

# The Christian Story and the Christian School (5): A Defense of the Narrative Approach in Reformed Christian Education

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With this article we bring to a conclusion the discussion of the narrative approach in Reformed Christian education. The defense and development of an understanding of the narrative approach is the burden of the book *The Christian Story and the Christian School*, Christian Schools International, 1993, by Dr. John Bolt. In this book Dr. Bolt contends that the problems in Christian schools arising from contemporary education and our culture could be addressed best and solved by the narrative approach. We have previously described the narrative approach as one in which the Christian school tells a specific and distinctive story that reflects the truth of the inspired Scriptures and the Christian creeds in every area of the curriculum.

Dr. Bolt contends that the narrative approach can be a possibility and reality because our Christian schools exist in what can be called communities of memory. These communities of memory are repositories of stories that will be most helpful in the employment of the narrative approach. In the final chapters of the book Dr. Bolt considers the idea of "story" or "narrative" as a method to discover the content of Christian education. He argues that narrative provides an enrichment of our understanding of human experiences and that it is a constructive way of understanding the reason for Christian schools and the goal of Christian education.

## ***The Story of God and His People***

Dr. Bolt asserts that the Christian faith is first and foremost a story—a story of the triune God and His people. Often Christian testimonies will take the form of a story. The believer will tell how the Lord has taken him from the bondage of sin and has changed his life. He may recount his sinful past, his present redeemed state, and his hope for future glory. The Christian confession of faith results in a confession that becomes a narrative, and therefore it can be called one's spiritual autobiography.

Bolt notes that the Christian faith takes on a narrative form that is used in worship and liturgy. The Apostles' Creed can serve as an example because it covers the entire narrative history of the universe from creation to the consummation of all things. The second article of the Apostles' Creed is a simple summary narrative of the life of Jesus, the Savior—the God-man—from His conception by the Holy Spirit to His rule at the Father's right hand and His return in glory.

Dr. Bolt cites [Deuteronomy 26:5-9](#) <sup>[1]</sup> as an example of an Old Testament narrative form that serves as a communal confession of faith and a summary salvation history.

*A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous: and the Egyptians evil entreated us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage: And when we cried unto the Lord God of our fathers, the Lord heard our voice, and looked*

*on our affliction, and our labor, and our oppression: And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders: And He hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey.*

The Christian story, according to Bolt, is not merely our story, our narrative of discovery and imagination.

*The Christian story is the story of God and His people. From creation through redemption unto the consummation the Christian story is a covenantal narrative, a narrative about a relationship between the triune God and His people. John Calvin begins his Institutes of the Christian Religion by underscoring this inseparable covenantal duality: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" ( Bolt, p. 186).*

Dr. Bolt asserts that the covenantal relationship between God and His people does not involve "equal partners."

*God is the sovereign who initiates and governs the relationship. He created the world for His glory and He breathed life into human beings.... We are children of God, not by human will or decision. Rather we are 'born of God.'*

John 1:13 <sup>[2]</sup>

*... God's people respond to His initiative, and their story is a recital of what God has done for them, in them, and through them (Bolt, p. 186-187).*

Bolt continues by stating that the story that relates what God has done, and is doing, and will do, cannot be told apart from the community of faith. New Testament metaphors such as the body of Christ and temple of the Spirit remind us that the locus of God's presence and the manifest sign of Christ's kingly rule in the world are the people of God (cf. I Cor. 12:27 <sup>[3]</sup> and I Cor. 3:16 <sup>[4]</sup>).

Since the people of God are so important in the story God is telling, Bolt insists that it is important to know the context of God's story today. This means that we must know the influence of ideologies like modernism, secularism, and paganism and the pervasive influence of the media as these affect and shape the story of the people of God today. We should remember that the world in which we live was created perfect but is now a world that has fallen. It is a world in which men serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is God blessed forever (cf. Rom. 1:25 <sup>[5]</sup>). It is a world that serves the god of this world (Satan), who has blinded the minds of those that do not believe (cf. II Cor. 4:4 <sup>[6]</sup>). It is a world in which the redeemed of the Lord are called to live as those who look for the new heavens and new earth. Christian students must be taught to see that God's purpose is "to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ" (cf. Eph. 1:10 <sup>[7]</sup>).

Christian education that Christian parents promise to provide for their children must fit into the story of God and His people and must serve the mission of God. The story of God and His people is the story of the triune God's mission that is commissioned by the Father, accomplished by Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit, and is in process until the end comes and God is "all in all" (I Cor. 15:28 <sup>[8]</sup>).

***The Christian School: A Visionary Community of Memory***

Dr. Bolt also argues that the Christian school must be a community of memory. We must think of the Christian school as a visionary community of memory. This is another formulation of a narrative framework because all narratives are temporal in nature, joining characters and events in a plot over time. A narrative joins past to present in memory and then joins both to the future in anticipation or hope. A narrative understanding of the school therefore situates it between the past and the future, between memory and vision.

