

Telling the Gospel

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Our understanding of the role of the Gospels in the early church has tended to determine our models for the interpretation and proclamation of the gospel now. The conclusion of form criticism that the Gospels were originally a series of short stories corresponds to the more or less exclusive equation of the gospel tradition with a series of short readings from texts. The recognition of the character of storytelling events in oral cultures raises the possibility that the Gospels were long stories told in homes and marketplaces. This possibility opens up a series of ways in which the biblical storytelling tradition might be reappropriated now.

Form Criticism and the Character of the Oral Gospel

The basic methods of form criticism were derived from the folklore research of the nineteenth century. Hermann Gunkel was the first biblical scholar to explore the implications of the research on oral culture for the understanding of the Bible. Gunkel's interests focused on exploring the interaction between particular forms of oral tradition, the functions these forms had in the culture, and the development of these forms through time. Gunkel's interests were broad and form criticism in his hands was a flexible methodology which ranged widely in its exploration of the origins of Old Testament literature.

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In the hands of the young Rudolf Bultmann, form criticism became a weapon to slay the dragon of the quest of the historical Jesus. The exclusive focus of form criticism for Bultmann was to determine the history of the Synoptic tradition (Bultmann). The tracing of the individual stories and sayings to their original form in the oral tradition enabled Bultmann to demonstrate that the early church was involved in the composition of virtually every individual unit of the Gospels. In the context of this realization, it was difficult to argue that there was in the gospel of Mark, for example, an early historical account untainted by the accretions of tradition.

A picture of the gospel tradition accompanied this reconstruction. In Bultmann's picture of the synoptic tradition, each pericope circulated independently as a unit and was then set into a variety of contexts in the later compositions of the Gospels. Any particular unit could then be used in a number of different contexts. The relatively free adaptation of sayings and stories in different contexts was a natural development of oral tradition processes. And this basic conclusion has been validated by subsequent work.

A further conclusion accompanied this reconstruction. Without ever saying it directly, Bultmann and the form and redaction critics who followed him assumed that the character of the gospel in the oral tradition period corresponded to the units of oral transmission. That is, the assumption of both Bultmann and Dibelius was that the gospel in the oral tradition period was a series of short stories and sayings. The picture of the oral tradition was then that the stories circulated as a series of oral tradition units that were almost wholly atomized. The implication is that the stories of the Gospels were a series of speeches that ranged from 15 to 20 seconds to perhaps 15 minutes for the passion narratives.

Based on this assumption, Werner Kelber in his recent book, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, concludes that a long narrative of the gospel did not exist until the composition of the written gospel by Mark (Kelber). In oral tradition literature, there may be

long narratives but they are composed of episodic sequences of stories that simply go around and around without a coherent plot. According to Kelber, only in written narrative does one observe the development of tightly plotted stories. Thus, Mark was the first one to create a plotted story of the Gospel.

The picture that emerges from recent studies of the history of the tradition is that the oral gospel was a series of individual stories while the written gospel was a long, plotted narrative. From the point of view of media criticism then, the conclusion is that the oral gospel consisted of a series of short stories which were followed by long literary compositions. This picture corresponds with the modern use of the Gospels as a series of short oral readings in public worship and with the silent reading and study of the Gospels as long literary compositions.

Storytelling Events in Oral Culture

In the 20th century, major developments have taken place in the study of oral cultures and the processes of oral tradition. As a result of a wide range of field studies, we now have much more comprehensive information about the character of oral tradition. These studies have important implications for our understanding of the character of the gospel in the period of its composition and recital after it was written down.

The Length of Storytelling Events

Storytelling events in oral culture have one consistent characteristic: they are long. In Lord and Parry's groundbreaking studies of the singers of tales in Yugoslavia, they describe the basic pattern of the tales. A tale is a song which can vary in length, from a hundred or so lines to many hundreds of lines. The occasions for the singing vary widely:

Epic poetry in Yugoslavia is sung on a variety of occasions. It forms, at the present time, or until very recently, the chief entertainment of the adult male population in the villages and small towns. In the country villages, where the houses are often widely separated, a gathering may be held at one of the houses during a period of leisure from the work in the fields. Men from all the families assemble and one of their number may sing epic songs. Because of the distances between the houses some of the guests arrive earlier than other, and of course this means that some leave earlier. Some very likely spend the whole night ... The singer has to contend with an audience that is coming and going, greeting newcomers, sayings farewells to early leavers (Lord, 14).

