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# Matters of the Heart: Orality, Story and Cultural Transformation — The Critical Role of Storytelling in Affecting Worldview

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*Cultures are dynamic and are always in flux. What happens, however, when cultural changes are not good — when there is evidence of an eroding values system? Can a particular culture's worldview intentionally and substantially change? It is unarguable that one's worldview, culture, and values are entrenched and that to influence the alteration of these is difficult. However, affecting one's worldview, culture, and values to the point of change is not impossible. There are certain catalysts affecting cultural change that can be harnessed for the propagation of the gospel, with special attention given to the role of oral tradition and the impact it has on cultural transformation. What this article proposes is that worldviews, cultures, and values can indeed be changed, resulting in not only the transformation of an individual's life, but an entire culture as well. Storytelling in particular is a catalyst that can bring about substantial changes in worldview, culture, and values.*

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## Introduction

Intentional and catalytic cultural transformation — what a bold, daring, and perhaps audacious vision! Some sociologists and cultural anthropologists would react in horror at such a thought, especially when considering cultural transformation from the perspective of an exogenous or outside influence. What they would envision, perhaps, is something like the colonization of Africa or India, where Western-oriented ideals are transplanted within indigenous cultures and grow, spread, and ultimately consume what they touch. Unfortunately this has happened over the centuries, even within the “Christianization” of various peoples and nations, along with sincere and extensive intercultural missionary efforts. This is not cultural transformation in its truest form,

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however, since it usually takes place without change-of-heart “metamorphosis” among the affected peoples

To be addressed here is not the transitioning of a local culture to one of a Western perspective. What is to be considered is the idea of biblical worldview impacting the hearts and worldviews of individuals, one at a time, leading to changed lives and ultimately to a changed or transformed culture.

Cultures are dynamic and are always in flux. They might be equated with languages, in that a static, unchanging language becomes a classical language, no longer living but only studied within the halls of academia. Language is dynamic, it changes over time or else it dies. That is why there are differing versions of Portuguese in Portugal, Brazil, and the Portuguese-speaking nations of Africa. Likewise, the English of Britain differs considerably from the English of Australia or America. Just as languages change, over time, cultures change, they are not static.

So, is the idea of intentionally affecting cultural transformation an unattainable dream? Can, in fact, worldviews change substantially, and, if so, how? As this paper will show, what cultural anthropologists say about the entrenchment of one’s worldview, culture, and values is unarguable. To influence the alteration or changing of these is extremely difficult. What can be questioned, however, is the idea that affecting someone’s worldview, culture, and values to the point of change is next to impossible.

Life transformation takes place at the heart level. To change the heart is to change worldview. To change worldview is to change culture. What this article proposes is that worldviews, cultures, and values can indeed be changed, resulting in not only the transformation of an individual’s life, but an entire culture as well. As such, there are certain catalysts affecting cultural change that can be harnessed for the propagation of the gospel. Careful attention must be given to the role of oral tradition and the impact it has on cultural transformation, since it holds the key to catalyze worldview and cultural transformation effectively.

### **Worldview, Culture and Values in the World of Oral Tradition**

Christian mystic Sundar Singh (1889–1929) gives the following account:

*I will never forget the night I was driven out of my home. I slept outdoors under a tree, and the weather was cold. I had never experienced such a thing. I thought to myself: “Yesterday I lived in comfort. Now I am shivering, and I am hungry and thirsty. Yesterday I had everything I needed and more, today I have no shelter, no warm clothes, no food.” Outwardly the night was difficult, but I possessed a wonderful joy and peace in my heart. I was following in the footsteps of my new master — of Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head, but was despised and rejected. In the luxuries and comforts of home I had found no peace. But the presence of the Master changed my suffering into peace, and this peace has never left me. (Comer 32)*

Singh provides a strong argument that worldviews can change, that inner joy and peace are independent of outward circumstances, and, in a way, that worldview issues are matters of the heart.

As part of my work in cultural studies, I recently interviewed a small group of rebel soldiers in the Congo who had become Christians. The fighting there has been going on for over a decade, resulting in over 5.4 million deaths, and many of the soldiers

have committed horrible atrocities. One said, “I murdered people, raped women, and I enjoyed it.” Several others shared the same story. Finally one said, “We were only doing what we thought rebels did.” It was through hearing stories from God’s Word by pastors brave enough to enter the rebel camps that caused a difference in the lives of those sitting before me. “I committed so many sins and I feel very guilty,” one of the rebels shared. “Now I know I can be forgiven because of Jesus.” Over 500 rebels have become believers during the past year, experiencing a transformation of the heart that is affecting their culture and community. Their worldview changed.

