

Erzähltes Evangelium – Erzählende Kirche?  
Zur Aufgabe und zum Wesen narrativer Apologetik<sup>1</sup>

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There has been growing interest in apologetics within the Christian churches in the last two decades, catalysed to no small extent by the rise of the New Atheism.<sup>2</sup> Although the appeal of the New Atheism is diminishing, it is clear that the churches need to consider developing apologetic ministries which might prepare individual believers and congregations to meet such challenges and criticisms in the future. This growing interest in apologetics has taken place in parallel with an increased awareness of the importance of narratives in many areas of human culture, including Christian life and thought. In this paper, I shall reflect on the theory and practice of narrative apologetics.

### **I. The Importance of Narratives**

Human beings are creatures who try to understand who we are, what our world is all about, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves within a framework of narratives and metanarratives.<sup>3</sup> For many, Christianity represents a classic example of a Grand Story<sup>4</sup> - a metanarrative, which offers an imaginatively compelling and intellectually satisfying vision

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<sup>2</sup> See Albert J. J. Anglberger and Paul Weingartner, eds, *Neuer Atheismus wissenschaftlich betrachtet*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Günter Frank, Anja Hallacker, and Sebastian Lalla, eds. *Erzählende Vernunft*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2006; Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 87-116.

<sup>4</sup> Willibald Sandler, “Christentum als große Erzählung. Anstöße für eine narrative Theologie.” In *Religion—Literatur—Künste. Ein Dialog*, edited by Peter Tschuggnall, 523-38. Anif: Müller-Speiser 2002.

of a new way of existence, made possible in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> This metanarrative is proclaimed and enacted by the church, understood as an interpretive community which crystallizes around the core story of Jesus Christ. The Christian Bible, as has often been pointed out, consists mainly (but not, I emphasize, *exclusively*) of narratives – stories of individuals who are found by God, who have been transformed by God, and who seek to tell others of God.<sup>6</sup> The story of God is the point of interconnection of all such biblical stories,<sup>7</sup> the eye of the needle through which all narrative threads must pass.

Postmodern thinkers may have misgivings about the ambition of these “grand stories” or metanarratives;<sup>8</sup> they have, however, no problems about narratives themselves, realizing that it is impossible to give an account of our individual lives without using the structure of a story. As cultural anthropologists remind us, there is overwhelming evidence that narratives provide a means of organizing, recalling, and interpreting experience, thus allowing the wisdom of the past to be passed on to the future.<sup>9</sup> This underlies the rise of “narrative explanation” since about 2000, particularly the idea of a “Narrative Connection” which goes beyond the mere *cataloguing* of events, offering an *interpretation* of those events which finds ways of linking them together within a bigger picture.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund Arens, “‘Wer kann die großen Taten des Herrn erzählen?’ (Ps 106,2). Die Erzählstruktur christlichen Glaubens in systematischer Perspektive.” In *Erzählter Glaube – Erzählende Kirche*, edited by Rolf Zerfass, 13-27. Freiburg: Herder, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> See especially the early studies of Harald Weinrich, “Narrative Theologie.” *Concilium* 9 (1973): 329-34; and Jean-Baptiste Metz, “Kleine Apologie des Erzählens”. *Concilium* 9 (1973): 334-42; Hugh O. Jones, “Das Story-Konzept in der Theologie.” In “*Story*” als Rohmaterial der Theologie, edited by Dietrich Ritschl and Hugh O. Jones, 42-68. München: Kaiser Verlag, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Gunda Schneider-Flume, “Die vielen Geschichten der biblischen Tradition und die eine Geschichte Gottes. Zur Frage nach Einheit und Mitte der Schrift.” In *Dogmatik erzählen? Die Bedeutung des Erzählens für eine biblisch orientierte Dogmatik*, edited by Gunda Schneider-Flume and Doris Hiller, 31-50. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005. See also the points about the theological accommodation of different narrative styles: Dietrich Ritschl, “Nachgedanken zum ‘Story’-Konzept. Die Koagulation wiedererzählter ‘Stories’ auf dem Weg zu differierenden theologischen Lehren.” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 61, no. 1 (2005): 78-91.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Jean-François Lyotard, *Das postmoderne Wissen: Ein Bericht*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> See the review of the field in Dan P. McAdams, “Narrative Identity.” In *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* edited by Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles, 99-115. New York: Springer, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Noël Carroll, “On the Narrative Connection.” In *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, edited by Willie van Peer and Seymour B. Chatman, 21-41. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001. More

