LEARN TO LOVE NARRATIVE

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Thoughts on narrative, propositional logic and why Paul is so popular!
Category: Observations

Yesterday, I posted a video from the Bible project which introduced the book of Job (it is very good). Job sets out to answer complex questions about the nature of suffering and how, if God really is just, suffering can exist in the world. The strange thing is that these questions are never really enumerated as such, nor are they answered in a way that can be easily summed up in a few words or bullet points. What Job gives us is an extended narrative, a story, which explores the questions and which leads us to the answers. If truth be told, most Christians in the West find this sort of literature hard going. We like our ideas to be expressed in terms of logical arguments, propositional statements or bullet points telling us the five essential things we need to know about suffering. This is the way that our background, history and educational system have trained us to deal with information. It's part of who we are.

However, a large proportion of people around the world (perhaps the majority) actually prefer to process information in story form. Stories, parables and proverbs are used to convey truth and deep ideas rather than the sort of reasoned ideas which seem normal to us. Not only that, but the majority of the Bible is narrative, too. Almost the whole of the Old Testament and a good proportion of the New consists of history and stories which reveal the nature of God and his interaction with humanity. Only a relatively small proportion of the Bible is given over to logical argument and propositional statements - the majority of which occurs in Paul's Epistles.

At this point, I can imagine someone piping up and saying that Paul's Epistles don't take up a lot of space in our Bibles, but they are the most important part because they explain to us what Christianity is all about. Yes, Paul's Epistles are incredibly important, but I wonder whether the prominence that they are given within the Western Evangelical world is as much to do with the fact that they present information in the way that we prefer as it is to do with their content? I realise that this might sound somewhat heretical, but please understand, I am not questioning the importance of Paul's letters within the biblical canon. They are incredibly important. What I am questioning is the relative importance that is accorded to Paul's letters compared to, say, the Gospels, by some in the Evangelical world. We find narrative difficult to deal with, but we like propositional arguments, so we gravitate towards Paul and away from the Gospels (and Acts, much of the Old Testament ...).

I realise that this is supposition. It would take some serious research to get to grips with the reasons for the prominence of the Pauline Epistles in evangelicalism and I'm not in a position to do that research. However, I am absolutelyÂ convinced that we need to give more prominence to the Gospels and to Jesus' teaching within the Evangelical world. However, to do this we will have to grow in our appreciation and understanding of the narrative genre. This can be a real challenge to preachers and Bible teachers who have grown up in the Western intellectual tradition. The temptation to take one of Jesus wonderful, many-layered, stories and to turn it into three logical (alliterated) points can be almost overwhelming. However, God gave us a Bible which is mainly narrative for a reason and we need to learn to appreciate it for what it is rather than trying to turn it into what we would like it to be.

One last thought. While I think we need to learn to appreciate Scriptural narrative for what it is, there is a clear place for presenting the Gospel in a reasoned, propositional fashion when addressing people for whom this is the normal way of processing information. However, I would also suggest that the general direction of our society is moving towards a more narrative-based mode for processing and that those of us who are responsible for presenting the Christian message need to be aware of this.