What is worldview, and how does it affect culture and values? To put it succinctly, “Worldview study concerns the basic underlying assumptions, whether on tacit or overt levels, that people hold about reality” (McKinney 197). Charles Kraft, prominent cultural anthropologist and missiologist, further explains that a people’s worldview provides them with a “lens, model or map” through which reality is perceived and interpreted (Kraft 2002: 16). “Our worldview not only guides us in the commitments we make but we are committed to our worldview as well,” he says (18).

*A people’s worldview includes the most basic assumptions, values and allegiances of that people. This deep level of culture affects and underlies all surface level behavior. [T]o discover why people behave in the ways they do, we must look beneath the surface to the things people believe and assume. These deep-level assumptions—values and allegiance—are largely unconscious, having been learned from childhood as if they were the only possible assumptions. They are, therefore, assumed without proof. (1:10–11)*

Kraft goes on to say that all human interpretation is based on worldview assumptions. “Whenever we observe something, whether it is something merely standing there or something happening to us or to someone else, we automatically assign meaning and value to it” (1:11).

*People ordinarily follow their worldview habitually and unconsciously. The worldview assumptions underlying our behavior are mostly quite unconscious to us, though we may become aware of certain of them. We are taught these assumptions—values and commitments before we knew anything about alternate possibilities with which they could be compared. This is meant that we accepted or, rather, imbibed what we were taught as absolute, the only right way. Such unconscious acceptance as the only right way, then, led to the development of habits of assuming, thinking, feeling and behaving that felt natural to us. And this naturalness was also without competition. This is, we did not select between one habit and another. There was only one choice with regard to any given issue, so the habits got developed under the best possible circumstances for habit development and they became very strong. (1:12)*

Kraft is adamant that in order to understand a people, one must understand their worldview. He explains, “Though we can learn a lot about a people by observing their surface-level behavior, we will never know them deeply until we learn the deep-level assumptions and motivations behind their behavior” (1:12).

In his book *Scripture and Strategy*, missiologist David Hesselgrave asks the question, “How are worldviews formed in the first place?” He then answers “by the telling of a story (and stories within a story) and drawing inferences from it. That’s

why all peoples have their story (myth, legend, history — in one sense it makes little difference) and draw upon it to sustain their values” (Hesselgrave 50)

In gaining a basic understanding of worldview, one can see how intricately woven the concept is with that of culture Marvin Mayers, author of *Christianity Confronts Culture*, simply defines culture as “everything that is part of one’s everyday life experience” (Mayers xi), and Kraft cites culture as “the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance” (Kraft 1981 46) Furthermore, Kraft concurs with anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn

*Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts, the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (46)*

With worldview and culture, one mirrors the other At the same time, it becomes nearly impossible to separate one’s values from his or her worldview “Values and worldview are very closely related,” McKinney says “For example, values can be viewed either as part of worldview or as emerging from a worldview Which way you choose to view them depends upon your theoretical perspective” She adds that worldview, values, emotions, and behavior overlap, operating both dependently and interdependently (McKinney 215–216)

*Values are accepted or normative ideals of behavior They involve judgment—bases of evaluation of behavior and actions Values within various groups are part of their ethical systems that define what is perceived as right, moral, and good within society versus what is disapproved of immoral and viewed as wrong Values distinguish between duty and happiness They are the basis of many of our decisions Values are a cultural universal in that they point out how people should and should not behave Every culture has a system of values They are the core of a moral order within a culture They provide the ideals towards which people strive (215)*

One day while I was in the Buddhist nation of Bhutan, I found myself telling stories to a group of about 80 people The theme of the stories was the suffering women of the Bible When I finished telling the stories, the response was really quite disappointing, because there was no response, just blank stares “Well, that went over like a lead balloon,” I thought to myself Later that day a woman came up to me She was a pastor’s wife As we sat down over a cup of tea, she said, “I know you were puzzled by the way the women responded to your stories today I want you to know, though, that it’s not that they didn’t respond, it’s that they didn’t know how to respond” She went on to say that the stories spoke to the women at a very deep level, and because of their culture, they all intimately identified with them Then she said, “You told my story today,” and she began to weep “My husband doesn’t love me,” she said “Oh, he provides for me, but he doesn’t love me I cook for him, I clean his house, I give him his children, but he doesn’t love me I know he doesn’t love me There’s one thing I

do know, though, and that is God loves me, and that gets me through” She continued crying