The importance of biblical narratives for Christian theology and ethics has also increasingly been appreciated, particularly since the 1970s. But what of Christian apologetics? There is growing interest in both “narrative theology” and “narrative ethics;”<sup>11</sup> but what of narrative *apologetics*? This paper focusses on two objectives: laying a theoretical framework for the apologetic use of narratives, and showing how these can be used in the ministry and outreach of the church – for example, in preaching. We begin by considering how the term “apologetics” is to be understood.

## II. Christian Apologetics: Its Nature and Importance

Apologetics is a principled attempt to communicate the vitality of the Christian gospel faithfully and effectively to contemporary culture. Although apologetics is often considered to deal with the questions raised about faith by those outside the community of faith, it is clear that many within that community also have questions that need to be engaged and answered. Apologetics thus addresses both secular and Christian audiences. There are three main aspects of this programme of engagement.<sup>12</sup>

1. *Cultural empathy*. Apologetics recognizes the sensitivities and difficulties that the Christian faith encounters in any specific cultural context. This may take the form of addressing specific objections to Christianity, or potential misunderstandings or historic misrepresentations which may stand in the way of an appreciative reception of the gospel. The best apologists are likely to be those who know a cultural situation very well, and understand its sensitivities, concerns, and anxieties.
2. *Evangelical depth*. Apologetics rests on the deep understanding and appreciation of the Christian gospel, which both generates the motivation to communicate the faith, and informs the way in which this is done. The best apologist is likely to be someone

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generally, see Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung. Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*. Frankfurt a.M: Fischer Verlag, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Karen Joisten, ed., *Narrative Ethik: Das Gute und das Böse erzählen*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011, 13-25.

who is deeply steeped in the Christian faith, and is able to discern how its riches can be faithfully communicated within a specific cultural context.

3. *Effective translation.* Finally, apologetics aims to translate the language of the Christian faith into the cultural vernacular. The Christian faith is traditionally expressed using a wide range of abstract conceptual terms which are becoming increasingly disconnected from contemporary Western culture. Theological terms – such as justification, salvation, and sin – are now likely to be misunderstood, generally by being inappropriately and inadequately assimilated to the nearest cultural equivalent. These terms need to be translated or *transposed* – that is to say, reformulated in terms of narratives or images, capable of connecting with a wider audience.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to appreciate that the Christian church has had to face these three apologetic tasks throughout its history. Every period in Christian history has witnessed the fear that the church was entering the unknown, confronted with difficulties and challenges for which there was no precedent in the past. Yet a close reading of Christian history suggests that the church was generally able to rise to those challenges, and has passed on to their successors resources that are valuable in engaging the contemporary situation.

The best apologetics arises naturally from a deep love of the Christian faith, and a strong sense of its relevance to the world. The best forms of apologetics are steeped in Christian theology, and represent attempts to set out the rich vision of reality that lies at the heart of the Christian faith, and demonstrate its transformative potential for human existence. Christian apologetics is a natural outcome of a “discipleship of the mind”, which many consider to be a vitally important aspect of growth in faith: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Christians are called on to think about their faith, and to respond winsomely and engagingly to those who ask them about the Christian hope (1 Peter 3:15). And often the best responses to those questions take the form of narratives – stories of what happened to people as they encountered Christianity.

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<sup>13</sup> For the importance of this for evangelism, see Martin Reppenhagen, “Evangelistische Verkündigung als Übersetzungs- und Beziehungsgeschehen.” *Theologische Beiträge* 47, no. 6 (2016): 343-54.

So what theoretical justification might be provided for the use of stories in apologetics, or the greater vision of developing a specifically narrative approach to apologetics?