The very nature of the school as an educational institution qualifies it and defines it by the special task of remembering, says Bolt. He writes: "The school is the place where the broader community seeks to pass on to the next generation its civilizational memory, its cultural wisdom" (Bolt, p. 189).

The school's task according to Dr. Bolt is

*to prepare its students for citizenship in a specific community, to mold character, and to encourage virtues consonant with the historic values and traditions of that community. Teachers are to be custodians of a civilization and students are to be its heirs. The school is a specialized community in which the larger community preserves and passes on its cultural memory. Education is a matter of passing on and of nurturing students in a shared memory, incorporating them into a shared story (Bolt, p. 189).*

Dr. Bolt views the Christian School as one that is concerned with the story and symbols of the national community, but more broadly with the story and symbols of God's kingdom and mission in the world.

The wisdom that the student must learn is rooted in memory and tradition, says Bolt, that are passed on from generation to generation. To educate students is to civilize them, to make them wise. Bolt states that we are wise "to the degree we share traditional memories and live by traditional wisdom. We are educated to the degree that we know and begin to participate in the community's story" (Bolt, p. 190).

Bolt asserts that a good Christian school curriculum must draw significantly from the wisdom of the ages. This requires good teachers who drink deeply from wells of tradition, so that their students are incorporated into a story of the past, the present, and the future of God and His people. Students incorporated into this story are given a memory, a vision, and in this way a mission.

## ***Teaching As Storytelling***

Dr. Bolt believes that when one thinks of the school and teaching in narrative terms this has implications for the identity of the teacher, the shape of the curriculum, and even the structure of specific lessons.

Concerning the identity of the teacher, we should note that when the school is viewed in narrative terms, one thinks of the teacher as the community's storyteller. The Christian school must be rooted self-consciously in the grand narrative of the acts of the triune God in creation, redemption, and the renewal of all things.

The curriculum is the story the teachers are to tell. We must recognize that stories are the

preeminent means by which we make sense out of our experience. We also must recognize that, because of divine revelation, Christians have access to the story that must be employed to judge all the stories that teachers tell. The Christian school curriculum that tells the Great True Story and all derived and supporting stories is the way that Christian education helps students make sense of their experience.

The narrative of Scripture will play a foundational role in the curriculum of the Christian school. A good Bible curriculum that introduces students to the grand narrative plot of Scripture and explores its vast and rich imagery is the cornerstone of a solid Christian education. Basic biblical literacy is important to shape the Christian identity and character of students. It also provides students with an essential cultural vocabulary for understanding Western civilization.

The second great building block of a rich curriculum is church history. To be taught correctly and effectively church history must be more than data and information about God and His people. Students who are going to become the kind of Christians that will courageously resist the encroachments of the pagan world must hear stories of men like Moses, Daniel, Stephen, Polycarp, John Huss, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Hoeksema, George Ophoff, and many others. Dr. Bolt states that the

*Christian school curriculum must provide students with a good measure of biography so that they will learn the story of God and His people, identify with it, and develop the habits and character that are consistent with the mission of God's people in the world (Bolt, p. 194).*

History is an obvious candidate for the narrative approach. Because of the concern of social studies for events, values, places, intentions, individual people, and groups, history comes shaped for a story. The challenge for the Christian teacher is to frame these stories in the content of the story of God and His people.

Bolt suggests that we should extend the narrative approach beyond Bible, literature, and social studies to courses like mathematics and science. Quoting from *Teaching as Story Telling*, by Kieran Egan, Bolt asserts that the narrative model helps a teacher "to use the power of the story form in order to teach any content more engagingly and meaningfully" (Bolt, p. 198).

Bolt argues that the entire spectrum of the school curriculum can be viewed as story. The schoolteacher in every area of the curriculum can be viewed as a storyteller because the narrative approach encourages one to see lessons or units as good stories to be told rather than sets of objectives to be attained!

## ***The Narrative Payoff***

Dr. Bolt concludes his presentation of the narrative method exactly where I should like to conclude, viz., in a discussion of the benefits of the narrative method.

Dr. Bolt states that telling the Christian story and telling it well is an invitation to students to join the mission of God and His people. Bolt writes that stories draw us in by calling us to identify with their characters and drawing us in as participants in the plot. Bolt continues by stating that without indoctrinating and without treating the school as a place for evangelism, a compellingly told account of the Christian story as it is actually practiced in history by real individuals and groups will convict students about the demands of Christian discipleship. A focus on narrative

does not simply pass on information but it models and invites participation in God's mission. The narrative form of God's mission provides the context for reflection and action and also provides the counter-cultural alternative to the influential story told by modern mass media.

The narrative approach passes on the memory of Christian reflection and action and provides a vision for Christian living.

The narrative approach is a fashionable topic in educational circles but it is not merely a passing fad. Storytelling is a way for people to give order and meaning to their experience. It is at the heart of the Christian method of instruction and the Christian faith.

The Christian story is the only foundation, content, and goal of the Christian school.

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