bringer of justice. His anger is kindled against the sheep stealer. David goes so far as to say that this man deserves to die. Then Nathan comes with the knockout punch. “You are the man.” By telling this little story, he entices David to condemn his own behavior.

If you read the rest of the chapter, you will see that the Lord chastises David through his messenger Nathan. David confesses that he has sinned against God. He remains king but as punishment, the son born of his sin with Bathsheba would die.

David has had a great story in the Bible up until this point. It has been a challenging one, but one that David has risen to time and time again. He waited his time, fought his battles, and slayed his giants. But now David seems stuck in his story. He is sitting at home and milling around. If life is a story, then David seems to have writer's block. In fact, he is choosing writer's block. His story has gone from a grand adventure to a selfish and abusive one.

But I think we can relate to David here. We often get stuck in our stories. We love stories and we love movies. We love seeing a character encounter conflict and be forced to change. We love seeing the struggle of someone else's life. But that conflict is more fun when it is someone else. It is so much easier to live vicariously through another story

than to live our own adventure. Why would we want conflict? Why we would we chose the risk of a quest. We get comfortable, and our story stops.

Sometimes it stops because we are comfortable and we don't want the conflict. Sometimes we live stories that are saturated with problems. The problems overwhelm us. Sometimes we get type-casted in our stories, like Bruce Willis in every movie he has ever been in. We see ourselves as the victim and we play the victim in every area of our lives. Or we play the control freak in every area of our lives and, eventually, our stories grind to a halt.

Sometimes we go through a loss or a tragedy and we are scared to move on. We either can't imagine our story without the person or situation that we lost, or we are paralyzed by the fear of failing in our story again. Maybe we can't stop replaying the trauma of our story in our minds, and we lose the creativity and energy we need to write our next chapter.

We get writer's block. We don't know where to go next. Or we choose weak and/or boring stories that do not demand too much change from us. The story stops. Life has no movement.

So many churches are in this place. They are trying to look just like they did in the 1950s. They long for the good old days, even though, if they remembered those days without romanticizing them, they would discover that they were not that good after all. Churches say they want to change, but what they really want to do is what they are currently doing, just with more people and more money. The story is stuck.

What we need in the church, and as pastors, is more Nathan moments. We need better stories. We need to retell the history to understand where we are in the story. We

need creative critiques of the culture's stories and grander and more sweeping stories for the future.

God is a great story-writer. He is a big story-writer. There is a reason that Hollywood is turning to God's stories right now. God writes big stories. God is in the character transformation business. God does not leave David alone. He sends Nathan to retell the story and jumpstart a new story for David.

What if pastors saw themselves in this role? What if pastors learned to think and respond in story? It worked for Nathan. What would ministry look like if we took story-thinking seriously?

The Storied Ministry of Jesus

I think that this kind of story-thinking is how Jesus approached his earthly ministry. If I had to summarize what Jesus did on earth, I would say that Jesus told stories and did miracles about which other people told stories. Jesus answered and taught in parables. It was his language and his preaching method. He also created stories, so many stories that John says that the world could not hold the books to contain them. That is a lot of stories.

Jesus was trying to help his disciples to get a vision of a different kingdom—a different reality of a kingdom breaking in and already here. It is now but not yet. That kind of kingdom cannot be taught with exclusively didactic teaching. Jesus had to use stories to get his disciples to think deeply about this kingdom.

Let's look at one of the most memorable of Jesus' stories. In John 15, we are told that the tax collectors and sinners are drawing near to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees and

the scribes are grumbling. They don't think Jesus should be receiving sinners and eating with them. In those days, to eat with someone is to accept them. Jesus perceives the dynamic between these two groups, and tells them three stories. (Allow me a little sidebar here—stories often come in threes. Three bears. Three pigs. Three Billy goats gruff. Three passers-by of the beaten man in the Good Samaritan.)

The first two stories follow the same pattern. Something is lost that seems inconsequential (a coin and a sheep) and the owners (a woman and a shepherd) radically work to find them. Good stories in their own right, but they are actually just setting up the third story. This one is different because there is no one to seek the lost object (a son) and there are more characters to deal with.

We typically call this story “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” This is a mistake. Jesus begins the parable, “There was a man who had two sons.” Jesus tells us that the story is about a man who has two sons. Somehow both sons are meant to point our attention to the father.

The younger son asks for his inheritance from his father. He is entitled to a portion of the estate, but he not until after his father had died. Kenneth Bailey has pointed out that the request is tantamount to wishing the father dead.¹ He doesn't want anything to do with his father. He only wants the father's stuff. The father should have chased him away and disowned him as a son, but this father gives the son what he wants.

The younger son goes to a far country and blows all the money on what Jesus calls “reckless living.” We can imagine the waste and debauchery. This is where we get

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).

our usual title for the parable. We use the word *prodigal* to refer to someone who leaves home, and their roots, because of this story, but it originally referred to lavish spending. A famine arrives and suddenly the son can't support himself. He ends up feeding pigs—a terrible job for a Jew.

But there, in the muck, longing for the pig-pods, the son comes to his senses and hatches a plan. His dad is gracious and his dad's servants live much better than this. Why not go home and be a servant? So he takes the walk of shame home. We can imagine him practicing his speech for his father.

However, he doesn't get to give his speech. His father sees him coming, from a long way off. This implies that the father was looking for the son and hoping for him to return. How many times had he looked up the road for that son? When he finally sees his son, he takes off running. In that culture, patriarchs did not run. He would have had to hike up his cloak and expose his legs to run. But this father runs to, and kisses, his lost son. He puts the best robe on his son and a ring on his finger. The best robe would have been the father's robe. The son is a son again. The ring would have been a symbol of doing business on behalf of the father. The son is trusted again. He kills a fattened calf and throws a party for the whole community. Timothy Keller points out that the most prodigal character in the story is the father.² He spends lavishly to give his son the inheritance, and spends again to celebrate when his son returns.

It must have been an awesome party, because the older brother hears the music and the dancing from his work in the field. He finds out what has happened, but instead

² See Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York, NY: Riverhead, 2008).

of celebrating, he stays outside. The father goes out to plead with his older son to come into the party. But the son will not come in. He says that he has served his father all these years and has never received party, but this other son comes back and the father kills the fattened calf! Not only does the other brother refuse to call his brother a brother, but he also refers to his own relationship with the father as servitude.

Then the story ends. We never get to know if the elder brother comes into the party or not. But that is the very question for the group of people with whom Jesus is talking. The two brothers represent the two groups of people. The younger brother represents those sinners and tax collectors. They have rebelled against their Heavenly Father and lived a lot of debauchery and wastefulness. The Pharisees are right to judge them as sinners. Yet here they are trying to eat with Jesus and learn from Jesus. They have begun returning home.

The Pharisees and scribes are just like that elder brother. They have never been wild or gone to a far country. They have served their Heavenly Father, but they see their relationship as servitude, as if God owes them something. A good son would have gone to the far country to rescue their lost brother. Jesus invites the Pharisees and scribes, just as the father entreats the elder brother, to join the party.

Jesus tells us that the star of the story, the protagonist as we would say in story terms, is the father. And the father has two lost sons. One is lost because he is bad and rebellious. The other is lost because he is good and self-righteous. Yet the father is prodigal with both. The father runs to his younger son to welcome him home. The father begs his elder son to come into the party and join the family. Timothy Keller even goes

so far as to say that Jesus is himself the better elder brother in the story. He does not just go to the far country, but he enters humanity and sin and rescues lost brothers and sisters.

The story of the lost sons is more than just an example of a compelling story. It is a case study in story thinking and story ministry. When you understand the story in a little more detail, you get a glimpse of the story genius of Jesus. Jesus looks at these two groups of people and their conflicting relationship with each other and sees them in the larger story of humanity's relationship with God the Father. Then, Jesus tells a story that sets up both parties to see themselves. He also leaves the story open ended, so that the Pharisees and scribes are invited into the story. Jesus masterfully does the same thing as Nathan: he tells a story that perfectly describes the current reality and uses the story to invite a response.

Jesus is working in story all the time. When he meets the woman at the well, he knows her story. When he is trying to help people understand why not everybody wants to hear the good news, he tells a story about soils. Jesus could have just reinstated Peter by saying, "It is ok. I know you love me. I forgive you and I am going to continue to work through you." But instead, he asks Peter three times if he loves him and tells him to feed his lambs. He creates a story to undo the story of Peter's three denials. (Remember how story loves threes!) Jesus did not just tell stories. Jesus created story moments. He created moments that were handed down from person to person until they were finally written down.

Perhaps Jesus' greatest story moment was the institution of the Lord's Supper. He is with his disciples for the Passover. The goal of Passover is to retell and become a part of the Passover story. You eat with your cloak and shoes on. You tell the story of the

plagues. You break matzah bread to remember the coming deliverer. You drink from a cup to remember the blood of the lamb. It is the rehearsal of Israel's origin story, and you are meant to see yourselves in the story. But then Jesus says that this is his body. This is his blood. He reads himself into the story as the deliverer, and the lamb to be slain. In doing so, he starts a story-experience that the church has continued for 2,000 years. When we go to the table, we are part of that story too.

This is not the only place in the Bible where a story makes a difference. Paul is constantly retelling his personal story in Acts. When God gives commandments to Israel, He often does so by reminding them of their place in the story. God says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Despite our best efforts to make the Bible into a book of rules or theological insights, the Bible is primarily story.

I think that if pastors are going to follow the example of Jesus, we need to follow the examples of Jesus and Nathan. We need to think and respond to ministry moments in story terms. We need to train ourselves to use story as a lens for the world. I think we need to see ourselves as STORY PASTORS.

A Different Kind of Ministry

I remember my first Nathan moment—the first time I intentionally acted as a Story Pastor. Very shortly after I started thinking about story and ministry, a couple came to me for counseling. I had officiated their wedding and done their pre-marital counseling, but they did not go to my church and I did not know them well. They had been married about a year and a half, so I hoped that they were not already struggling in

their marriage. I am not trained for serious counseling, so I expected to meet with them once and then refer them to someone who could help them.

It turned out that they needed to have a conversation with a pastor, not a marriage therapist. They were struggling to deal with the miscarriage of their first child a few months prior. The wife was very sad, but, more than that, she was angry. She told me how she had stopped smoking and stopped drinking so hard, the way she had when she was single. She had cleaned up a lot in her life and was now going to church. Still, she lost her baby. Why had God done this to her when she had been doing so many good things? Was God punishing her?

Her husband sat quietly beside her with a look of pain on his face. He was feeling the same burden, but he was also worried about her. He had no words to add to the conversation, but could only sit and hold back tears.