“Every social group, subculture, or community has its own pattern of values,” Mayers explains “In part, these are derived from the sum of all the values of the members of the community In part, they are in addition to any and all individually held values These values make a community unique They are what causes [sic] a community to grow and maintain interest in life” (Mayers 155)

*Values are whatever a group or individual within a group considers of importance Values refer objectively to the worth of an object, thing, action, beliefs, etc , or subjectively to the perceived worth of the same In each automatic or consciously made decision, some value underlies the choice of one thing over against another Since the socialization process is designed to make as much action as possible automatic in response, it thus is responsible for developing or underscoring values The entire life of an individual can be plotted simply by indicating the choices by which the individual lives These choices reflect values that underlie the social groupings of which an individual is part within society The values cause an individual or a group to select out from the total range of activity and identify those specific aspects that the individual and group chooses to make a part of the everyday life experience (154–155)*

Like Hesselgrave, McKinney makes a strong connection between the transmission of values and that of oral tradition “The transmission of values occurs through various means such as advice given by elders, including parents to children, customs, taboos, gossip, songs, education, the media, and oral traditions,” she writes “Outside researchers can derive values through studying what is transmitted from one generation to the next” (McKinney 222)

McKinney defines oral traditions as recollections of the past that are commonly known in a given culture She explains, “ you can view oral traditions as verbal folk art in a culture ” These would include folktales, proverbs, riddles, praise songs or exclamations, heritage tales, legends, poetry, myths, music, and performances “The term oral tradition applies both to the process and its product,” McKinney writes “Definitions of culture from the cognitive perspective relate directly to the collection of oral traditions you must study oral traditions, among other things, in order to obtain the knowledge that people have within their memories” (229–230)

Kraft concurs “One of the most productive ways of getting at worldview is to collect and study what I call here ‘oral and written literature ’ ” He explains, “These are the myths, folktales, proverbs, song lyrics, poems, riddles, novels and the like Such materials are produced by the people themselves as expressions of concepts they value” (Kraft 2002 13 6)

Stressing the importance of collecting and studying a people’s folklore, Kraft points out seven ways in which oral and written literature function to reinforce worldview assumptions Such literature

- 1 provides a basis of common origins and identity
- 2 answers questions about human destiny and what may help or alter it
- 3 reinforces basic assumptions of authority, respect, and rights to land or other material possessions

- 4 clearly pictures who are to be included and who are to be excluded, who are the “we” and who are the “they”
- 5 teaches and reinforces moral values
- 6 serves to illustrate ideal and sub ideal behavior and the rewards and punishments that go along with either
- 7 serves as encouragement in times of difficulty and uncertainty (13 7–8)

Dorji Penjore of the Centre for Bhutan Studies emphasizes the impact folklore can have on the formation and transmission of values. A cultural researcher and specialist in the area of oral traditions, he proposes that

*Distilled folk wisdoms like proverbs for example validate values and beliefs, which are reinforced practically in adult life. Folktales make children imagine and create their own mental pictures, and this mental exercise leaves deepest impression on them, imprinting folktales' rightful place in their imagination. Folk wit and wisdom are not taught through formal arrangement, but through direct observation in earlier stage and direct participation in events themselves. To children, entertainment is the end, and values inculcation comes as a by-product. Scolding parents distill folktales into proverbs and use them to guide children's behaviours, thoughts and actions.*

*Listening to folktales momentarily transports the audience, mostly children, to a different world, later reflection connects the folktale world to the real world that they would soon face as adults. It is when they first understand and link these two worlds that values so imparted are used in their interactions with man, animals, physical world and spirits. These wisdoms are not ordinary one, they have been time-tested through many years of interaction or experience with the real world. The morals of tales are packaged into proverbs. “A confederation of frogs can kill even a tiger” for example is a distillation of the folktale, “Come on Acho Tag! Jump!” Stories express moral or practical wisdom and provide an insight into the adult world. It is common for village elders to quote from some well-known folktales. “like in the tales, you will end up with nothing,” or, “don't behave like a tiger in the tale.” Child is exposed to knowledge, experiences, morals, customs, rituals and belief that they are supposed to live through as adults through tales. (Penjore 54)*

Tom Steffen, author of *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry*, also makes a strong connection among worldview, culture, and oral tradition. He writes.