### **III. The Basis of a Narrative Apologetics**

The intellectual foundations of a narrative apologetics was laid down in the first half of the twentieth century by three leading literary figures, all with close connections with Oxford University: C. S. Lewis; Dorothy L. Sayers, and J. R. R. Tolkien. One of the central themes of Lewis's apologetics is that Christianity offers a narrative which is capable of generating a "big picture" of reality, capable of allowing us to make sense of our subjective experiences and our observation of the world. Lewis does not try to prove the existence of God on *a priori* grounds, but rather invites us to appreciate how what we observe in the world around us and experience within us fits the Christian way of seeing things.<sup>14</sup> Lewis often articulates this way of "seeing things" in terms of a "myth" – that is to say, a story about reality which both invites "imaginative embrace" and communicates a conceptual framework, by which other things are to be seen. The imagination embraces the Christian narrative; reason consequently reflects on its contents.

For J. R. R. Tolkien, the human instinct to tell stories of meaning is grounded in a Christian doctrine of creation, and provides theological explanation for our love of narration. Tolkien argues that our capacity to create stories such as the great fantasy epic of the *Lord of the Rings* is the result of being created in the "image of God." "Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."<sup>15</sup>

Tolkien is often described as developing a "theology of sub-creation," in that he holds that human beings create stories which are ultimately patterned on the "Grand Story" of God. We unconsciously tell stories which are patterned along this lines of this great story of creation

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<sup>14</sup> Alister E. McGrath, "An Enhanced Vision of Rationality: C. S. Lewis on the Reasonableness of Christian Faith." *Theology* 116, no. 6 (2013): 410-7.

<sup>15</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*. London: HarperCollins, 2001, 56. For reflections on this theme, see Fabienne Claire Caland, "Le mythe spermatikos." In *Horizons du mythe*, edited by Denise Brassard and Fabienne Claire Caland, 7-32. Montréal: Cahiers du CELAT, 2007.

and redemption, and which reflect our true identity as God's creatures, and our true destiny as lying with that same God. For Tolkien, one of the great strengths of the Christian narrative was its ability to explain why human beings tell stories of meaning in the first place. The Christian gospel enfolded and proclaimed "a story of a larger kind", which embraced what he found to be good, true, and beautiful in the great myths of literature, expressing it as "a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world."<sup>16</sup>

Similar ideas are encountered in the writings of C. S. Lewis. While Lewis's spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, can be read in many ways, one of its most fundamental themes is how Lewis's discovery of the Christian narrative helped him to discern a coherent narrative within his own life. Lewis's realization of the theological importance of narrative arose from a conversation with J. R. R. Tolkien in September 1931 that is now seen as critically important in Lewis's transition from a generalized theism to a specifically Christian way of seeing things.<sup>17</sup> That conversation with Tolkien helped Lewis to realize that myths – in the technical literary sense of the term – were "profound and suggestive of meanings" that lay beyond his grasp, so that he was unable to state in plain language "what it meant." For Lewis, the idea of "demythologization" – as found, for example, in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann<sup>18</sup> – was simply an impossibility. Narrative was not a dispensable container for theological ideas; those ideas were expressed and communicated through irreducible stories, which resisted attempts to reduce them to – and hence replace them with – abstract concepts.

For Lewis, a myth is a story which evokes awe, enchantment, and inspiration, and which conveys or embodies an imaginative expression of the deepest meanings of life. Lewis came to see that the story of Christ was a "true myth" – that is to say, a myth which functions in the same manner as other myths, yet which *really happened*. To Christianity possessed the

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<sup>16</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 71-2.

<sup>17</sup> See Alister E. McGrath, *C. S. Lewis – Die Biografie: Prophetischer Denker, Exzentrisches Genie*. Basel: Brunnen Verlag, 2014, 182-8.

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung." In Rudolf Bultmann, *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen*. München: Lempp, 1985, 27-69.

literary form of a myth, with the critical difference that it was true. The story of Christ is thus to be understood as “God’s myth” where the great pagan narratives are “men’s myths.”<sup>19</sup>

Dorothy L. Sayers developed a similar approach in her *Mind of the Maker*, which expresses her own distinct notion of the “image of God” in humanity as a kind of imaginative template, which predisposes human beings to think and imagine in certain ways.<sup>20</sup> Sayers held that the pattern of human creative processes “correspond to the actual structure of the living universe,” so that the “pattern of the creative mind” is an “eternal Idea” that is rooted in the being of God.<sup>21</sup> Stories thus express something profound about who we are – which in turn expresses something of the God who created us in this manner.