As I listened to her speak, I started to place her story within a larger narrative. She believed a story where if she was good enough, God would bless her. She thought that cleaning up her life would cause God to take care of her and give her what she wanted. In her underlying story, God was like a cosmic vending machine where you could put in good deeds and clean living and get out blessing.

I immediately compared this story to the story of the Bible. In the Bible, the best characters seemed to suffer the most for God. There were certainly standards of behavior, and the Bible does call for righteous living. Yet, in the Bible, the living comes as a response. God first loves us.

I could have corrected her theology, talked about the nature of a fallen world, or recommended her a good grief counselor. In the moment, however, I felt the Spirit

guiding me to deal with the story. I could have given care and prayer for the presenting story, but to truly help her I needed to address the underlying story. I very carefully started to question her story. Why do you think God is punishing you? Why did you think that God should give you this baby because of the things that you do? At the same time, I started to create a new story. God cares for you. God mourns with you. God wants relationship with you. He is proud that you are doing well, but that is not what God really wants. God is holding the baby you lost right now in His arms.

In the end, we prayed and asked God for health in future pregnancies, as well as a deeper sense of relationship with God that was not based on exchange, but on love. About a year later the couple had a little daughter who is doing well. They never came to my church, but I do bump into them every once in a while. I have a sense that our conversation that day did make a difference for them.

I was honored to have that moment to speak into the story of this couple. I got a chance to hear their story, to think about their story biblically, and to help them reframe their story. Story gave me language and insight that my seminary training and experience did not.

This is a different kind of ministry, but I hope you will see that it is not as different from the tradition we have inherited, as we may initially think.

Chapter 2: The Hero's Journey

What is a Story

To start thinking about ministry in story, you must get a deep understanding of how story works. We will get into the elements of story in detail, but for now let's get the lay of the land. Most people use the terms *narrative* and *story* interchangeably. I think the terms are related, but not the same. Narrative is the telling of events sequentially. As Robert McKee puts it, the key words for a narrative are "And then... ." ¹ This happened, and then this happened, and then this happened. Recipes are narratives of how to bake a cake or cook a meatloaf. They are a series of events in sequence. A story is narrative because it happens in a sequence, but a narrative is not necessarily a story. Story involves conflict. Story is driven by the word "but." The person went to do this, *but* it did not work. They tried this step, *but* it had this unintended consequence. I try to use the word story more than the word narrative, but I do use them both.

There has been a lot of work done in recent years to understand story. This research about story is driven, partially, by all the new mediums that people have for storytelling. Stories that used to be told around the fire can now be written in books or blogs. They can be made into YouTube videos or big budget films. They can be told in a sermon or written into a television show. They can be drawn as a comic book or made into a feature-length cartoon. Think about it: the only medium in this list 150 years ago were books, and many people could not read them. There is a new-found fascination with what goes into a story and what makes a good story.

¹ Robert McKee, "Storynomics" (Workshop, New York, October 22, 2015).

Let's start simple and get the view of story at 4,000 feet. At its most basic level, a story is formatted into three parts. A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. These are sometimes called three acts in a story. Aristotle noticed this three-act structure around 330 BC. The story centers on a lead character. The character is sometimes called the hero or the lead, but most often they are called the protagonist. In some stories, the lead character can be a group or a team, but not very often. Normally there is one character around whom the story revolves, and there are companions who go on parts of the journey with them. Even in ensemble stories, there is normally a leader of the group who the story is centered on.

The heart of any story is the journey of this protagonist. In the beginning, they are in one place. They go through the middle of the story which is filled with challenges. They then have a final battle or effort that reveal them to be different at the conclusion. This is why the three-part structure is so important. It marks the different stages of the transformation of the protagonist. The story is never about the journey that the character goes on. It is always about the journey that the character's character goes on. It is about the transformation of the protagonist. Rocky must get stronger. James Bond must push himself to the brink. Marlin must get over his fear of the ocean to find Nemo. This transformation is often called "the story arc."

The driving force of the transformation is conflict. Protagonists do not change on their own. They are forced to change by circumstances beyond their control. Every story is based on a readily apparent external problem. The character must go to a place or retrieve an object or survive an ordeal. The conflict builds throughout the story. Often,

the story is complicated by the protagonist's own actions. Their attempts to overcome the external problem are met with unintended consequences. They make things worse.

For example, the external problem in *Star Wars: A New Hope* is that Luke Skywalker (the protagonist) must get the droids with the stolen plans to the rebels. That is the clearly explained external problem. When Luke and Obi-Won Kenobi attempt to do that, they end up on the Death Star, taking the plans even closer to the Empire. Then they realize a new external problem: they need to destroy the Death Star.

Underlying this problem is the internal problem. This is what the story is really about. It almost always involves some variation of the question, "Does the protagonist have what it takes?" Is he good enough? Can she complete the task? Whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, a horror movie or a romance, the story is always ultimately about the change in the character of the protagonist as they rise to the challenges of the journey. In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker has all kinds of doubts about himself. He is constantly trying to prove himself. Does he have what it takes? Can he learn to trust the force, and himself? That is the internal problem that is the central driver of the film.

Great stories also tap into larger problems. The internal problems point to larger dichotomies like good and evil, right and wrong, or love and hate. The protagonist must bump up against these larger problems. Luke Skywalker must not give into fear, or fall to the Dark Side.

Our Desire to be the Hero

Screenwriting teaches that, for a protagonist to be effective, the audience must begin to empathize with this character. The audience does not need to like or sympathize

with the protagonist, but there must be something in the protagonist's character or actions that resonates with the audience and draws them into the story. There must be something of themselves in the protagonist, or the story will not grab their attention. In order for this feeling to occur, screenplay writer and teacher Blake Snyder proposed that early in a film the protagonist must “save the cat.” In other words, they have to do something very early on in the movie to make the audience like them.

This is important because when people listen to stories, they want to see themselves as the hero. They want to watch the film or read the novel or see the play so that they can live vicariously through the lead character. We transform along with the character. This is why you cry at movies, or jump when the monster scares you. You aren't just neutrally watching the film. You are experiencing the film with the protagonist. You are seeing yourself as the hero.

Let's return to Nathan's story to David for a moment. Why is David so outraged at Nathan's tale? Because David has heard stories before and he expects a satisfying conclusion. More importantly, David naturally sees himself as the hero of the story. He reacts as if he is the sheep owner who is wronged. It is only when Nathan points out that he is the bad guy that David sees the story in that way.

David sees himself in the story, and we naturally think in story, because life is a lot like a story. Think about it. Our lives happen over time and in different scenes. We all face conflict and have to rise to the challenge. We try to deal with life, and sometimes it has unintended consequences. We make it worse. Do we have what it takes? Can we make it?

We play out these conflicts in multiple stories. I live the story of a pastor, a husband, a dad, a writer, and any number of other stories. You live your own stories. In our stories, we are the stars. We are the heroes. This is why David so easily sees himself as the man in the story. We naturally see ourselves as the hero of every story that we hear because we are used to being the hero in our own story. Even if you don't feel very heroic, your life is being acted by you. You might feel like a failed hero, but you are still the star.

We love movies because we get to escape our own conflicts and go live in someone else's conflicts. We don't really like change, but it is fun and even inspiring to see and experience someone else's change. These are the same reasons we tell stories and listen to stories. We want to share our struggles and conflicts with other people and gain strength and insights from their stories. This helps explain why, when you tell someone a story, they want to return a story of their own. The exchange of story helps us transform our own character.

The Basic Outline of All Stories

With the core of story set, let's dive into the details of how stories play out. Not all music is the same. Songs and styles sound very different from each other, but what all music has in common is a set of rules or an understanding of music theory on which creativity is built. There are patterns of notes, chords, and timing. Similarly, in stories, the characters, settings, and content of stories are infinitely varied, but there are structures, patterns, and principles that remain the same. Stories are retold and modified, but most stories have common elements and forms. They follow certain conventions.

What is crazy in story is how consistent the patterns are, and how often the same stories are told with different elements. Plato wrote a little story in *Republic* called “Allegory of the Cave.” It is the story of people who are trapped in a cave their whole life and can only see the shadows on the back of the cave. Eventually, they are freed and slowly realize that the world they have been seeing is not the real world. The real world is the world behind them that is casting the shadows in the cave. Plato wrote this around 380 BC. Yet it is the basic content of the movies like *The Matrix*, *City of Ember*, and *The Truman Show*.

In *Beowulf*, an Old English poem from as early as AD 975, Beowulf is a warrior who goes to aid the Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, who is having a problem with a monster. Beowulf has to summon all his wits and courage to fight the monster Grendel, and then later fight Grendel’s mother. The movie *The 13th Warrior* is almost exactly the same story. That story arc is also the outline for *Jaws*, *Predator*, *The Thing*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Godzilla*.

Stories are repetitive. Christopher Booker argues that there are only seven basic plots.² Blake Snyder believes that there are only ten movie plots.³ What is even more fascinating than those small numbers is how much the seven story plots or ten movie plots have in common with each other. Joseph Campbell, among others, has studied ancient mythology in an attempt to describe “the monolith.”⁴ Is there one story outline

² See Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2004).

³ See Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies: The Screenwriter’s Guide to Every Story Ever Told* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

⁴ See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008). Joseph Campbell is a key figure in the study of story.

that describes how all, or at least most, stories work? The reality is that stories have a lot of variation, but that there are certain elements which remain the same.

(Sidebar: Let me apologize for how much this description may ruin your movie watching for a while. Understanding this stuff will make movies seem very repetitive and predictable. Don't worry. It will get better. The best movies will suck you in so that you forget all this stuff, and you will gain a better appreciation for the films which do this well.)

A lead character or group of characters begins the story with a stable and balanced life. They may be not be good or healthy, but their lives have a sense of normal. This normal is upset by an inciting incident. James Scott Bell calls this “the disturbance.”⁵ Harry Potter gets a letter from Hogwarts (*Harry Potter*). Luke Skywalker buys some new droids (*Star Wars*). Sandy Olson shows up at highschool where Danny Zuko is one of the T-birds (*Grease*). The inciting incident starts a journey for that character to reestablish their equilibrium and get their life back together. This is the dramatic question that keeps the audience hooked—how will this turn out? You have to know and, even if it is a bad movie, you will sit through it to the end to find out. The incident sets up a thing or objective called the object of desire that the protagonist identifies as capable of restoring equilibrium. This might be getting the girl or guy (every romance), defeating the boss (every James Bond film), finding the stolen or lost goods (every Indiana Jones film), or finding Nemo (*Finding Nemo*).