*Worldview, the linguistic-cultural assumptions and presuppositions that distinguish one people group from another and form subcultures within, finds its foundational meaning in myths and stories. Myths and stories convey their message through historical or fictional characters and beings, sometimes rationally, sometimes in contradictory ways. They are communicated orally, in written prose or on the screen. Those not found in print or picture change in time as legitimate and illegitimate contextualization takes place. Nevertheless, these two powerful genres form, warn, heal, and transform every worldview, whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaism, scientific, or Christian. To survive, any worldview requires the recitation of myths and stories. (Steffen 31–32)*

Steffen concludes that myth and story not only form worldview, but transform it as well. He is not alone.

### “If this is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?”

Edward Chamberlin, Canadian Professor of English and Comparative Literature, shares the following story, an incident from which he derived the title of his book on stories and national/cultural identification

*It happened at a meeting between a [Native American] Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn't understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question: 'If this is your land,' he asked, 'where are your stories?' He spoke in English but then moved into Gutsan, the Tsimshian language of his people — and told a story. All of a sudden everyone understood — even though the government foresters didn't know a word of Gutsan, and neither did some of his Gutsan companions. But what they understood was more important: how stories give meaning and value to the places we call home, how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words, how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart. (Chamberlin 1)*

“If this is your land, where are your stories?” This question carries with it the impact of a doubled-edged blade: not only do the stories of a people define who they are and the space they possess, but the stories of a people are also the tools used to possess that space.

This is no more evident than in India today. The immense popularity of the Hindu epics *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Bhagavad Gita*, and others, performed in drama, song, and dance, and recounted as both oral and written narratives, helps to entrench Hinduism among the peoples of that country. William Graham, author of *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, explains

*It is in scripture that the primordial wisdom heard and taught by generations of prophets or spiritual leaders is preserved, and in the ongoing tradition of oral teaching, be it of the Buddha-word (buddhavacana) or of the Vedic mantras, scripture comes alive only as the sacred word of truth is spoken, and only spoken, by teacher to pupil. Here especially the role of scripture as oral word takes on central significance within the larger tradition.*

*Moreover, in the subsequent Hindu tradition, for all of its massive internal diversity of sects and schools, the oral word has remained the only fully acceptable and authoritative form for sacred texts for over two, possibly over two and a half, millennia after the implementation of writing. In the Indian context, it is not the inability to write that has resulted in the supremacy of the oral form of religious texts, but the conscious choice of oral transmission as the only appropriate vehicle for holy utterance. (68)*

Graham goes on to say that the oral nature of Hindu sacred scripture can be seen in every aspect and at every level of life in India, centered on the preservation, teachings, and transmission of its narrative content. “Recitation of sacred texts forms the indispensable core on Hindu ritual life,” he says. “This is evident to anyone who has spent any length of time in a Hindu environment.” It is interesting that Graham emphasizes that “writing is a secondary function [in India] and has no standing reference in the religious tradition whose hermeneutical task lies rather in reconstructing the relationship between text and speaking” (69).

One should note that in addition to Hinduism, Christianity has a long, rich, and legitimate heritage in India, as well. The question should be asked, therefore, "Where are its stories?" In a land where oral tradition is core to the very nature of being Indian and/or Hindu, the voices and stories of the faithful in Christ cannot, must not, be silent.

In McKinney's estimation, "The collection and study of oral traditions are crucial for understanding essentially oral societies, and they serve as the bases of the literature of literate societies. Events in both oral and literate societies are the bases for the continued development of oral traditions" (McKinney 230).

It is not until the role of story in worldview and culture is firmly grasped that one can fully comprehend the necessity of story in worldview change and life and cultural transformation.

"We live in a world impoverished of story," states Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*. "[W]e need story and storytellers" (Peterson 1999: 8). "But why story and storytelling?" asks Thomas Boomershine in his book *Story Journey: An Invitation to Gospel as Storytelling*. "Story is a primary language of experience. Telling and listening to a story has the same structure as our experience," he explains. "The episodes of our lives take place one after another just like a story. One of the ways we know each other is by telling our stories. We live in stories" (Boomershine 18).