#### **IV. Narratives, Explanation, and Meaning**

So what is the relevance of this for Christian apologetics? In his 1944 essay “Myth Became Fact,” Lewis stressed that God *authorizes* the use of myth as a means of captivating the human imagination and engaging the human reason. Since “God chooses to be mythopoeic,” then we in our turn must be “mythopathic” – that is to say, receptive to God’s myth, recognizing and acknowledging its “mythical radiance”, and offering it an “imaginative welcome.”<sup>22</sup> And, since God uses myths as a means of communicating both truth and meaning, why should not we do the same? Why not tell stories – above all, stories grounded in the Christian metanarrative – as a way of creating imaginative and hence cognitive receptivity towards the Christianity and the great truths that it enfolds and conveys? The Christian narrative has the potential both to disclose the intelligibility of our world, and to establish patterns of meaning in life. In what follows, we shall consider the apologetic importance of the notions of “intelligibility” and “meaning.”

*Intelligibility* is best understood in terms of identifying patterns of connection between events. In the philosophy of science, this is especially linked with the concept of “epistemic explanation,” understood as making phenomena understandable, predictable, or intelligible

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<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October, 1931; in *Collected Letters*. 3 vols. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004-6, vol. 1, 977.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*. London: Methuen, 1941, 15-24.

<sup>21</sup> Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 172-3.

<sup>22</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Essay Collection*. London: HarperCollins, 2002, 142.

by setting them in an informing context.<sup>23</sup> This approach is probably best seen in “unificationist” models of scientific explanation, which hold that to understand our observations and experience is to see how they fit into a bigger picture, allowing us to see the fundamental unity and coherence that lies behind the apparent disconnection of the phenomena themselves.<sup>24</sup>

*Meaning* concerns basic existential questions about our identity, purpose, and values. Science may help us with explanation; it has little to say about meaning. To speak of meaning in life is an act of rebellion against a shallow rationalism which limits reality to the realm of empirical facts. It is to reach behind and beyond our experience of this world, to grasp and explore a realm of ideas which position human beings within a greater scheme of things, and to allow us to see ourselves and our inhabitation of this world in a new way. The general term “meaning” is often used to describe the ways in which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, or perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life.<sup>25</sup>

Psychologists have stressed both the importance of finding meaning in life for human wellbeing, as well as the role played by religious faith in providing a comprehensive and integrated framework of meaning that helps individuals to transcend their own concerns or experience and connect up with something greater.<sup>26</sup> More recently, philosophers have begun to explore how narratives help us discern or construct meaning,<sup>27</sup> opening up important apologetic possibilities. The Christian narrative allows individuals and communities to make sense of their own stories, and see them as part of something greater. It is best seen as an epistemic device, which explains events by imposing an explanatory framework on what

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<sup>23</sup> Wesley C. Salmon, *Causality and Explanation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 320-9.

<sup>24</sup> See Anya Plutynski, “Explanatory Unification and the Early Synthesis.” *British Journal for Philosophy of Science* 56 (2005): 595-609; Rebecca Schweder, “A Defense of a Unificationist Theory of Explanation.” *Foundations of Science* 10 (2005): 421-35.

<sup>25</sup> Michael F. Steger, “Meaning in Life.” In *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, edited by Shane J. Lopez, 679-87. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality*. New York: Guilford Press, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Joshua Seachris, “The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New Proposal for Interpreting Philosophy’s ‘Primary’ Question.” *Philo* 12, no. 1 (2009): 5-23.



might otherwise seem to be an accumulation of disconnected events or experiences, thus laying the foundations for a “big picture” of reality.

## V. The Application of Narrative Apologetics: The “Love of God”

The imaginative power of narrative apologetics can be explored in many ways. Limits on space mean we can reflect on only one example – the way in which narratives are able to render the character of the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3) in ways that capture the human imagination more effectively than the mere enunciation of Christian ideas. A single case study, of obvious relevance to preaching and apologetics, will help open up the points at issue – the question of how we speak of the “love of God” to seekers and outsiders. The fundamental theological issue is how human language can be used to communicate the nature of God. Consider the following New Testament text:

God is love (*agapē*). God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:8-10).