⁵ James Scott Bell, *Plot and Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot that Grips Readers from Start to Finish* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2004), 27.

In most stories the protagonist meets a guide who shows the hero where to go and equips them with information or weapons for the journey. The guide has been through the trials before and has a plan for the protagonist, for example, Obi-Won Kenobi or Yoda (*Star Wars*), or Haymitch (*The Hunger Games*). Characters do not change during their films, but they help others around them change. For a guide to work, they can't have their own story arch. In other words, guides can't change in stories. They can have back stories, and more can be revealed about them as the story goes on, but if they change, it confuses the audience about who is the hero and who they should identify with. A good guide also gives a clear plan. Obi-Won Kenobi's plan is that Luke should become a Jedi and learn to trust the force. He repeats the plan multiple times on their adventure. Sometimes the movie is written from the perspective of the guide, such as *Mary Poppins*, *Nanny McPhee*, or *Annie*. These

In addition to an initial guide, the lead character may also be aided by the guidance and help of others throughout the journey. In mythology, this often included advice, amulets, and secret agents that are discovered in the far country to help hero. These are sometimes companions who join in the journey. Often, companions have their own subplots or smaller story arches, like Han Solo (*Star Wars*) or Peeta Mellark (*Hunger Games*). They also help the protagonist on their journey.

The lead character sets off on the quest for the object of desire, following the plan of the guide, and often with a companion by their side. There is normally a moment called "crossing the threshold," where the protagonist makes a definitive move to start the journey. This is the scene when Ethan Hunt chooses to accept the mission (*Mission Impossible*) or Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee leave the Shire (*Lord of the Rings*).

For every action the protagonist takes there are unintended consequences. The forces against the lead character are stronger than they realize, and the things that the protagonist tries to do, do not work out as they should. Some of the forces are internal and deal with the protagonist's own inadequacies, narrowmindedness, or lack of trust. Some of the forces are found externally. This is normally a person called the antagonist. If it is a group, organization, or idea, then it is normally personified or represented by their leader. Think of Darth Vader (*Star Wars*) or Moriarty (*Sherlock Holmes*).

At some point in the story, the quest must seem hopeless and the journey an inevitable failure. This moment in the movies is what Robert McKee calls the “negative floor.”⁶ Blake Snyder calls it the “all is lost moment,” or the “whiff of death.”⁷ This moment becomes a moment of choice. The lead character must hit rock bottom, and thereby gain the resolve to finish the journey. There can be no going back after the negative floor. The story builds to a final conflict. Campbell wrote about this in mythology as “the supreme ordeal.”⁸ This is the epic showdown. In an action movie, this is the hero beating up the bad guys. It is only after this ordeal that the character can return home.

In *Rocky*, the whole movie builds to the supreme ordeal where Rocky Balboa will finally face Apollo Creed in the ring. There is a moment where Rock is getting beat up and just about gets counted out. The trainer wants to throw in the towel. But somewhere deep down Rock finds the strength to stand up and keep going.

⁶ McKee, “Storynomics”.

⁷ Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat: The Last Book on Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 86.

⁸ Campbell, 211.

In action movies, the lead character will sometimes appear to die in this moment. This can lead to a resurrection scene, where the hero is shown not to be dead but to be alive. There is a scene in *The Last Crusade* where Indiana Jones appears to go over a cliff. His companions all mourn his death, only to realize a few moments later that he is not dead at all. He is alive and trying to climb up the cliff a few yards down from them.

Normally the character returns with some sign of their triumph or some symbolic action upon their return. There is an obligatory scene that has been building through the whole film or story. This scene is often a wedding (*Muppets Take Manhattan*), award ceremony (*Star Wars: A New Hope*), or reunion of family or friends (*Finding Nemo*), that signifies the lead's triumphant return. The guide is regularly present to recap the journey. This is fascinating in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. Both the guides, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda, have died in the films, but they come back as force-beings, like ghosts, to confirm the transformation of Luke Skywalker.

The lesson is almost always the same. The object of desire was not enough to make the protagonist's life right. The hero had to grow and change on the journey. For a great example of this, see the conclusion to *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II*. Harry has spent a lot of the movie hunting for the Deathly Hallows. He finally has the unbeatable wand, but he does not keep it. He breaks it and throws it off a bridge. He does not need the wand. What he needed to do was transform himself in the journey, and that has been accomplished.

Examples of the Hero's Journey in *The Wizard of Oz* and the Bible

I have been giving examples in this description, but I think it is helpful to try to see this pattern in one entire movie. One of the best examples of this pattern in film is *The Wizard of Oz*. The protagonist is Dorothy played by Judy Garland. Dorothy's life is stable, though not ideal, as she lives with her aunt, and without her parents. The action begins when Dorothy must protect her dog Toto from being euthanized. She runs away, but then decides that she needs to get home. This is the question of the movie: will Dorothy get home? This question is first asked when she looks into the crystal ball and sees Auntie Em and is taken to another level when she ends up in Munchkinland.

Glinda the Good Witch of the North is the guide. She understands Oz and has a plan. She gives Dorothy the object of desire. She must go see the Wizard of Oz. The plan is unforgettable because the Munchkins sing it over and over again. Dorothy must "follow the yellow brick road." She crosses the threshold and heads down the road. Along that road, she is met by three companions. Dorothy meets the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion. They each have their own internal problems and their own desire to see the Wizard. They want a brain, a heart, and courage.

The Wicked Witch of the West is the antagonist. She tries to stop them by coming to them and by slowing them down. The group finally gets to the Wizard of Oz, but they need to get the Wicked Witch's broomstick before the Wizard will help them. The Witch thwarts their efforts by sending the flying monkeys. The monkeys capture Dorothy and Toto. This becomes the negative floor. Dorothy gives up her dream of going home. But all is not lost, for her friends come in and rescue her. She ends up getting water on the Wicked Witch, which kills the antagonist.

The brilliance of the movie is the ending. The group thinks that the Wizard of Oz is going to fix all their problems, but their object of desire is a sham. Instead, they learn that they had the brains, heart, and courage all along. Then, in a heartbreaking twist, Dorothy misses her ride on the hot air balloon back to Kansas. All seems lost again, until Glinda the Good Witch shows up to tell Dorothy that she could go home if she would click her heels together and repeat “there’s no place like home” three times.

No one in the film stops to wonder, why didn’t Glenda tell Dorothy that plan in the first place? Dorothy already had the shoes. She could have just gone home right from Munchkinland without the danger of the yellow brick road or the haunted forest. However, the plan was not an option in Munchkinland, because the story is not ultimately about Dorothy going home. The story is really about Dorothy’s growth on the journey. She needed to experience all of these tests so that she would understand the truth in the phrase “there’s no place like home.” The final scene means so much more when she *is* home surrounded by family, making amends with Auntie Em for running away.

The over-arching story at the heart of the Bible follows this pattern as well. At the beginning of the Bible, humanity is the protagonist. The Garden of Eden is a state of equilibrium and norm. The Fall is the inciting incident. The external problem is sin and death. The internal problem is shame and the question of whether human beings have what it takes to fix their relationship with God. The fixed relationship with God is the object of desire. God plays the guide setting up a plan. The plan unfolds in various covenants with God’s help along the way. The Old Testament is a catalogue of failed attempts and unintended consequences, as humanity continues to fail to get relationship

with God restored. The story draws to a standstill, though the prophets speak of a coming change in the story. Humanity cannot save itself. A stronger hero is required.

The incarnation of Jesus is the moment of crossing the threshold. Jesus enters the foreign land as a new hero with his own objective. He will save the people who cannot save themselves. God the Father acts as the guide with a plan and a will. The Holy Spirit is an ever-loyal companion, while the twelve other companions falter and fail. Jesus meets resistance from protagonists in Satan and in the religious authorities. The conflict builds to a supreme ordeal in Jerusalem. It is the ultimate negative floor. Jesus does not just have a “whiff of death.” He dies.

Then the twist happens. The resurrection moment is an actual resurrection. Jesus is not dead but alive, and all is not lost. Just when the victory is won and just when the obligatory scene should occur, Jesus ascends to be with the Father. The obligatory scene is described at the end of the Bible, but has not happened yet. The hero has left, and the action flips back to humanity for a hero. The new hero is the church, who pushes against antagonists and persecution to continue the work of Jesus until the coming conclusion.

Although stories have similar patterns, elements, and conventions, each story is unique. It is amazing, when one is looking for it, how many stories follow the hero’s journey. Most stories follow this general pattern. It can be seen in movies and television shows, but it is also how people tell stories about their lives. A person who tells the story of what happened over the weekend will often follow these same conventions. People use and expect these story patterns, and will even go to the movies to see the same patterns played out repeatedly.

Chapter 3: Why Stories Work

Story and Life

To be a story pastor, you must understand how story works, but you also need to understand why stories work the way they do. First, story is like life. The Hero's journey describes how life works. We all want to be a hero. We want to do something valuable in our lives. We want to be brave when life comes at us. We have all had inciting incidents. Someone we knew passed away, or we got cancer, or we got fired. I have four kids, and I will tell you that inciting incidents happen all the time. There have been times that I did not plan to go to the ER in the middle of the night, or to make a trip to get diarrhea medicine at five in the morning. We did not plan for that third positive pregnancy test. But life happens, often at the expense of our equilibrium. Have you ever been at a point where you would do anything to have nothing happen or change in your life, for just a couple days? God, just give me a few days of rest!

We all identify objects of desire. These are the things we think will put our world back to normal. If only I had a new job, or met a new guy or gal, or got that new car... then I would be happy. I need to get married. I need kids. We set goals. We make plans. We set out to get our objects of desire, yet they are never what we hoped they would be. The new job has its own problems. The new car is soon as messy and unreliable as the last one. The new boyfriend or girlfriend can't fix everything either.

We look for guides. We read help-self books and seek gurus. We want to learn from somebody what we should do. We also want our guides to have it together. As

Donald Miller says, nobody wants to hire a trainer who is overweight. We want a guide to have already made the changes that we want to make.

We want our guides to give us plans. We want those plans to be simple and specific. Think about all the weight-loss fads over the years. Losing weight is a simple process. You need to burn more calories than you take in so that your body uses the calories currently stored in fat. That is it. Every weight-loss program does that, but that is an idea, not a plan. We want meal plans, shakes, and clear food guidelines. We want exercise regimens and Zumba classes. People want plans.

We also understand that in life there are enemies. There is always opposition or resistance to change or growth. Great accomplishments never come easily. There must be conflict to force us to change. Some of the conflict is external. These might be situations that are hard to work in or where we feel that the odds are stacked against us. These can also be antagonists—people who actively work to undermine our progress. We have all had bosses or neighbors or congregants who try to bring us down.