*Storytelling creates community. Persons who tell each other stories become friends. And men and women who know the same stories deeply are bound together in special ways. Furthermore, good stories get retold and from an ever-expanding storytelling network. There is something about a good story that virtually demands retelling. New connections are established between persons who have heard and identified with the same stories. And the deeper meaning of the story, the deeper are the relationships that are formed by the sharing.* (18–19)

"The telling of tales in oral cultures is so crucial because . . . continuity of culture cannot rely on anything other than memory and internalizing the habits and mores of tradition through rote and mimicry," writes Andrew Walker. "If the tradition is not accepted as authoritative through faithful copying or reconstruction, the culture will die" (23).

### **The Transformation Process: "The Lion is God"**

Vincent Donovan, missiologist and author of the classic book *Christianity Rediscovered*, tells the following story:

*I used to think that faith was a head trip, a kind of intellectual assent to the truths and doctrines of our religion. I know better. When my faith began to be shattered, I did not hurt in my head. I hurt all over.*

*Months later when all this passed, I was sitting talking to a Masai [sic] elder about the agony of belief and unbelief. He used two languages to respond to me—his own and Kiswahili. He pointed out that the word my Masai [sic] catechist, Paul, and I used to convey faith was not a very satisfactory word in their language. It meant literally "to agree to." I myself, knew the word had that shortcoming. He said to believe like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and fingers took part in the act. We should find another word. He said for a man really to believe is like a lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears*

*pick up the prey His legs give him the speed to catch it All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills And as the animal goes down the lion envelopes it in his arms (Africans refer to the front legs of an animal as its arms) pulls it into himself, and makes it part of himself This is the way a lion kills This is the way a man believes This is what faith is*

*I looked at the elder in silence and amazement Faith understood like that would explain why, when my own was gone, I ached in every fiber of my being But my wise old teacher was not finished yet*

*We did not search for you, Padri [sic],’ he said to me We did not even want you to come to us You searched us out You followed us away from your house into the bush, into the plains, into the steppes where our cattle are, into the hills where we take our cattle for water, into our villages into our homes You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, leave our land and our people to find him But we have not done this We have not left our land We have not searched for him He has searched for us He has searched us out and found us All the time we think we are the lion In the end, the lion is God ” (Donovan 48)*

The lion is God What a vivid picture of the way life transformation takes place! It is not in intellectual assent, nor is it in an intentional change of behavior Though one may be actively seeking God, actual transformation takes place when God grabs hold of the very foundational issues of one’s life and doesn’t let go This happens at the heart level and involves a change in worldview

Once while in Afghanistan I was telling the story of David and Bathsheba to a large group of people After finishing the story, a woman wearing the traditional clothing of a Muslim asked if she could speak “David is a prophet,” she said “Yes, I know this is what you believe,” I responded “Prophets don’t sin,” she said, “and David is a prophet ” I asked, “What does the story say?” She said, “Prophets don’t sin ” The next day the group was back to hear more stories Before I began, the same woman from the day before asked if she could speak “Oh no,” I thought to myself, “here we go again,” but I agreed for her to say something “David is a prophet ” she said “Here it comes,” I thought, then the woman continued, “and David sinned ” “Yes, I agreed, David sinned!” Then she said, “and God forgave him ” “Yes,” I said, “God forgave him ”

“The heart does not respond to principles and programs, it seeks not efficiency, but passion,” write authors Brent Curtis and John Eldredge in their book *The Sacred Romance* “Art, poetry, beauty, mystery, ecstasy These are what rouse the heart Indeed, they are the language that must be spoken if one wishes to communicate with the heart It is why Jesus so often taught and related to people by telling stories and asking questions His desire was not just to engage their intellects but to capture their hearts” (Curtis and Eldredge 6) “We have lived for so long in a ‘propositional’ approach to Christianity we have nearly lost its true meaning,” they continue (44) “Life is not a list of propositions, it is a series of dramatic scenes Story is the language of the heart Our souls speak not in the naked facts of mathematics or the abstract proportions of systematic theology, they speak the images and emotions of story” (39)

