

LEADERS ON LADDERS: THE POWER OF STORY IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

AMY L. CRIDER*

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary & Boyce College

ABSTRACT. In his Gospel, John reveals this key leadership principle: effective leaders harness the power of narrative to illuminate the metanarrative and connect people to it. John uses narrative techniques to make invisible spiritual realities visible and thus succeeds in connecting people to the metanarrative. John forges a link between people and the metanarrative by showing individuals how their own stories fit into the biblical metanarrative, fulfilling his purpose: 'These are written that you may believe...' (20:31). The church is transmitted through the ages by leaders who write. Because the metanarrative is a story and story is accessible to all audiences, the biblical metanarrative is not dependent on culture, time, or context; it transcends the ages, enabling John to lead and write from the present as well as for the future. Thus, John illuminates the metanarrative not only for the infant church but for all Christians to come. Christian leaders today also need to communicate so their people can see their place in the metanarrative of Scripture.

KEYWORDS: Christian leadership, writing, narrative nonfiction, metanarrative, John's Gospel

Introduction

'Academics argue persuasively that an executive's most important role is to be a steward of the organization's purpose' (Craig and Snook 2014). Being a steward of the organization's purpose means more than just being a keeper of it or the mouthpiece for it. For the church throughout the ages, the organizational purpose statement is the biblical metanarrative, the Bible's overarching story. Scripture's grand narrative 'is the story of God's determination to glorify himself by saving sinners through the atonement accomplished by his own Son. As Christ himself made clear, every word of Scripture serves to tell this story' (Mohler 2014: 39). Each biblical writer exposes part of the metanarrative (Köstenberger 1999: 108), but the Apostle John is an exemplary leader because he powerfully communicates the biblical metanarrative to his followers.

* AMY L. CRIDER (EdD Candidate 2017, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the Writing Center Coordinator at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Assistant Professor of English at Boyce College. Email: amycrider@sbs.edu.

Metanarratives share the same elements as narratives: rising action, crisis, climax/resolution, and falling action, which directly correspond to the biblical metanarrative's creation (rising action), fall (crisis), redemption (climax-resolution), and consummation (falling action) (Wright 2012: 260). The metanarrative is a divinely drawn map of human history and serves as a 'frame of reference' i.e., the big picture (Craddock 2008: 90). The map reveals humanity's past, its present, its future, and most importantly, its purpose: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever in a perfect relationship with Himself (*Westminster Shorter Catechism* 2015).

Christian leaders must learn to lead using the metanarrative map. When Christian leaders transmit truth in the light of the metanarrative, they enable their followers to see their place in the metanarrative and move from 'tension to resolution, from ambiguity to clarity, from what seems to be to what is, from guilt to grace, from death to life' (Craddock 2008: 88). In his Gospel, the Apostle John reveals this key leadership principle: leaders have lasting influence by harnessing the power of narrative to illuminate the metanarrative and connect people to it.

While leadership for good or evil means communicating a vision so followers are connected to it and thus transformed by it, Christian leadership defines that transformation as a growing into Christ-likeness. Christian leadership 'is taking the initiative to influence people to grow in holiness and to passionately promote the extension of God's kingdom on the world' (Howell 2003: 3). John the Apostle shows that one way Christian leaders can effectively get people to embrace the metanarrative vision is by writing. So how can Christian leaders learn from John to make their words matter?

Leadership of the Apostle John

John wrote (Bauckham 2006: 8-9). John is the first eyewitness (John 1:35), and he is the last eyewitness (John 21:22). According to tradition, John is literally the last one—the last apostolic witness, the final writer of God's Word, and the writer of the last words of the Bible. When John starts writing, he is no longer one of the disciples—he's the *only* disciple (Tenney 2015: 228). He was 'the last man standing' and the last link to Jesus the young church had (MacArthur 2002). By the time he writes, he is a revered elderly leader (Phillips 2007: 101). John, a great leader of the church, beautifully teaches that Christian leaders are writers (MacArthur 1995: xix).