Most of life's antagonism is internal. We wonder if we have what it takes to do what we are supposed to do. We have flaws in our character that hold us back. We have attitudes and perspectives that need to change. Sometimes our intentions are fine, but our actions bring unintentional consequences. We are trying to help the situation, but we only make it worse.

Some antagonists are imaginary. We have a knack for inventing bad guys. We think sometimes that if the resistance we feel is personal or specific then it is easier to deal with. We especially like to focus on external antagonism and ignore the internal problems that we bring. So we like to pick or make up enemies. Think back to the

weight-loss example. There are plans that say carbs are the enemy. Some say that the enemy is bigger portions. Still others do combat with preservatives and unnatural chemicals. I have also had the experience where I offer someone a cookie or a sweet and they treat me like the bad guy. How could I be such a bad guy as to tempt them to give up their quest for healthier living?

We love stories because we love to watch a character change. But we don't always like that process in our own lives. We don't like to change our own character. We don't like the pain of conflict in our own stories. Sometimes we even hold others back from growing in their stories so that we don't have to feel bad about our stories not progressing.

Despite our resistance to growth, we have all hit those moments when we have to change. We experience a negative floor, when the wheels fall off our lives and we have to choose to either rise to meet the challenge or give up. Sometimes we get caught in those "all is lost" spaces for a long time. Some people experience deep grief, and never really come back. But I think deep down we all want to be the kind of people who find the strength and courage to stand up and fight in those moments.

I think people also love the moments in life where a victory can be celebrated and wholeness can be exemplified. We love birthdays, holidays, and graduations. We love to get diplomas, certificates, and prizes. We are moved by the birth of the baby or a wedding. In those moments, we gather together with family and friends so that everyone can partake in the story.

It is not just individual lives that play out like stories. Groups of people—families—have shared stories. Churches and communities live out stories. These groups

all want to be about something bigger than themselves. They all have conflict and problems to overcome. They all must transform and change in order to overcome the problems. Whether you are helping an individual or a business, a church board or an entire church, story-thinking can inform how you work in those stories.

Story and the Brain

It turns out that this tendency to see ourselves in story and think in story is also biological. The brain works on story. Your grey matter likes to think in story elements. It searches for story patterns to complete them. If someone is telling you about a trip that they took to the mall to buy a new dress, you naturally want to understand it as a sequenced story. In fact, you will likely ask questions if you can't quite piece the story together.

Your memory works on story. Have you ever had the experience of seeing someone at the grocery store or in Starbucks and knowing that you have seen the person before but you can't remember where? You rack your brain until finally you remember that they work at your dentist's office. Then you remember that their name is Susan, or at least it starts with an "S." Once you get the context, you can remember the person. I am bad about this with seeing my church people away from church. I can know someone very well at church, but it takes me a few moments in the mall to get their name. We see an actor in a movie and we start trying to think of what other stories we have seen them in. We remember based on story.

Have you ever been listening to someone tell a story and they include information that is not relevant to the story itself? They are talking about a vacation they went on and

they add details about the trip and something about a quirky problem in their car. Why do they add that information? It is because the brain does not store information based on alphabetic entries or even based on topic. The brain stores information based on stories. So when people tell you a story and bring up seemingly irrelevant information, they are giving you the information that is stored with the memory of that story. We are like this about places also. If I asked you to remember your grandmother's house you could probably do that quickly, but I would guess that whatever you remember is not just the place. I would guess that you remember the living room and something that you used to do there or play there. The memory is tied to a story.

Evolutionary biologists have tried to figure out why people are so story-oriented. In that field, every physical or psychological feature of a person or an animal must have developed in relation to the species' survival. But why would people need stories to survive? Scientists have suggested that the brain uses imagination to think of potential survival situations. You have probably experienced this when you are getting ready to have a difficult conversation with your boss and you are playing out how it might go down inside of your head. Your brain is preparing for different eventualities. This is also why your brain replays situations in your mind. It wants to prepare to survive next time. Have you ever had the experience of thinking of the perfect thing to say in a conversation that happened five hours ago? This is your brain imagining a story to prepare you for next time.

This helps explain why the brain loves listening to other stories. Whether it be a friend telling you about a trip to the mall or a movie on television, the brain tunes into stories in order to learn how to survive similar situations, should they ever happen to you.

In fact, your brain shuts down a lot of extra functioning when it listens to or watches a story. It wants to get the most out of the experience. The brain even takes the next step and experiences stories as if you are actually in them. This is why you cry in *Bambi* or get excited when Rocky is training or jump when the Predator jumps out at you. Your brain does not know that it is not you getting sad, excited, or scared, and reacts as if it is real.

There is a lot of research going on about the brain and story, but there is no evidence to my next point. It is just my hunch, but I wonder if story works this way and people think in story for a spiritual reason. I wonder if human beings are attracted to this story because we are spiritually wired to long for the story of Jesus. Maybe our attraction to heroes in story comes from an inner longing for the Triune God. Maybe we want to see ourselves as heroes of our own stories because we are made in the image of God and deep down we desire to bravely continue the work of God in filling and ordering the world

The Story of Stories

I need to give you some historical perspective about stories. Stories have fallen on hard times in the last couple hundred years, but they are making a big comeback now. You need to understand where this is coming from and why it is happening, because it is an important aspect of the context in which pastors today work.

Throughout history, story has been the primary way of teaching ethics and building connection between people. Stories helped people remember things and taught others how to hunt or how to handle a crisis. In hunter-gatherer societies, it would have

happened around the evening fire. People would tell the stories of the hunt or of things that they had seen. These stories would be remembered in songs and rituals. They would be painted on cave walls or etched into pottery.

For Israel, the stories were captured in the Scriptures and celebrated in the festivals. The Passover was not just a holiday. It was the way that the people engaged in their origin story. Jesus taught in parables. Paul taught in little stories we call metaphors. The Christian faith is a faith based on story. Even the books of the law that begin the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—are primarily story. While some chapters read like a set of laws or a census of the people, most chapters are stories of how the law came into being and how Israel followed, or did not follow, these new laws.

The rise of the enlightenment in the 1500's marked the downfall of stories. With the invention of the printing press, information could be stored in books and did not have to be remembered in the same way. More importantly, the philosophical and worldview changes of the enlightenment saw story as a less reliable means of finding knowledge. The enlightenment thinkers began to buy into certain meta-narratives or over-arching stories about the world. These have been explained in various ways, but they are normally summarized something like this: science is good, and progress is inevitable. The more people know they better they will be. Technology was destined to improve our lives.

In order for these large meta-narratives to work, the small stories of people's lives had to be set aside. People called this *objectivity*. The idea was that for science to work and push the world into a better place, people had to remove their own story and the story

of the subject they were studying. You were supposed to take an objective position and pretend that you did not have any connection to what you were studying. People became statistics. Stories were ignored in favor of raw facts.

In theology, this showed up with an increasingly suspicious position toward the Bible. Scholars assumed the text was untrue and treated the book as a historical artifact to be dissected. They approached their studies as if they did not believe in the Bible. Theology became an academic discipline instead of an act of faith. God was divided into component parts and studied systematically instead of relationally. The result was a faith that was based on verses instead of the story, on criticism instead of faith, and on intellectual understanding instead of loving action in the world. The focus of the worship service turned to the preaching of the Word instead of the experience of the Eucharist.

The results of these practices for the world were not good. Technology and knowledge did not fulfill their promises. The world is not more peaceful. While some things have improved, there are many ways in which people are not better off. It has culminated in the last century with a depression, 2 world wars, Hiroshima, and the Holocaust. We have discovered more and more effective ways to harm one another, and the kind of objectivity that the Enlightenment pushed only served to allow worse cruelty to occur. Without stories, people become things. When people are things, they are easier to harm.

In other words, the claims of the meta-narratives of the Enlightenment have failed, and they are now being abandoned. The knee-jerk reaction has been an almost obsessive focus on personal story. This is why Facebook is popular. We go online and share the minutia of our stories. We love reality television and independent music and

films. We don't just want to see the movies, we want the behind the scenes interviews. Even sports news outlets like ESPN are now making documentaries and presenting many back-stories.

Story is popping up in all kinds of different professions and academic study. Here are a few examples.

- Business and Marketing - There has been a flurry of books published about leading organizations, managing staff, branding, and marketing with story.
- Counseling - There is an entire field called Narrative Therapy which seeks to think through counseling in story terms. Clients are asked to see their lives as stories and talk about how they might change their own plot lines.
- Medicine - There has been a surge of effort to help doctors listen to the stories of their patients in order to help in diagnosis. Several medical schools now offer or require classes on story.
- Law - Lawyers are now using stories and story principles for how they present cases and make arguments.
- Biblical Studies and Theology - Later on I will show how story is being used in biblical studies and theology.

At the same time that story is on the rise, meta-narratives are being treated with suspicion. Anybody who claims a simple version of how the world works is not trusted. We don't like big corporations or imposing worldviews. You are supposed to find your own faith, and any claim to absolute truth is met with disgust. As Dave Matthews puts in his song *Eh Hee*: "There's always someone who'll try to convince you that they know the answer no matter the question. Be wary of those who believe in a neat little world

because it's just f**king crazy, you know that it is.” Dave Matthews will not accept a description of the world that does not account for how crazy he believes the world to be.

This is so important to understand, because it impacts the world in which we pastor. We pastor in a world that is rediscovering story. In fact, people may be obsessed with it. But we are also leading a faith that was meant to be a lived-in-story, but became a faith of intellectual truth claims. The culture is reclaiming story but the church is having trouble going back. Our faith is so saturated in Enlightenment thinking that we have trouble imagining the story again.

Chapter 4: Storied Beings

Story and Metaphor

Story is so critical to how people think and how people approach life that human beings could be called *storied beings*. Story is at the very heart of what it means to be human. You can find a lot of books that talk about how story works and the hero's journey. You can even find books that make the case that I have made so far—that story is fundamental to life and therefore we should think of our lives and our work through the lens of story. Those books, however, are missing this chapter. I want to teach you not just that story and our lives interact, but how that interaction works.

Story works in human beings because story is metaphoric. Metaphor comes from the Greek words *pherin* meaning “to carry” and *meta* meaning “over.” Metaphors occur when meaning from one object or idea carries over onto another object. Humans think in terms of metaphor without even knowing it. For example, Lakoff and Johnson point to the common metaphor of argument-as-war.¹ The language that describes an argument includes phrases such as: positions are indefensible, weak points of the argument are attacked, criticisms are right on target, arguments are won or lost, and specific points are shot down. As another example, Lakoff and Johnson describe the connection between time and money.² People spend time, save time, waste time, invest time, budget time, lose time, and borrow time. These metaphors are so fundamental to the way we think about arguments and time that they often go unnoticed.