Andrew Walker, author of *Telling the Story Gospel, Mission and Culture*, agrees “The very fact that many of us now approach the Bible with the same scientific curiosity as any other interesting object of study has led us to an inability to read the ancient

writings as a sacred text,” he says “Our archaeological and increasingly literary approaches to the Bible bring us ever new insights into its sources and construction,” says Walker, while at the same time lamenting “the loss of the scriptural mind” He concludes, “This loss, this failure to see the wood for the trees, is endemic in the modern Church We no longer know what the gospel means” (Walker 12)

Thomas Boomershine, in his book *Story Journey An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*, shares a similar point of view “The gospel was originally a storytelling tradition,” he says “This storytelling character of the gospel is reflected in the history of the word” Boomershine explains that the word *gospel* is a shortened form of the old English word *godspell*, which means a good story or tale that has power, and that the definition of the Latin word *evangelium* implies “a tale whose telling had power,” while the Greek word *euangelion*, which has the root word *angelion* (meaning angel or messenger), denotes “good news” All three incorporate the idea of one who shares the message, as well as that of the message itself (Boomershine 16) “[T]he Church now tends to think of the gospel as a set of abstract ideas based on the study of the canonical documents but divorced from story,” Boomershine says “The gospel has lost its original character as a living storytelling tradition of messengers who told the good news of the victory of Jesus” He concludes, “telling biblical stories is foreign to contemporary experience We continue to read Bible stories to children But the assumption is that once you grow up and learn to think, you will stop telling stories and start telling the truth Telling the truth means that you will speak conceptual abstractions” (17)

“The gospel is not only the central message of the Christian faith it is both the story and its telling,” writes Walker “It is only by telling the story that the message becomes gospel” (Walker 12)

Peterson reflects, “When Jesus opened his mouth and spoke, what came out, more often than not, was a story” Further, he explains, “His stories draw us into a reality where we find ourselves in touch with the very stuff of our humanity We discover that there is something more to life, something that we didn’t quite see or understand before” (Peterson 1999 7) Peterson continues

*Jesus’ stories are brief Jesus employs ordinary things and persons as subject matter salt and light, farmers and merchants, travelers and banqueters, money and seeds parents and children*

*Jesus throws these simple little stories into our ordinary lives and we think, ‘What is this doing here?’ They appear so commonplace, so insignificant We expect big things from a teacher the stature of Jesus — bold headlines, eternal truths, religious thunder But these Jesus stories are so unpretentious More often than not, one or another of them lodges unnoticed in our consciousness and then, unexpectedly begins to release insights, create new perspectives shift the very ground beneath us so that we find ourselves reeling, reaching out for support When the story is allowed to complete its work, the sole support we find ourselves grabbing onto is God*

*Jesus was once asked by his friends why he told stories He responded that he told stories “to create readiness, to nudge people toward receptive insight” His stories, besides inviting us into a larger world than we presently inhabit, pull us into it as participants These are not stories that entertain, that let us sit back on a bench watching the action We become the action These stories don’t just tell us something new They involve us in what has been sitting right in front of us for years but that we hadn’t*

*noticed, hadn't thought important, hadn't considered to be connected to us and our lives*

*And then suddenly we do notice The story wakes us up to what is there, and has always been there Without leaving the world we work and sleep and play in daily, we find ourselves in a far larger world We embrace connections and meanings and significance in our lives far beyond what our employers and teachers, parents and children, our friends and neighbors, and all the so-called experts and celebrities have told us for so long (8–9)*

Without intellectual assent or intentional behavioral change, the stories enter the heart and affect change As Peterson says, the individual proclaims “what are these doing here,” but then finds himself embracing the truths embedded within the stories “All of a sudden we see things and people we had never noticed before,” he says “We hear words and sentences that make sense of what we’ve had intimations of but couldn’t quite place” (Peterson 1999 7) Curtis and Eldredge conclude, “The deepest convictions of our heart are formed by stories and reside there in the images and emotions of story” (Curtis and Eldredge 38)

Kraft says, “For solid changes to happen throughout a culture, people must make basic changes in the worldview of that culture Just as a tree can only grow as the roots allow it to, so a culture and the society that lives by that culture can only function as well as their ‘worldview-habits’ allow them to ” However, he warns that change in worldview-habits needs to be accompanied by a change in behavior “Changes in both the cultural structuring of the basic assumption and in the personal living out of those assumptions need to take place,” he writes (Kraft 2 12)