Writing alone is not enough to lead, however. Writing to communicate vision (the metanarrative) in such a powerful way that it changes the identity of those who embrace the vision is critical to great leadership. For John and all the biblical writers, the metanarrative is the grand purpose of God's people. That John has the metanarrative in mind as he writes is evident in several ways. N. T. Wright demonstrates John's cognizance of the metanar-

rative: 'The famous *tetelestai* in [John] 19:30 ('It's all done!') matches the *synetelesen* in Genesis 2:2 ('God finished the work that he had done')... John bring[s] the kingdom and the cross into the closest possible combination' (Wright 2012: 257). John also consciously references the metanarrative even as he opens his Gospel by repeating the first phrase of Genesis: 'In the beginning' (Kruse 2003: 63). Likewise, he concludes his Gospel revealing the metanarrative-driven purpose: 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in His name' (John 20:31). Embedded in this verse is the pinnacle of the metanarrative refrain: *mankind has sinned and needs a savior. The Savior has come. Believe and live*. Through John the Apostle, the Holy Spirit transforms the lives of those who read John's Gospel in part because John uses the power of narrative to connect people to the metanarrative (Köstenberger 2009: 176). Is it biblical to consider John's use of narrative? Köstenberger argues yes: 'Engaging in this close narrative reading of John's gospel... is vital because a literary-theological reading ensures that the presentation of John's theology is properly grounded in a contextual, narrative apprehension of the respective documents. Methodologically, Biblical Theology is inextricably wedded to a study of the writings in question in their historical and literary settings' (Köstenberger 2009: 176).

Narrative Effectively Communicates the Metanarrative

The universal 'language' of humanity is narrative (Rice 2008: 8). 'To be human one must have a story', attests Nigerian author and Brown University professor Chinua Achebe (Gioia and Gwynn 2006: 3). Story is foundational to every culture and person. Story drives history, and every culture acknowledges this by embracing stories. John employs the universal language of story to connect people to the metanarrative through narrative techniques. Not only is narrative universal, it intertwines with other genres: poetry can contain splashes of narrative; the gospel genre is essentially biography, which is narrative; prophecy is full of narratives of the future; history is pure narrative; wisdom literature and the epistles use specific narrative examples (Köstenberger 106).

John uses narrative techniques (Craddock 2008: 87) to make invisible spiritual realities visible and thus succeeds in getting people to embrace the metanarrative. Just as people have physical and nonphysical components—body and spirit—likewise, good writing has a similar dichotomy: concrete concepts and abstract ones. The 'ladder of abstraction' is the term used to describe the concept that ideas can be placed on a scale according to their level of abstractness (Clark 2006: 169-175). The bottom of the ladder 'involves the senses. You can do things with it. Put it against a tree to rescue your cat VooDoo. The bottom of the ladder rests on concrete language.

Concrete is hard, which is why when you fall off the ladder from a high place, you might break your foot. Your right foot. The one with the spider tattoo' (Clark 2006: 107). The top of the ladder is where abstract ideas reside, like mercy, justification, and sanctification.

John as a leader-writer understands the need for theology (abstract ideas) to be clothed in metaphor (concrete pictures): 'We need metaphors if we are to understand God' (Laniak 2006: 35). John recognizes that the ladder of abstraction must be climbed (Clark 2006: 107). To grasp the higher rungs of abstruse thoughts, one must first step onto the bottom rungs of the known and obvious. John records Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman as He gently guides her up the ladder of abstraction:

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give Me a drink'... The Samaritan woman said to Him, 'How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?'... Jesus answered and said to her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you 'Give me a drink', you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water'. She said to Him, 'Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water?'... Jesus answered and said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life' (John 4:7-14).

In this narrative, Jesus uses physical water as a symbol to help the Samaritan adulteress grasp the abstract concept of eternal life.