¹ George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

Allow me to get a philosophical for a moment, because these insights have huge implications for story. Metaphors use language and comparison to create meaning. We understand more about money because we compare it to time. That is exactly what a story does as well. Story unfolds in a pattern like the hero's journey, because story is ultimately metaphorical. According to Paul Ricoeur, story and metaphor "belong to the same basic phenomenon of semantic innovation."³ They both create meaning beyond themselves. Leonard Sweet explains that "narratives and metaphors are inseparable. A narrative, or story, is nothing but an embellished and embroidered metaphor. By the same token, we could define a metaphor as nothing but a dense and distilled narrative."⁴ He uses the term "narraphor" as a combination of a narrative and a metaphor to help people grasp how the two are related.

Stories are metaphors for life. As we have already seen, everyone has had their equilibrium upset by a problem in life, and had to work to overcome the imbalance. People identify with that struggle. In fact, screenplay writers build movies on this very principle. Ultimately, people listen to stories because they want to see themselves as the hero. They want to watch the film, read the novel, or see the play so that they can live vicariously through the lead character. The journey of the protagonist represents the journey of the audience. The story is a metaphor.

Because story is metaphor, most stories play out metaphorically. The best storytellers intentionally build metaphors into the story that help the listener or viewer

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), ix.

⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 37.

follow the story. You probably don't realize how many symbols are in a movie until you watch intentionally. Let's go back to *The Wizard of Oz*. Let's examine the appearance of the witches. The Wicked Witch is green with a large nose and a big mole. She is dressed in black with a pointy witch's hat. Glinda the Good Witch is beautifully dressed in white and pink with wings and a beautiful crown. They each symbolize who they are on screen.

The *Star Wars* movies are exceptional at presenting metaphors. The Empire's ships are all uniform with bland colors and basic shapes like triangles and circles. They are perfectly clean and well kept. The Empire's soldiers are all masked and in matching uniforms. Their voices are robotic and all sound the same. They are also called Stormtroopers—a clear connection to Nazi Germany. On the other side, the Rebellion ships are incredibly diverse. The ships are from different planets and systems. Many are dirty and show damage from being used. The Rebels don't wear masks, or uniforms, in most cases. They are all unique.

The two sides are symbolically opposite not just to represent that they are on opposing sides. This symbolism highlights the core struggle explored in the movies. *Star Wars* is a story about forced conformity versus free expression. It is a battle between the homogenous group and the authentic individual. Where is this clash most evident? In the lightsaber battles: whereas the Sith always use red lightsabers, Jedi can have different colors. When the sabers hit, these two worldviews hang in the balance. The symbols tell the story in a snapshot.

In film, the metaphors are cemented by a soundtrack. Darth Vader's dark and foreboding presence is accented by the Imperial March music. In many films, there are themes for each character as well as specific pieces for each critical moment of the film.

Think about what you feel when the Star Wars theme comes on, or when the Rocky theme starts playing. The music connects the feeling to the film, so that whatever the story represents as a metaphor for your life can come flooding back.

These are not just philosophical tricks. This is critical to understanding story. If the heart of story is the character transformation that comes through conflict, then metaphor is the story's lungs. Metaphor gives air to the story. Metaphor gives energy. The best stories are symbolically told so that you are swept up in them.

Jesus understood this. His parables and metaphors took everyday objects and made them carriers of the stories. A mustard seed represented the paradoxical smallness of a larger kingdom. A Samaritan showed what true love is. Soils taught about the receptiveness of the heart. Jesus was a master at taking everyday objects and using them to point to the larger story of God's work in the world.

The connection of metaphor and story can also be seen in the Bible's propensity to emphasize the names of people and places. Peter is the rock on which Christ will build his church. How could he have ever heard his name again without remembering that story? Jacob is so-named because he came out of the womb grasping his elder twin by the heel. The word in Hebrew means "to follow" or "be behind" but can also mean "to supplant." It is based on the Hebrew word for the heel. Jacob's name is the story of his birth. But he doesn't keep that name. He later wrestles with God and is given the name Israel meaning "may God prevail" or "he struggled with God." God gives him a new name that also represents a story. The supplanter who wrestles with God is made a new person in the process. His whole story arc is represented in his name.

Stories are metaphors for life. This is so core to what stories are that the stories themselves are often told with metaphors. The best stories have the best imagery underlying the story. Even if you are not consciously aware of all of the symbols, a great cinematographer or director is guiding you into the story with metaphors.

Embodying Story

Once you begin to understand the connection between story, metaphor, and life, you can begin to see how and why story is so powerful in our lives. People want to live in stories, but they also feel driven to embody those stories. In other words, people want to express the stories that they are living in physical ways. They want their lives to metaphorically show their own stories.

Think about it this way. You don't have to guess if someone is a *Star Wars* fan. If that is a story that means something to them, they are likely to talk about *Star Wars*, wear a *Star Wars* shirt, or have a *Star Wars* keychain. Their ringtone may be the *Star Wars* theme, or R2D2 may beep when they get a text. They find ways to have those symbols on their person and to proclaim to other people that *Star Wars* is part of their own story.

What we fundamentally do with story, since we are beings with bodies, is that we embody story. We physically act out the stories that we see ourselves in.⁵ We dress, act, talk and live in ways that represent the story that we see ourselves in, or the story that we want others to see us in. We celebrate key moments in the story. We also read people and

⁵ For a description of embodying story, James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: 2009).

situations by discerning the story that they are embodying. Let's take a look at this idea of embodying stories with several examples.

Where I am from there are a lot of Pittsburgh Steelers fans. You do not have to do a lot of work to pick out a Pittsburgh Steelers fan. They are usually decked out in Steelers apparel. They have stickers on their cars, and flags in their yards. You are not just a fan: you "bleed black and gold." You put up signs that say this is "Steeler Country." Think about the language: to identify the Steelers with your property and with your blood. People commonly get Steeler tattoos. It is more than a team you cheer for. It is an identity that you represent on your body and in your yard.

Clothes are critical in our stories. They are our costumes. This is why brands put their logos so prominently on their clothing. Wearing Old Navy tells a different story than wearing Abercrombie and Fitch. Wearing a Guns 'N Roses shirt says something different than wearing a Justin Bieber shirt. It is not just if you wear a hat, but what kind of hat, how do you bend the brim, and which way does the brim point?

A pastor friend told me about taking her son to buy a car. Her son has cerebral palsy and had just gotten a license to drive with his hands. They went together to get the perfect car that could be modified for this kind of driving. After some searching, he found what he thought was the perfect car. His mind was made up. The problem for his mom was that this car was obviously damaged by a fire. There were clear marks that the car had burned in the past and had been fixed up. She was trying to get him to pick a car that was in better shape. As we talked about the idea of embodying stories, she realized that her son was attracted to a damaged car because he sees himself as broken. He was attracted to a car that had a story that mirrored his own.

Why do so many people blast their radios in their cars? It is not because they can't hear it at a lower level. They blast their music because it is the soundtrack to their story. So if kids want to see themselves as gangsters they blast gangster rap, and if they want to see themselves as hipsters they blast Ed Sheeran. Our soundtrack cements our story, and our radios tell our story to the world.

Have you ever noticed that depressed people often physically look depressed? They sometimes don't take care of themselves in the ways that healthier people do. Their house and their car might be neglected, and get messy. But as a person comes out of depression, they begin to be able to take care of themselves and make their appearance a priority.

Churches do this. When I came to my church, they were feeling a little down on themselves, and you could tell. There were firmly established cobwebs and some impressive dust bunnies. There had not been an update to the church in a while. But as they started to feel better about themselves, they started to notice the peeling paint and the clutter. They began to see the building as not fitting the story they were living, and they could not stand it. Cleaning days were planned. Painting was started. We began to make the church look the way we felt, and the church's appearance in turn made us feel better about ourselves.

Sometimes people don't just embody their story, but instead try to embody the story that they want other people to believe they are in. Have you ever been around someone who is embodying a story that does not fit them? Like a 40-year-old woman who dresses in the same styles as her daughter. Or think about the mid-life crisis car

purchase. A 55-year-old guy buys a car appropriate for the story of the 20-year-old that they wish they still were.

We also have a tendency to ritualize our stories.⁶ We celebrate graduations, anniversaries, and birthdays. We have graduation ceremonies, anniversary getaways, and birthday parties. Each of these events have their own predictable elements or traditions. They mark steps in the story, new chapters in the movie of our lives, and they are attempts to embody a story.

So much of our behavior and our choices can be understood in terms of the story we are embodying. We have this insatiable desire to embody a story. Nobody understands this better than marketers. They hire the best storytellers and use the best special effects. They develop the most enthralling soundtrack, all so that you will do what they want you to do. Most of the time you probably don't even realize that a story is being told.

Make-up companies do not sell make-up in their commercials, at least not the good ones. They sell a story. "Maybe she is born with it. Maybe it is Mabeline." That slogan is not about make-up. Otherwise it would be a slogan like, "Our make-up is good." Instead they are selling the story of natural beauty. The story is that someone is going to look at you and wonder if you are naturally beautiful or if it is Mabeline.

Think about the entire pickup truck industry. Most of the people I know who have trucks have never hauled or towed anything. They have never even been off-road. It is more of a status symbol. Think about Ram's slogan: "Guts. Glory. Ram." They are

⁶ See Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

selling a story of manliness. I have never met anyone who gave this testimony: “I used to not have a lot of guts. I never got any glory. But then I got Ram truck, and now my life is full of guts and glory.” Ram trucks don’t give you glory or guts. What the company does is position Ram as the truck of people who live stories with guts and glory in them. If that is the story you want to live, then you should buy a Ram truck.

This is why companies pay huge sums of money to professional athletes and movie stars to promote their products. This is also why companies want their products placed in popular movies and shows. They want you to associate their product with those stories and those characters and to emulate them by buying their products. You should wear Hanes underwear and eat Ballpark hotdogs like Michael Jordan does. Gatorade even had the “Be like Mike” campaign. They sang songs about being like Mike, always with Gatorades being prominently consumed and the logo being prominently placed in the commercial.

Today, commercials are even more story-based. Many commercials have few or no spoken words. The story might have nothing to do with the product. It may just be a great little story with a logo at the very end. Budweiser has been brilliant at this with their horse commercials. Who can forget the one at the Superbowl in 2014 where the horses will not let the puppy go with the new owners? What does the story say about Budweiser? Absolutely nothing. What they want to do is get you to associate their brand with the good feelings of the story.