The same pattern prevails in the coffee house or taverns of the small towns. The singing of songs is then the break from work, either during the day or in the evening.

This is reflective of the primary occasion of storytelling in oral culture. Storytelling constitutes the entertainment for the evening. Thus, in a recent class, Martin Freeman, an African who grew up in Ghana, told about his experience as a child. After supper, the family would gather together and the parents would tell stories. The storytelling went on for anywhere from two to four hours, depending on how tired the parents were or whether someone else came to visit who could help with the storytelling.

Storytelling events can be extremely long. I remember Samuel Terrien describing his experience with a Bedouin tribe in Saudi Arabia in the early '50's. According to Terrien, the storytelling would sometimes go late into the night until 2 or 3 AM. Storytelling of this length is also described by Lord:

Among the Moslems in Yugoslavia there is a special festival which has contributed to the fostering of songs of some length. This is the festival of Ramazan, when for a month the men fast from sunrise to sunset and gather in coffee houses all night long to talk and listen to epic. Here is a perfect circumstance for the singing of one song during the entire night (Lord, 15).

This length of storytelling during an entire night would require stories of truly epic length, six to eight or even ten hours. And this is not atypical of storytelling for festivals in oral cultures. Another student of mine, Jonathan Munting, who grew up in a tribe in Borneo, reported that in his tribe, the families would gather in a large room in the long house and tell stories that would often go late into the night and, on special festivals, would continue all night long.¹

Thus, the units of composition and transmission may vary in length and some of the pieces of a narrative may be short, but the occasions for telling the stories are generally long. Indeed, the predominant time frame for the singing or telling of a tale is a long story of at least 30 minutes as a part of a longer period of two to six hours of storytelling. The idea that storytelling events are normally a one or two minute recital of a story reflects a much later period in which the patterns of literacy have been deeply internalized.

Of course, this custom of long storytelling events continues in literate cultures. Campfires and informal evenings of storytelling among friends are frequently times for long stories. If the storytelling goes well, it will last well into the night. The stories may be a series of relatively short and unrelated stories but the storytelling will go on for a long time.

The Character of the Gospel

This information raises the possibility that the Gospels as we presently have them may be both the product of and the resource for storytelling occasions in the life of the early Church. When told by persons without formal recital training, the Gospel of Mark is 2 ½ - 3 hours, John and Matthew 3 ½ - 4, and Luke 5 - 5 ½. Thus, the length of the Gospels corresponds with the length of a variety of storytelling evenings. This in turn raises further questions about the character of the Gospels.

The dominant understanding of the character of the gospel has been shaped by modern assumptions. C. H. Dodd's classic work, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development*, concluded that the early preaching was a series of short kerygmatic statements in the character of a creed. The short stories of the Gospels were then the later illustrations of that early kerygma. This picture corresponds with the modern homiletical pattern of kerygmatic idea and narrative illustration. But this picture is not supported by this oral tradition research. It is difficult to imagine that the reciting of a creedal formula would have had much impact as a proclamation of the gospel for a crowd in the first century.

The possibility is that the gospel tradition began as a series of storytelling occasions in which the disciples of Jesus told the stories of their memories of Jesus' life, teaching, passion, and resurrection. These storytelling events may have taken place in a variety of settings. The stories may have been told in homes, marketplaces, and synagogues in the evenings but also during the afternoon. This storytelling preaching was then later summarized in the kerygmatic formulas which are found, for example, in I Corinthians 15:3-5. The storytelling preaching tradition of the apostles developed alongside the preaching of the Pauline mission. As the stories were written down in order both to record the early testimony and to facilitate

authentic tellings by others, they tended to take the shape and form of these early occasions of witness and proclamation.