Johannine commentator Mark Stibbe demonstrates how essential symbols are in a narrative: 'Symbols are connecting links between two levels of meaning in a story' (Stibbe 1992: 19). Water, for instance, plays a significant part in the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. On another level, water is a metaphor for eternal life. John uses the ladder of abstraction to show the narrative as both historically accurate and symbolic of a deeper truth (Kruse 2003: 37).

John writes 'in terms of a world in which phenomena—things and events—are a living and moving image of the eternal, and not a veil of illusion to hide it, a world in which the Word is made flesh' (Dodd 1953: 142-43). Stibbe also notes, 'The fourth evangelist throughout the gospel connects concrete images with abstract meanings' (Stibbe 1992: 19). John uses seven 'I am' metaphors to make Jesus concrete: 'I am the bread of life' (John 6:35), 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12), 'I am the door' (John 10:9), 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10:11), 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25), 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), and 'I am the true vine' (John 15:1). These 'I am' statements remind readers of the metanarrative as 'the 'I am' sayings undoubtedly recall the divine name

revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14' (Laniak 1987: 228). In each of the 'I am' instances, the biblical author is solidifying doctrine in the minds and hearts of the young church with concrete language. John's use of this narrative device, making the transcendent concrete, is a leadership tool any generation's leaders can employ effectively (McGuire 1977: 13).

Using narrative and its concrete language, John as a church leader empowers readers to embrace the reality of transcendent truth (John 1:14, 18) (Laniak 1987: 35). Through John's pen, Jesus Himself forever gave the church concrete, touchable, knowable examples of what He is like. The incarnation is the epitome of God making the abstract corporeal: 'Christ is the visible image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15). John Piper asks,

Why did he [John] choose to call Jesus 'the Word'? [John 1:1]... Jesus himself—in his coming, and working, and teaching, and dying and rising—was the final and decisive Message of God. Or to put it more simply: What God had to say to us was not only or mainly what Jesus said, but who Jesus was and what he did. His words clarified himself and his work. But his self and his work were the main truth God was revealing (Piper 2008).

Jesus is God (abstract) coming to man (concrete) as man (concrete). John's use of the concrete clothing the eternal is a potent leadership technique today. As John Piper encourages, 'Don't do an end run around concrete language on the way to the eternal. You won't get anybody with you' (Piper 2014).

Jesus Himself is the ultimate *micronarrative*, the epitome of God encapsulating Himself—a being far beyond abstract ideas—and making Himself concrete. 'One of the marks of this Gospel is that the weightiest doctrines are often delivered in the simplest words. This could not get simpler—and it could not get weightier. The Word, who became flesh and dwelt among us, Jesus Christ, was and is God' (Piper 2014).

John was so effective in using concrete language to define the abstract, his readers were able to defeat attackers of the biblical metanarrative and preserve Christological doctrine. In the early centuries, the Gnostics (the 'false prophets' of whom John warned against in his first epistle) widely circulated the false teaching that Jesus did not come or die in the flesh.

It was to John's Gospel—replete with examples of the humanity of Christ—that Athanasius (AD 325) and others turned to refute the 'anti-christal' gnostic teachings (Köstenberger 1999: 210).

So while the ladder of abstraction is tied to narrative for the purpose of opening people up to the truth of the metanarrative, it also works as a safeguard for doctrine.

Narrative Effectively Connects People to the Metanarrative

Thus far, the focus has been on the narrative techniques John uses to illuminate the metanarrative. But, illuminating the metanarrative is insufficient. In addition, John forges a link between people and the metanarrative by showing individuals how their own stories or ‘micronarratives’ fit into the biblical metanarrative. With painstaking intentionality, John carefully records the various responses of the biblical audience to Jesus, providing a spectrum of belief in which every reader of the fourth gospel may find himself mirrored. For instance, John gives multiple examples of people in the Gospel’s story who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and were saved (John 20:31): Nathanael (1:49), the Samaritans (4:42); the blind man (9:33, 35-38); Martha (11:27); the disciples (16:30); and Thomas (20: 24-29). Each of these *micronarratives* leads readers closer to believing in the Lord Jesus Christ themselves, thus fulfilling John’s purpose: ‘These are written that you may believe...’ (20:31) (Kruse 2003: 380).