The real money of the film industry today is in products. You can thank George Lucas for this one, and thank Disney for taking it to the extreme. What these people know is that when you are moved by a film or show, you want to embody that in some way.

You see that story as part of your story. So people buy *Star Wars* shirts and *Doctor Who* bracelets and *Harry Potter* necklaces because they want those stories to be represented in their stories.

This is brilliant. The marketers and writers of our day are very good at what they do. The problem is that these marketers, writers, and directors end up telling stories that shape our lives. We become the kid who needs to get girls and use Old Spice. We become the woman trying to make people think she is naturally beautiful. We become the man who needs guts and glory. Unfortunately, our needs and our “objects of desire” are described and defined by those who stand to benefit from our embodiment of those stories.

Competing Stories

The world is telling a story about you. The story of the world is that you are a thing, or at least a potential thing. You are a consumer, a voter, a constituent, and a statistic. You are something to be traded. The message of our culture is that you are not enough. What you need to do is buy more, travel more, dress better, buy this car, etc. You have to be more, know more, have more, do more, and get more however you can. The ends justify the means.

The cycle is insatiable. The marketing system only works if you keep buying and consuming. You have to keep wanting more. Keep driving for more. Often you have to keep feeling bad enough about your life that you go out and buy the biggest and latest thing. The world keeps you in its story using one key tool—shame. The world shames you into feeling you are not good enough until you have the latest car or the bigger house

or the next iPhone. And the world is very good at telling that story, selling that story, and getting you and I to embody that story.

God has a different story about you and I. Yes, we are broken. We are in need. But God does not shame us. God does not demand more of us. We can never do enough, sacrifice enough, give enough, or be enough to be right with God. But here is the big story about God—God is enough for you. In the fullness of time, God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus lived the perfect life that we could not and taught about what it means to live a different story. Jesus often did this by telling stories. Jesus died the death we deserve to give us the life that only he deserved. On the third day he popped up out of the grave. The story was not over. It was just beginning. You don't need more stuff, more prestige, or more beauty. You need more Jesus.

God's story about you, written in the Bible and sung in the hymns, is that you've been saved, redeemed, and transformed. You are a new creation—the old is gone, the new has come. You are loved, beloved, perfect, good, and holy. You've been bought with a price, paid for with a life, given new life, and been born again. You have been made new. You are not the sum of your past. You are not the total of the future. You sit in your seat right now as a treasure in your father's eyes.

That's your story, but it is not your functional story if you are not embodying it. And here is one of the church's biggest problems today. We have made the Christian faith into something you believe in and talk about instead of a story you experience and embody. We sing a song "I love to tell the story," but really we love to talk about telling the story, or how we used to tell the story. We don't know how to live the story anymore.

It is strange that we find ourselves in this place, because when I read the Bible and study the early church, I see a faith that is based on embodying story. In the Old Testament, the Law isn't just a set of rules, but also the story of how Israel got the law. The Law was a set of practices explaining how to worship, how to sacrifice, and what festivals to celebrate. Often these rules or rituals are introduction with a reminder of the story—"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, therefore... ." Laws were placed within the larger story.

In the New Testament, Jesus uses very physical metaphors and tells lots of stories. Jesus does not just talk about service, but he also washes the disciples' feet. Jesus institutes baptism and the Lord's Supper as great experiential rituals that are based in the story. Even Paul, who we tend to think of as a logical thinker, is rooted in embodying story. Paul tells his story multiple times in the book of Acts. In 1 Corinthians, he develops a significant theology of the body. What you do in your body is important and your faith is lived out in your body. The faith is a physical faith that is to be embodied.

Historic Christianity is best understood not as a series of beliefs or ideas, but a set of practices meant to help people experience and embody the Christian story. Christianity transforms our story into God's story. Think about all the ways that our tradition anchors us to the story. The church set aside a day of Sabbath so that we can pull away from the world's story about us and instead connect with God's story about us. During this day we gather together in a physical space. This space is full of symbols that help tell the story. We have liturgy and singing and sacraments. We are singing the story, speaking the story, eating the story, and standing on the story's promises. In many traditions, we shake

hands and remind one another of the peace of Christ with a physical affirmation of that peace. We live a church year that gives a rhythm to life.

The world is telling a story about you, and it keeps you in its story using shame. But God keeps you in his story for you with one tool—love. You are reminded of, you experience, and you physically embody symbols of this love in worship. We also live that love with others. Christian service is all about embodying the story. According to Jesus, what we do to others we have done to Christ. When we serve in the church or in the community, we are embodying the story of Jesus.

Becoming the Story Pastor

Cliff Richard sang a song that said, “Why should the devil get all the good music?” One of the most important questions for the church today is, “Why should the devil get all the good stories?” The church holds the plotlines to the greatest story ever told. We have traditions that were designed to help people experience and embody this story. We need to learn how to do this again.

I am suggesting that pastors deal in story. Story is the primary paint that a pastor works with; the hammer and chisel of the story sculptor. Story is the medium of our work. When we stand in a pulpit, we are trying to get people to understand God’s story about them and critique the story of the world. When we lead worship, we are trying to get people to embody this God-story. When we preside over the sacrament of communion, we are helping people to take into their bodies the story of Christ. When we meet with someone in our study, or in the grocery store, or in the hospital room, we are hearing their stories and getting the opportunity to reframe or retell their stories. When

we do a wedding, a baptism, or a funeral, we are ritualistically celebrating a key step in their story. When we lead a church, we are helping them write the next chapter in their church community's history.

The primary work of the pastor is to act as the interpreter and chronicler for the stories of our church communities. We get to read situations through the lens of the Bible story. We get to retell past stories with new meanings. We have the opportunity to wield stories in a time craving for stories. The church was built on a story and was designed to help followers of Jesus embody that story, but we have lost the art of storying.

Communion is a story moment, where we physically embody the story. We take it into our body. The church is designed for embodying story and retelling the story in metaphor. We just lost our sense of story along the way.

As we have lost story, I think that too many pastors have lost their own story in the story of their church. They have wrapped up their identity and story arc in what happens to their church community. Pastors need to be living God's story. We need to see ourselves through the story of scripture. We are not the hero of the story. We cannot be the hero for our church, our community, or our world. We need to find our proper place in the story.

My denomination likes to call pastors "Ministers of Word and Sacrament." I like that title. I like the connection between Word and Sacrament. But I wonder if we have used too many words. We have fought for the "right" words and divided over the "wrong" words. In the meantime, the culture has, like commercials, moved past words. We live in a world of story and symbol. The church is mourning that loss, but in reality that is what the original church was like. I have therefore taken to calling myself a

“Minister of Story and Sacrament.” I am a story pastor and I lead a storied ministry. I am inviting you to think of yourself the same way.

Chapter 5: The 12 Principles of the Story Pastor

I needed to help you dig deep into how story works. This chapter moves us from theory to practice. The possibilities for story in ministry are practically endless, but therein lies a problem. As I have talked to other pastors about this new way of thinking about ministry, many of them said, in nice ways, “So what? How does this help me in ministry?” I knew that I needed to lay out some stones to help you cross the creek by applying story to your ministry.

Here are the core 12 principles of story pastors. These are the keys to applying story to pastoral ministry. They are not in a particular order, though the first three build on each other. Some of these seem very basic. I have already noted or hinted at a few of them, but I want to lay out clearly how to start thinking of a storied ministry.

1. Jesus is the ultimate hero.

There is one story at the heart of the Christian faith—the story of Jesus who sacrifices his own life for his people. This makes Jesus the hero of our story. There should never be a sermon or a gathering of the church where this story is not proclaimed. It would be like meeting Michael Jordan or any president of the United States and pretending that they are not there. The center must always be recognized and attended to.

This may seem like a “duh” sort of claim, but I worry that the church has lost this center. We tend to talk about Jesus in the abstract or theological treatise. The stories we do tell are often in the past tense. How many sermons have you heard or preached where the people are actually the hero? There is nothing about God’s grace paid for on a cross in Christ, but instead it is a sermon about five things to save your marriage that all start

with the same letter or rhyme with each other. We have forgotten that we come to church to worship God. We sometimes come to worship to praise ourselves or our great pastors or praise leaders. We come to see ourselves as heroes.

This confusion about who is the hero has led to poor ecclesiology. We have attractional churches that bring people in and missional churches that send people out. Both have their place, but I wonder if the truth isn't found in either approach. Jesus said that if he is lifted up, *he* would draw all people to himself (Jn. 12:32). I think that the church is to be a "lift-up-ional" church. This is the kind of church where, whether it is attracting people or sending people out, the goal is to lift Jesus up and give him glory. This church will not lift up the individual, the church as an organization, not the community. Instead, the church will lift up Christ in each of those places.

Jesus is the hero. It is his work on the cross, his work in the church, and his work in our lives that is saving. The center of the pastor's work is lifting Jesus up as the hero. Every pastoral task and pastoral interaction comes back to proclaiming Jesus as the hero.

2. The congregation are heroes. You are the guide.

This may seem contradictory the point. I just said that Jesus is the ultimate hero, and now I am saying that the congregation is also a hero. Is Jesus the hero, or are we? The answer is both. Jesus is the ultimate hero, and we are heroes in our own subplots. I think this is a biblical tension. Jesus is the hero of the Bible and the ultimate work in the scriptures is the action of God, but along the way God works through heroes on earth. Noah, Moses, David, John, Paul, Ruth, and the woman at the well are each heroic in their own way as they bravely follow God's leading in their lives.

We have subplots in the larger hero's journey of Jesus. Part of following Christ involves continuing his work and ministry in the world. We have also seen that everyone wants to see themselves as the hero. This happens both corporately and individually. The church as a whole stands as salt and light. The gates of hell cannot prevail against it, but they will sure try. It is a difficult time to be a church today, and we have a lot of work to do. We need to be heroes in our stories.

Your parishioners, too, long to be heroes. They are scared to fail, but deep down they want to do something meaningful with their lives. They want the courage to rise above the challenges of life and do something spectacular. That is why they watch movies and read novels—to vicariously experience those feelings through the stories of others. And if God is a big God with plans in this world, then he has plans and purposes for their lives.

I think it is helpful to think of yourself as the guide when you are the pastor. You are not the hero. You are not Luke Skywalker in your church. You are Obi-won Kenobi or Master Yoda. You are not Dorothy. You are Glinda the Good Witch. You are charged in the community with both pointing to and listening to the True Hero. You are listening to the Holy Spirit yourself. You don't have the whole plan; in fact, you are not responsible to give the plan. But you do start the plan and help the church find the plan. You coach parishioners as they discover their own calling. You also equip the church for the adventure. You give them the weapons of scripture and spiritual disciplines. You motivate and inspire them to follow their Yellow Brick Road or take on their Death Star. You give comfort when they fall down, meet antagonism, and feel they can't go on.