This familiar passage makes two distinct types of statement about the love of God. The first is framed almost as a timeless ahistorical truth: “God is love.” Yet there is an apologetic issue here, which concerns the manner of *presentation* of this theme, not its veracity nor its fundamental theological role. The love of God is presented and explored in a theoretical and abstract manner, which appeals primarily to the mind, while failing to engage the imagination. We are assured that “God is love,” but are left unsure what this word “love” means, and how it is shown. The affirmation of a timeless theological principle will doubtless help some to think about divine love; others, however, will simply not grasp what it is all about.

So we turn to the second of those theological statements: “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” It is impossible to miss the dramatic change in imagery and genre which takes place here. Metaphysics is replaced by a *narrative*. We are told what God *did* to demonstrate both the nature and constancy of the divine love. This terse statement calls to mind the gospel accounts of the passion of Christ, which both highlight the reality of that suffering, and the reasons for Christ’s willingness to bear it – his obedience to God, and his love for us. It invites us to turn over in our minds and savour elements of that

narrative, seeing in our mind's eye the shocking scene of Christ's crucifixion. The Passion narratives draw us into that appalling scene, emphasizing the costliness of our redemption.

So what is the love of God like? The most effective apologetic response is likely to take the form of a narrative – the telling of the story of someone who lays down his life so that those who he loves might live (cf. John 15:13). Apologetics thus does not appeal primarily to an abstract timeless truth, but rather retells the story of the passion of Christ, inviting the audience to enter into that narrative, and try to understand both what is going on, and how it relates to them. The passion narrative has its own distinct integrity and deep appeal, which the apologist is called on to reflect and exhibit. This narrative can be judiciously supplemented by artistic images of the crucifixion, which help many to focus on the event of Christ's death,<sup>28</sup> allowing the apologist to begin to interweave the New Testament narratives about Christ with its theological interpretation of his meaning for humanity.

## **VI. An Apologetic Strategy: Christianity tells a better Story**

Finally, we reflect briefly on an apologetic strategy that is a natural outcome of a narrative apologetics: aiming to demonstrate and exhibit the deeper appeal and capaciousness of the Christian story when compared with its secular alternatives. This approach already has a significant history of use. In his 1941 sermon "The Weight of Glory," C. S. Lewis considered how the cultural dominance of a materialist metanarrative might be broken. This metanarrative makes the idea that earth is not merely our home, but that there is no transcendent dimension to life, seem *normal*. So how can its spell be broken?

Lewis's answer remains significant: *to break a spell, you have to weave a better spell*. "Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness that has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years."<sup>29</sup> To break the spell of one narrative, a better narrative needs to be told, capable of capturing the imagination and opening the mind to alternative possibilities.

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the points made in Mitzi Kirkland-Ives, *In the Footsteps of Christ: Hans Memling's Passion Narratives and the Devotional Imagination in the Early Modern Netherlands*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *Essay Collection*, 99.

This approach thus sets out to exhibit the rational, moral, and imaginative vision of the Christian faith. Although a narrative appeals primarily to the imagination, it also allows and encourages connections with human reason and experience. There is a sense in which a sensitive presentation of the fundamentals of Christian theology can serve an important apologetic role. Although some argue that the best apologetics is a good systematic theology, this overstatement requires careful nuancing. There is, after all, a significant difference between teaching theology to the committed, and explaining and commending the spiritual and intellectual vision which is articulated by theology to outsiders and seekers.

During his period as an atheist, Lewis found himself reflecting on the capacity of various worldviews to do justice to the complexity of reality. Modernist writers such as George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and H. G. Wells (1866-1946) seemed to Lewis to be superficial and unsatisfying. The “roughness and density of life” was not adequately represented in their works.<sup>30</sup> Yet the Christian poet George Herbert (1593-1633) seemed to Lewis to succeed in “conveying the very quality of life as we actually live it,” on account of “mediating” reality through what Lewis then termed “the Christian mythology.”<sup>31</sup>

This surprising discovery made Lewis increasingly receptive to considering Christianity as a “big picture” of reality. While it did not lead directly to his conversion, it appears to have made him receptive to this way of seeing things. For Lewis, the “better” story was more capable of “conveying the very quality of life as we actually live it” – and is thus more likely to be taken seriously by a contemporary audience.