*Jesus knew this When he wanted to get across important points, He aimed both at worldview and at consistency between belief and behavior He sought to change both paradigm and practice Someone asked ‘Who is my neighbor?’ So He told them a story and then asked, not the expected question, ‘Who was the neighbor?’ — a question about their worldview assumptions Instead, he asked who was being neighborly, a more important question designed to challenge their behavior He was leading them implicitly to reconsider and, hopefully, change a basic value down deep in their system and explicitly to change their behavior to match the worldview change He wanted them to move first to, then through a paradigm shift into a practice shift the practice of being neighborly, not just believing they should treat outcasts as neighbors (2 12)*

Kraft refers to one’s worldview as one’s life script This script not only provides the mechanism for how one perceives the world, as a lens, so to speak, but also serves as a map for how one relates or responds to the world around him (Kraft 2002 2, 6, 15) The stories of God’s Word can serve as the catalyst for a new script, laying a foundation for a new worldview, resulting in life transformation Kraft warns, however, that change of worldview is a personal thing “Any ‘power’ of culture (including worldview) is not in the patterns themselves but in the habits of those who follow them,” he states, “so change in surface culture or worldview is a matter of people changing their habits ” Kraft continues, “A script does not change itself If it is to be changed, it is the people who use it that make the changes Since culture and worldview do not have life in and of themselves, they cannot change themselves Like scripts, those who use them give life to the patterns they provide — usually by

habitually following them, sometimes by altering the old patterns or by creating new ones” (Kraft 1 15)

British theologian N T Wright devotes over 100 pages in his book *The New Testament and the People of God* to the principle of worldview and life transformation through stories “Stories are a basic constituent of human life,” he states “They are, in fact, one key element within the total construction of worldview Stories thus provide a vital framework for experiencing the world They also provide a means by which views of the world may be challenged” (Wright 38–39) The authors of the book *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* explain

*Wright argues that this is why Jesus so often told stories particularly parables Jesus intended then to challenge the existing Jewish worldview and to provide an alternative picture of reality Jesus called “the kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” Wright says, ‘ Stories are, actually, peculiarly good at modifying or subverting other stories and their worldviews Where head on attack would certainly fail, the parable hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favour which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden away for safety ’*

*Wright says stories come into conflict with each other because worldviews and the stories which characterize them represent the realities of one’s life People are threatened by the intrusion of an opposing worldview or story because it challenges their understanding of reality Wright says The only way of handling the clash between two stories is to tell yet another story explaining how the evidence for the challenging story is in fact deceptive ” (Lovejoy 2005 36–37)*

In essence, Wright says that in order to change one’s worldview, he or she must hear a better story What better story is there than the Word of God?

*If stories anchor people’s existing perspective on the world, then the best thing Christians can do in order to displace that perspective is to tell better stories, and we have them! Our stories must provide biblical answers to the essential questions of life The more biblical stories people know and can fit into a single comprehensive story of God’s saving work, the more completely they are able to embrace a biblical worldview By changing their fundamental view of the world, we hope to influence a wide array of beliefs and practices which grow out of that fundamental core (37)*

One day I was in Pakistan walking with a young man — a local believer He asked, “Why are you here?” His question opened the door for me to talk about the importance of helping people share their faith in cultures where few people learned through reading and writing “I’m like one of those people,” the young man said “I’m illiterate, and I always thought that I couldn’t do much for God because of that ” We began to discuss how he could indeed have an impact on people following Jesus, even if he couldn’t read or write Continuing to talk, we walked by a small village and heard a man yell from his fields, “Come join us for tea,” pointing to a small house nearby “I would like that,” I said We soon found ourselves sitting in a pleasant garden in front of the man’s house The man, a few of his family members, and the two of us sipped hot sweetened tea as we talked about the local legends of the hills and mountains towering above them “That reminds me of a story,” I said, anxious to not only share the Good News with our hosts, but to model what I had been describing to my new

disciple I then shared a brief story from the Word of God, and one of those listening said, “That’s a true story” “Yes,” I agreed, “that’s a true story”