This runs contrary to an authoritarian model of ministry where the pastor rules and decides all. I think it should. Too often pastors see themselves as the hero who must redeem the world, fix the church, and save the souls. We see ourselves as the Good Samaritan, when perhaps we are meant to be the innkeeper.¹ Yes, pastors have authority, but it is derivative authority. It comes from your calling and your own salvation, not from your position or education. You earn the credibility to lead and help write people's story and you care for others.

I don't want to take away from how heroic pastors are. It takes guts to stare down the sin in the lives of your people. It takes nerve to speak into those moments when others are too overcome with grief or worry to say anything. You are a hero to do what you do. It is a great responsibility, and you will have to grow and change to meet the challenges of ministry. You will have your own story arc in ministry. The key is that you can't be obsessed with your own hero's journey. If you want to have your ego stroked or your heroism recognized, ministry may not be the right place for you. It is not about you and you can't make it all about you. Keep pointing to Jesus as hero and building up your people as heroes.

3. Christian maturity is making Jesus more and more the protagonist of your story.

There is a principle in film called "the false protagonist." This is a character in a story that appears to be the lead character, only to later be revealed as a supporting character. Star Wars uses this tool when the movie begins by following the movements of two droids—R2D2 and C3PO. It appears that their story is going to be about them, until

¹ A distinction that my seminary professor Andrew Purves would often make in class.

the droids find Luke Skywalker, and he takes on the protagonist role. The book of Samuel makes a similar change, where the focus shifts from Samuel to David.

I think that Christian maturity involves a similar shift. Jesus is the ultimate hero, and we are sometimes heroes in the subplots of God's story. But often we are false protagonists. Christian maturity is making Jesus more and more the protagonist of your story. Immature Christians want to do something great for Jesus. Maturity means wanting Christ to do something great in me. The focus shifts from me being the primary actor in the story to Jesus being the actor in my life. My story is actually Christ's story. Or, as Paul put it, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal.2:20)

My dad talks about this shift in his own life. His prayer when he was younger was, "Lord, made me a great piano player for you." He never learned the piano, but what he was saying to God is, "Give me the tools, the skills, and the platform to glorify you in my life." Over the years, my dad realized that his prayer was laced with vanity. More than that, the prayer had him in the wrong place. He was not to be a great piano player for Jesus. He was the piano. The prayer of maturity is to ask God to play you however and wherever he wants so that the spotlight is always on him. The prayer of a mature Christian is, "Lord, use me in whatever way would give you the most glory."

Adam and Eve got the protagonist wrong way back in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were made in the image of God and given important work to do. They were to continue the work of God on earth. They were to sustain and fill the earth. This call was not just to care for God's creation. They were to create life themselves both in human

form and in the garden. But they fell to the temptation to be like God instead of reflecting the image of God. Instead of doing something heroic in God's name, Adam and Eve wanted to be the ultimate protagonist.

Our parishioners make the same mistake. They want to be heroes even at the expense of the ultimate hero Jesus. The church must disciple people toward maturity. Jesus must be the protagonist. We should all be able to say with Paul that we do not live anymore but Christ lives in us.

Pastors make this mistake as well. Ministry is about helping your people make Jesus the protagonist of their lives, and we should model this. I worry that ministry in many churches is overly centered on the pastor. The pastor is too much the hero. This is exacerbated by the pastoral culture, where pastors are trying to move up the ladder into better jobs. Calls become careers, and we attempt to be the heroes. No wonder pastors are stressed and burned out. They are trying to be the protagonist instead of being the guide.

Through liturgies, homilies, and eulogies, the story pastor gets to help move people from center stage to the background. There is always the temptation for the pastor to put herself in the spotlight. Christians must all learn to trust Christ and faithfully play their own part in the drama.

4. People often pick a lesser object of desire than Jesus.

We have seen that people want to see themselves as heroes. In stories, something happens to upset the equilibrium of the protagonist: the inciting incident. We noted earlier that people experience these kinds of moments all the time. What the protagonist then does is identify an object of desire to pursue to make things right. It can be getting

the guy or girl, finding the Lost Ark, or finding the enemy spy. If only they could complete the journey or collect the treasure, then their life would be normal again.

What people really need is the grace and love of Jesus Christ, but human beings are bad at picking objects of desire. Since the fruit in the Garden of Eden, we have picked wrong objects to desire. Sometimes we pick good and edifying objects to desire, but even these good things can't handle the weight of being an object of desire and putting all of life back together again.

For some people, the object of desire is a material object. "If only I had a new house, a better job, more money in savings, or a new car, then I would be happy." For others, the object of desire is found in relationships. "If only someone loved me, my husband would stay true to me, my wife would make me happy, or I could have my child back home, then my life would be fulfilling and I would be happy."

I once heard a then-popular reality star talk about how her kids meant everything to her. They were her world, she said, and made her feel happy and fulfilled. Here children were her life. A few months after that interview, when I heard that she was getting a divorce and losing her show, I was not surprised. There is not a lot of room for a husband in that equation. Kids are valuable and amazing gifts that should be treasured. I would do anything for my kids, but my kids are not the answers to my problems. I can't make my son the professional athlete I never was or my daughter the preacher I wish I could be. If I do that, I am using them for my own needs. Kids are good things, but they make very poor ultimate things.

Idols always let you down. Only God can carry the weight of being God. Jesus is the only way to lasting hope and fulfillment. We have already seen that in movies, the

object of desire is never enough. The real treasure is the change that the character goes through on the journey. We love that in movies, but in our lives, it is too tempting to believe the lies of idols. We want our marriage to make us happy, and we don't even question if the purpose may actually be to make us holy.²

When one idol fails, we simply switch targets. If I can't impress my parents, then I will live through my children. That doesn't work, so I find my identity in my work. The big one right now for many Americans is politics. We find our hope or our despair in elections and political parties. Even Christians confuse politics with their hope.

This is so critical in established churches with old traditions and older members. These parishioners have seen the world around them change. They lost their jobs. They lost their pensions. They lost their America. They lost their kids and grandkids to other cities and other careers. They got old and can't do the hobbies they used to enjoy. What is the one thing that hasn't changed? What is the one area of their lives that hasn't really changed? The church. Now the church has probably changed more than they think it did. People's memory of the way it used to be is normally a little skewed. But what pastor's need to be sensitive to is the reality that the church has been a major coping mechanism for these members as their lives have been full of changes. That is sometimes why you get an overreaction when you change the carpet, paint a wall, or move a pulpit. You are getting a response to all these other changes. The church can become an object of desire that falsely holds people's hope.

² Question raised in Gary L. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

Part of the pastor's job is to critique these objects of desire. The pastor keeps quietly and patiently pointing back to Jesus, for Jesus is what the people need. He is the only comfort, hope, peace, and fulfillment they will be able to find that will not let them down.

5. People want to embody story.

In the previous chapter, I developed the idea that people don't just want to hear stories. They want to be in stories and embody those stories. They want to wear shirts and drive cars and carry themselves in a way that represents the story they are living. This is critical for pastors to understand for two reasons. First, your parishioners are already telling you what they think is their defining story in their clothes, cars, homes, and pictures. Second, the work of the church is to embody a different story.

On the first point, your people are giving you data on what story they see themselves in. Their lives are books which allow you to read their story. There is a reason they picked those clothes, play that music, bought that furniture, and put up those pictures. They are not thinking in these terms, but they are embodying a story. It might be the story they think they are living. It may also be the story they wish they were playing in or the story they want other people to think they are playing in. Your people are giving you clues and insights into what they value, what they see as their object of desire, and who they are trying to be.

Your work is to get them embodying God's story. You want to help them live out God's story in a way that is authentic to the part God has called them to play. The leverage that you have is that the church is designed for exactly this process. When we

come to church, we embody the story. We stand up and sit down. We clap and raise our hands (well, we Presbyterians don't). We speak together our liturgy and creeds. We sing songs that give us a soundtrack to the story. We hear the story proclaimed in a story. And we serve others together. Sometimes we even go on mission trips or to the local soup kitchen so that we can embody the mission of the church. Church is where we go to connect with God's story about us and detox from the world's story about us, all so we can take that story back into the world. We used to be aided by embodiment practices in the church. They were called spiritual disciplines. The basic components of these were Bible reading and prayer. Where have these embodiments gone in our churches?

Churches don't always do embodiment well. Sometimes the church uncritically embodies the story of the world instead of a counter-narrative. The church simply echoes the values of the culture with minimal God-language attached. The preacher says, "God wants you to be healthy and wealthy. Here, buy my book and learn more about it." On the other hand, the church can put on an act, where people start embodying an expected story of good and perfect people. Everyone pretends to be beautiful and put-together instead of being a sinner saved by grace. The church can express an inauthentic story.

The church worries about training people to talk about their faith. We used to call this witnessing or evangelism. Yet people are eager to talk about their favorite sports team, computer, or car company. They wear their shirts and share their stories. The Steelers don't teach anybody how to witness. Colleges don't train students to be ambassadors for the school. What these companies do, and they do it intentionally, is give people great experiences to create customer loyalty. Why do we have to help teach people how to talk about their faith? Because we have failed to teach them how to

embody their faith. People who have genuine experiences of God will be quick to share those experiences, like the woman at the well. She goes back and tells her entire town about Jesus.

Social media is the new place that people go to embody their story. We post our pictures, update our statuses, and go live to share our stories with the world. “I’m a chef, look what I cooked.” “I have musical taste, look what I am listening to.” “I have skill, look what I built.” “I am smart, look at my opinion.”

It used to be that you took pictures of places you went or people you saw. Now you take selfies. Selfies are the latest in embodied stories. You take a picture of yourself with someone or in a unique place, so that you can portray yourself as an actor in the story instead of just taking pictures from your own perspective. We want people to embody God’s story, especially as it is expressed in our church. Yet we are not good at giving people the opportunity to embody that story on social media, where they now go to embody their stories.

When you are with your people and in their homes, they cannot help but give signs to their functional stories. You need to learn to scan their pictures, read their bumper stickers, and notice their clothing. You can exegete their stories using the same techniques you bring to one of Jesus’ parables. From there, you can create experiences and develop sermons to critique their stories in favor of Christ’s story for them.

6. Story language connects with people.

People surround themselves with cards, trinkets, and pictures from their lives. Those are there for a reason. Each embodies some kind of story. It is there to remind the

person of a time when they tried, felt, or learned something, or it is there to remind them of a relationship. I learned a long time ago to ask about those items. “Tell me the story of this picture.” “Where were you when this was taken?” “Who is that in this photo?”