Kelber's suggestion that the first long story in the gospel tradition was Mark's writing down of the short story tradition of the oral period is not supported by this evidence. It may be that there is a higher degree of plotted character to the story in the written form than was present in the more episodic character of the earlier stories. But the basic structure of the Jesus story is present from the earliest to the latest forms of the extant narrative tradition. Only the hypothetical "Q" does not have the structure of Galilean ministry, rising conflict, trip to Jerusalem, controversy, plot, death, and resurrection. In light of the oral tradition evidence, the probability is that the storytelling tradition developed with a basic structure that was present from beginning to end.

The possibility is, therefore, that the gospel was written down as a continuation of the telling of the gospel in long storytelling occasions. The weekly series of short readings from the Gospels followed by a sermon interpreting the reading may have also come into practice during this period, but it was a later development for the more literate cultures of the early Christian mission. The energy and power of the gospel tradition was related to the oral forms of the Gospel in this storytelling mode.

The Telling of the Gospel Now

One way of exploring this possibility is to see whether the gospel is meaningful as a long story now. If so, there are significant implications for the proclamation of the gospel now. In the context of contemporary culture, the possibility that the gospel was a long story told in the evenings rather than a series of short Scripture readings in public worship opens a wide range of possibilities for the continuation of the gospel tradition. The basic hypothesis is that the gospel was a series of stories told in relatively long storytelling occasions. These events range from several stories told between friends to a whole Gospel told either within a community or to persons outside an existing community.

There are a variety of explorations of this possibility that have taken place in recent years. The most visible has been the performance of the Gospels in theatre-like contexts. Alec McGowen performed the Gospel as an Elizabethan theater piece, first in London and then on Broadway as well as in various cities. Professor David Rhoads, who has been a part of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, has developed a performance of the gospel that is a dramatization of Mark telling the story. These performances have demonstrated that the Gospel of Mark, when recited as a long narrative, has great power.

In recent years, I have conducted a series of courses and retreats in which the goal was to prepare a recital of a whole Gospel. In the last year, a class on the Gospel of John and two weeklong retreats on Matthew have had this as their basic structure. In each instance, the climax of the event was a communal retelling of the Gospel in which each person in the group told a major part of the story.

There are different values to each of these experiences of the gospel as a long story. In hearing a whole Gospel, people make connections between parts of the stories they had not made before. There is a vitality to the whole story when told that is never experienced in the hearing of individual lessons. In the retreat settings, there are additional values. The recital of the Gospel is not as well formed, but the internalization of the parts of the story that each

person learns creates a different relationship to the Gospel. The participants learn to know Jesus Christ in new ways through the internalization of his story. Thus, there is a profound degree of personal spiritual formation that happens in learning and sharing the stories with others. Furthermore, a deep sense of community is formed through learning and telling the Gospel together.

There are undoubtedly many other ways in which this character of the gospel can be reappropriated in the life and ministry of the Church today. To my knowledge, for example, no one has seriously explored the ways in which the telling of the gospel might be a part of Christian evangelism. But these initial efforts have proven to be extremely fruitful.

The most apparent options are to encourage individuals and communities to learn and tell whole Gospels, first to themselves and then perhaps to others. Within existing Christian communities, the Gospels can be learned and told in a variety of contexts. The basic format is that a community learns the whole or major parts of a Gospel together and then recites it. In retreat settings, a two or three day retreat is an ideal context in which to internalize major parts of the Gospel. In a local church, either individual classes or a study group might undertake a Gospel. Participants of various ages can contribute different sections of the Gospel to the communal telling. Groups can, over the course of a year, learn a Gospel and tell it to each other as well as to others both within and outside the congregation.

This basic character of the gospel as oral tradition also suggests ways in which the Gospel may be shared in radio, television, and film. To develop a telling of a whole gospel for audio and video media will be in direct continuity with this understanding of the gospel tradition.

However, any of these suggestions are only beginnings in our ongoing listening for the ways in which the Word of God is seeking to be made present now. The energy and life of the stories of God will become present in our time. The promise is that a combination of study and faithful experimentation will be an offering that God can use as a medium for communicating with us.

Bibliography

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Endnotes

- 1 For further information about the patterns of oral culture, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*.