Lewis’s approach thus rests on showing that the Christian narrative can engage and transform human existence. It does not primarily take the form of an argument, but is rather the unfolding of a narrated vision of reality, which makes sense of what is expected, offers the possibility of renewal and transformation, and lays the foundations for appropriating what is true, good, and beautiful. The Christian story affirms the intelligibility of our world and creates a framework of meaning within which we can live, move, and have our being.

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<sup>30</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*. London: HarperCollins, 2002, 249.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 249.

## **VII. Implications for Preaching**

So what are the implications of this approach for preaching? How might narrative apologetics relate to the proclamation and outreach of the church? I have already hinted at several potential applications in this article. I shall now set out more clearly how this approach might inform and enrich preaching.

First, we must appreciate and make the best use of the appeal of narratives to the human imagination. C. S. Lewis's apologetic approach is to tell a story which captures the imagination of his readers, and thus makes them receptive to the ideas that this story unfolds and expresses. We have already noted how the potentially abstract notion of the "love of God" can be given a compelling imaginative dimension by linking it with the narrative of the crucifixion. There will always be an important place for rational argument in preaching. However, it remains important to also capture the imagination of our audiences. As Pascal pointed out, we must aim to make our audience wish that Christianity were true, and then subsequently provide reasons for believing this is the case.

Second, it is not enough for a preacher to set out the Christian narrative; it is important to demonstrate that this narrative has the capacity to illuminate our understanding of ourselves and the world, and to transform and re-orientate our lives. Perhaps the best way of doing this is through narratives of conversion or discipleship, which tell the story of how individuals found the Christian faith to be true and life-changing. Personal narratives of faith are a testimony to the capacity of the Christian gospel to change people, becoming an important part of their lives, so that an objective truth becomes a subjective reality without losing its objective character. A narrative is something that we are invited to enter, thus becoming part of it – not something that we view from the outside.

These narratives might take the form of the discovery of the Christian faith, or the experience of the capacity of this faith to inspire, console or sustain in times of struggle and despair. While audiences will find these stories interesting, the most important point is that these stories illustrate and confirm the ability of the Christian faith to become part of someone's life, offering them hope and meaning in difficult situations. A personal narrative has an inner authenticity and rhetorical power that far exceeds that of a logical argument, even though they can both be linked together in a creative and persuasive whole.

And third, it is important to appreciate that Christians live in a world in which multiple narratives compete for loyalty and attention. These alternative narratives include those described by the American sociologist Christian Smith as the “Capitalist Prosperity narrative,” the “Progressive Socialism narrative,” the “Scientific Enlightenment narrative”, and the “Chance and Purposeless Narrative.”<sup>32</sup> As C. S. Lewis points out, the best apologetic approach can often be to tell a better story – a story that makes more sense of our world and the human situation, and which offers a solution to the human problem, rather than merely identifying it. Our task in preaching is to explore the weaknesses of these rival narratives, and show how there is an alternative, capable of making more sense of life, and offering a more powerful vision of meaning and significance.

### **VIII. Fazit**

This brief study has argued the case for developing a narrative apologetics. The apologetic appeal of stories is itself rooted in the Christian “big picture” of reality, and is not an opportunistic tactic based simply on the pragmatic observation that stories connect well with contemporary culture. Although this study has focussed on literary writers with theological and apologetic interests, such as C. S. Lewis, it is clear that there are many other authors and approaches who can help both theologians and preachers to capture the imaginative appeal and rational depth of the Christian faith. This article can only act as a stimulus to further discovery and exploration!

Summary: This article sets out the case for a narrative apologetics, understood not simply as an approach to theology which opportunistically uses stories, but one which is grounded in the fundamentally narrative nature of the Christian faith. The essay draws especially on C. S. Lewis in both making the case for the use of narratives in Christian apologetics, and also considering some ways in which a narrative apologetics might be developed further. In particular, it highlights the importance of showing that a Christian narrative has an imaginative and rational appeal that exceeds that of its secular alternatives.

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<sup>32</sup> Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 85-7.

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