The language of story helps unlock some of these conversations. Life happens as story and the brain works on story. If I say, “let me tell you a story,” you are interested. You have learned since you were a child that “once upon a time” is an invitation to something magical. People don’t know the language of protagonist and object of desire or negative force, but they intuitively know what a story is. They understand the language of hero, bad guys, and playing a part in the story.

Story opens up my pastoral awareness. I often have to talk to families who are losing or have lost a loved one and I will need to do their funeral. If I ask them to tell me about their lost loved one, I get a list of facts that might be in the obituary. But if I ask for a story that shows what their father was really like, I get much more insightful comments. I will actually begin to see who the person really was in those stories.

Many people have survived hardships, lost lovers, and buried their children. They have built businesses, grown families, and started ministries. Part of the role of the pastor is to help people learn the beauty and bravery of their own stories. At the same time, pastors bear witness to the work of God in and through their parishioners.

This is the awesome responsibility at funerals. Telling the person’s story while at the same time speaking of God’s story in them. It is a great privilege and responsibility to sum up a person’s life, but that is sometimes what the pastor must do. I wonder if we shouldn’t try to do the same thing for our living parishioner. I am not sure that we should be morbid enough to ask people for stories for their eulogies, but can you sum up your

people's stories in only a few minutes? Do you know the stories that define them? If you told their story in front of them, would they agree? As my teacher Len Sweet points out, there is no greater honor than to tell someone's story in front of them and have them approve of your telling.

Two other great story moments are available to pastors that they often miss. The first is people's names and nicknames. Most people are named after someone or have someone else's initials. Some people have nicknames. Everybody has a last name that came from somewhere. I once led a retreat where I asked people to share in small groups and then in the large group the story of their name or nickname. We got to know a lot about each other in that little exercise.

The other story opportunity for pastors is tattooing. Many people have tattoos that represent something important. This is the most permanent embodiment of story that a person can have—they actually put ink into their skin so that they cannot lose, break, or forget a story. Though these are sometimes hard and painful memories, they are also publicly displayed. I see them not only as fair game for conversation, but an invitation for conversation. For example, I had a waitress once who had several beautiful stars tattooed to her wrist. When I asked her the story of her tattoo, she said that her dad had died two years before. They had done a lot of star-gazing together when she was a child. It was her way of remembering him. The setting did not allow for a deep conversation about her loss, but the story of her tattoo gave me insight into her life. If I had asked if she had ever lost someone in her life or if both her parents were alive, it would have been awkward and painful. But the tattoo was an on-ramp for the conversation.

Since childhood bedtime stories, we have all learned that stories are special moments. Use that language in ministry, and you will see a different response from your people. They don't see their lives as stories, but they are so used to seeing themselves in the characters of movies that story language is natural for people. They also tune in when you tell stories from your own life or other people's experiences. When you tell a story or talk in story terms, you are speaking the brain's language. If you frame and order your conversations like stories, it can be like WD-40 to your pastoral care. It gets things moving.

7. The Pastor's work is primarily dealing with internal problems, not external problems.

Remember how I said that every protagonist has an external problem. This external problem always exposes an internal problem. The internal problem is normally a variation of the question, "Am I enough?" Movies are always about the internal problem. It is not about Rocky winning the fight. It is about the training montage. It is about Rocky getting stronger to rise to the challenge.

In ministry, people always have external problems. They are depressed. They lost a loved one. They need to pick a main course for the Christmas dinner. They need information for the bulletin. It is easy for pastors to get caught up in the external problems. In fact, I think some pastors think their job is the external problems. Ministry, like a story, is always about the internal problem. Craig Barnes talks about this as a

ministry of subtext.³ Your ministry is about what is going on underneath the surface of the conversation.

Let me try to make this painfully clear. Your job is not the budget, the bulletin, or even the sermon. Those are important, and you have to do them, but you will not give an account before God on these external problems. Those are never your true work. Your work is at the internal level. Why are people having trouble with this budget? Why are they nervous about finances? What are people feeling as they enter this worship service? What are the doubts that people have now that their spouse has died? Your work happens at the spiritual or the heart level. Your job as you help manage the church is to help your people live out of their new self instead of their old self. Your job is to help people serve Jesus as Lord.

It is far too easy as a pastor to become task-oriented. The external problems are real problems, and people will demand that you deal with those problems. The challenge is that protagonists don't know what the internal problem is unless it is in hindsight. The guide's job is to help the lead deal with their internal problem even if the lead does not recognize what the deeper problem is. In fact, pointing out the internal is not always helpful or welcome. People are sometimes not willing to hear the truth. Sometimes, your attempts to point out the internal problem are met with skepticism or anger. Sometimes the nudge is not received until years later. Still, we pastors, like the prophets, must speak God's truth, whether it is received or not.

³ M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009).

This impacts my ministry in a few ways. First, I ask the question “Why?” a lot. Why are you feeling that way? Why does that scare you? Why are you so excited about this? I want to get under the surface and understand that internal struggles that the presenting issue is exposing.

Second, these kinds of problems demand that you, as the pastor, occasionally give a spiritual perspective of what is going on. I remember having a meeting with my session about spending a significant amount of money. We were in the middle of a capital campaign, and were waiting until we had enough money in the bank before we moved onto the next phase of the project. We had the money, but my board was slow to pull the trigger. I called a time-out on the conversation and asked them why they were hesitant. They admitted that they were gun-shy because of the amount, but also because they did not want to be blamed if things did not turn out well. We made the decision to bring a few more people in on the discussion before we decided to start the project. When they got the opinions of a few other members, they realize that everyone was ready to get things started. We did the project, but we also addressed some underlying fears related to distrust of the session’s decision making. Those fears were based on past-experiences, but they were influencing the present-day decision. It was my job to get to the deeper questions and help them move forward.

Third, discussions of internal problems do not lend themselves to formal settings. Robert did not write his *Rules of Order* to address internal problems. These are the kinds of things that are dealt with in hospital rooms, grocery stores, and living rooms. The sermons and the formal meetings support those interactions by building trust and

developing biblical and theological language for those conversations. But the vital work of ministry happens in informal settings.

The work of internal problems sometimes contributes to pastors feeling lonely in ministry. We work and think on a different level. We are set apart and supported by the church to think about the things that people don't always have the time or energy to think about. Like Jeremiah, we can be depressed or frustrated with problems that others avoid, but need to deal with in order to grow and mature. We are keenly aware of the wounds that are holding our churches back, but they may not be willing to talk about those issues right now. Hard as it is sometimes, we pastors work on internal problems.

8. Conflict is important for people and organizations to change.

One of the central principles of story is that conflict drives the change in the protagonist. In fact, stories where the protagonist chooses to change instead of being forced to change are rarely accepted by audiences. Marlin can't just choose to get over his fear of the ocean. He has to be forced to find his strength while he finds his lost son Nemo. Deep down, we all know that change is hard and that we won't change unless we are forced to. This is why we love to sit through a movie or get lost in a novel and vicariously live through someone else's changes. We know that change is hard and comes through conflict. It is safer to watch Dorothy go through the challenges in Oz than to face the conflict in our own lives.

We become afraid to change and we try to avoid conflict. We don't like anyone to rock the boat, even though sometimes the boat needs to be rocked, and it is only when the boat is rocked that the sailors do their best work. We have all seen people who are in

complete denial about the conflict that they are going through. They simply ignore or deny their problems instead of dealing with reality. This kind of denial can be so damaging as we leave problems nameless, pretend they are not there, and let them grow until they are too big for us to handle.

Churches do this, too. How many small churches are one or two funerals away from closing or at least being unable to pay the pastor? Yet these churches are slow to talk about the problem. I have talked to churches that admit that the world is changing and they are going to have to change with it. Some of these churches are at 10-20% of the membership and financial resources that they used to have. They needed to change 20 years ago, but they are now finally being forced to change, and it is much more difficult.

The story pastor understands that the path to the future of the church, and the path to the maturity of parishioners, is through conflict. This might mean conflict, with antagonism outside the church or the challenges of accomplishing a larger task. It can also be the conflict of disagreements and conflicting ideas of vision in the church. Iron only sharpens iron when the two are hit against one another. For people and churches to become sharper, they must hit against conflict that forces them to grow and change.

Denial and sugar-coated conversations will not produce fruit. People need to deal with reality. Facts are our friends, and very little is ever helped by avoiding conversations. The work of ministry is not to avoid conflict, but to manage it so it is not unhealthy and help people learn the right lessons from the conflict.

Let's imagine a church that is planning to do a renovation of the sanctuary. Many churches have had this struggle, as people don't like to see the sanctuary change, or they disagree about how it should change. This conflict can be harmful as it turns into

opposing sides and becomes win-lose. It can also be harmful if it involves personal attacks, particularly if those attacks are anonymous and passive-aggressive. Those same discussions are an opportunity to strengthen the church and encourage maturity. The pastor must start with the larger goal of the renovations. What is the larger vision or purpose for our sanctuary that drives the choices we make in the sanctuary? Then, the environment must be set up where everyone can speak their mind. If people don't get a chance to voice opinions, they will never totally buy into the decisions. They will later say that they did not agree to begin with.⁴ If we can rise above our personal desires for the larger purpose, it will be a great triumph of maturity. Instead of avoiding these difficult conversations, the pastor needs to lean into them, because it is in the conflict that the parties involved will be challenged to change.

People also need to learn the right lessons from conflict. It is like a cat who walks across the stovetop one day and gets burned. The cat never gets burned again, but the cat also never walks on the stovetop again. The cat only learned part of the lesson. The cat learned that you get burned when you walk on the stovetop, but did not learn that sometimes the stove is off and sometimes on. The cat also did not learn where you can or cannot step on the stovetop to avoid being burned. The lesson was just to stay off the stovetop.

A lot of people have been burned in life. They tried and failed. They talked about difficult things and were attacked for their trouble. They learned a lesson, but it was not the right lesson. They learned to not try, not share their opinion, and to stay safe. The

⁴ To understand this process, every pastor should read Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

pastor needs to help people rise to the challenges of life. This often means coaching and encouraging people in their conflicts with others or with obstacles to their goals.

Most people, just like most churches, have dreams that are too small. What is your church trying right now that most people think is going to fail? What are you doing in your life that is impossible without God's help? Pastors who lean into these kinds of adventures will be the ones who see people and churches transform.

9. People will get excited about antagonists.

10. People and organizations get writer's block.

11. You are the chronicler of stories.

12. Stories do not always fit well into points or into clear conclusions.

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