“To change a people group’s worldview requires the hearing and/or seeing of different stories,” explains Tom Steffen, author of *Reconnecting God’s Story to Ministry* “To change a people group’s worldview so that Christ becomes central requires the hearing and/or seeing of stories from Scripture Unlike some myths and stories, Bible stories find themselves rooted in history and the Supernatural Their authenticity stands the test of time and legitimate contextualization Through these powerful stories and our faithstories [sic] which connect them, the Holy Spirit transforms the worldviews of peoples and communities” (Steffen 32)

*Wright argues that stories lie at the core of a worldview formal belief statements, including propositional and theological statements, grow out of those stories Thus discipleship that offers only propositional teaching does not reach to the center of the worldview If we give only propositional teaching and do not present biblical stories to challenge existing worldview stories, we run risk of syncretism The cultural stories will continue to comprise the heart of the worldview and discipleship will deal only with the dimensions of the person’s life [dealing with behavior, values and beliefs] Because propositional beliefs are generated by and reflected in the core stories those cultural stories will continually be challenging Christian propositional content We wind up with the tragedy of professing Christians who assent to biblical propositions, but whose essential worldview and value system is deeply tied to worldview stories that have gone unchallenged That mix of contradictory religious beliefs and practices is the essence of syncretism It constitutes a failure in discipling (Lovejoy 2005 37)*

“We can only confront mythological thinking with redemptive history if our proclamation comprises the whole of the Bible, the message of the Old and New Testaments,” Weber says “It is therefore fundamentally wrong to tell only stories from the New Testament, or portions of it, as is the general practice [W]e must translate at least the accounts of the high lights of the whole redemptive history of the Old and New Testaments” (Weber 44–45)

Hesselgrave beautifully sums up the challenge

*How does the worldview change or “exchange” implicit in Christian conversion take place? How does one go about reconstructing a Christian worldview that has fallen upon hard times? Not first by stressing appropriate behavioral patterns or building Christian institutions Not necessarily by enumerating Christian values or outlining the basics of a Christian worldview Not even by taking bits and pieces, the “little stories” of the Bible and dealing only with them Worldview change is best accomplished by studying and telling or retelling the biblical “big story” that enshrines Christian worldview That is why some of the most successful Christian missionizing [sic] has been done by missionaries who resorted to telling the big story that unfolds from Genesis to Revelation (Hesselgrave 50)*

He goes on to say, “True, it is the *substance* of the Bible narrative that is most important But the story *form* is also important because stories are the mode in which worldviews are best transmitted from generation to generation and from one people to another Stories are readily told and easily remembered And one’s personal ‘little

stories,' whether of success or failure, are most readily understood in the light of the worldview 'big story'" (51)

## Conclusion

### Jesus and the Parable of the Sower and the Seed

*One day such a large crowd gathered around Jesus that he entered a boat, pushed offshore and began teaching from there. He taught them using many parables and stories. Jesus said*

*Listen! A farmer went out and planted seed. Some of it fell on the roadside and the birds ate it. Some fell on rocky ground, where there was not much dirt. It sprouted up quickly, but didn't put roots down very deep. The sun scorched it, and it withered away. Some seed fell among weeds and thorns, and the weeds and thorns choked it, and it didn't produce fruit. But some seed fell on good soil, and it sprang up and grew and produced good fruit — even beyond expectations!*

*"Listen to this," Jesus said. "Are you listening? Really listening?"*

*When they were by themselves, those who were close to him, along with His twelve disciples, asked Jesus about the story. He told them, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom — you know how it works. But to those who can't see it yet, everything comes in stories, making them ready and receptive, nudging them toward insight." Then Jesus said, "You don't know this story? You don't understand it? Then how will you know, how will you understand, any of my stories?" Jesus then explained the story of the Sower and the Seed to those around him. He said*

*The farmer sows the Word. Some people are seed that falls on the roadside. Immediately after they hear, Satan comes and snatches away what has been planted in them. Some are like the seed that lands in the rocky ground. When they first hear the Word, they receive it with gladness. They only last a short time, though, and when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it. The seed sown in the weeds and thorns represents the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and desires for other things, chokes out the word and nothing comes of it. But the seed planted in the good soil represents those who hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest way beyond their expectations.*

*Jesus then shared several other parables and stories about the Kingdom of God.*

*With many stories like these, Jesus spoke to the people, sharing the Word with them, presenting His message to them, but only as much as they were able to hear it and receive it. He was never without a story when he spoke, and when He was alone with His disciples, He went over everything, explaining what the stories meant.*

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