Commentating on the story of Mary anointing Jesus’ feet (John 12:1-8), N. T. Wright exclaims, ‘It is one of those scenes which positively shouts at the reader, ‘Where are *you* in this picture?’ (Wright 2012: 23). However, John not only shows his readers how their lives connect with his narrative, but how they connect with the metanarrative as well: ‘These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in His name’ (John 20:31).

Narrative is the ideal medium for revealing to individuals how their lives relate to the metanarrative because ‘we see our lives as a kind of narrative. Storytelling has such wide application because, at its root, it serves universal human needs. Story makes sense out of a confusing universe... And it helps us discover the universals that bind us to everything around us’ (Hart 2006: 5). John uses story to fuse the metanarrative of Scripture with the *micronarrative* of the audience:

The reason people enjoy movies or novels is because of their recognizable shape. They lead the reader through clearly defined experiences with clearly defined characters involved in a plot with beginning, middle, and ending. At last, the reader is satisfied with a sense of final resolution, stated or implied. However ‘real’ the novel [or movie] is, it is unreal in that the reader’s own life is not clearly defined in time and space with a sense of movement to resolution. A novel [or movie], then, offers the reader a brief respite from a cluttered and disjointed life that seems not to move with purpose to an ending. While engaged with the novel [or movie], the reader is allowed to forget the way life really is (Craddock 2008: 89).

John’s narrative, however, is not an alternate reality but a mirror of reality, revealing ‘a master narrative, a macro-narrative, a metanarrative... ultimate

reality, the divine purpose, now seen, now not seen, which runs through beginning, middle, and ending' (Craddock 2008: 89). The transcendence of the story makes it real for both the hearer of the story and also the participants.

When leaders show their followers the metanarrative and where their lives fit into the metanarrative, transformation results become a reality. As Stephen Brookfield explains in his book *The Skillful Teacher*:

I grew up suspicious of the use of narrative, of storytelling, as I would have described it. Storytelling was something that was entertaining but essentially fictional. It was most certainly not academic, chiefly because it was clearly subjective and a-theoretical. It has taken me a long time to realize that narrative is one of the most compelling pedagogic approaches I can use. Nothing draws people more quickly into considering challenging information and perspectives than a personal story, and dissertations that are scholarly personal narratives (Nash and Bradley, 2011; Nash and Viray, 2014) are often far more likely to influence practice than research reports written in the third person (Brookfield 2015: 116).

What outlasts the individual is the grand narrative. When the books are opened, how one's life fits into the grand narrative is what will be judged (2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 13:8). Every life may be found to derive its meaning from this metanarrative, and because it is the meta-story that matters, leaders need to teach their followers to recognize their place in the metanarrative and live in the light of the truth it sheds (Mohler 2014: 39).

Lasting Influence of Metanarrative-Driven Leadership

The church is passed down through the ages by leaders who write. The church's memory is in her writers passing off the baton to the next generation: 'Leaders write because words matter and the written word matters longer and reaches farther than the words we speak' (Mohler 2014:172). Because story is accessible to all audiences, the biblical metanarrative is not dependent on culture, time, or context; thus, it transcends the ages, enabling John and other Christians to lead and write from the present as well as for the future, giving them lasting influence.

Writing in light of the metanarrative gives transcendence to writing. Throughout his Gospel, John illuminates the metanarrative not only for people in the infant church but for all Christians downstream. Christian leaders who write, like John, recognizing how the metanarrative shapes the purpose of writing, are cognizant that they may also be writing for Christians to come (John 20:29; 2 Timothy 2:1-2). As the psalmist pens, 'This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD' (Psalm 102:18). Likewise, John records this significant phrase in Jesus' High Priestly Prayer: 'I am praying not only for these dis-

principles but also for all who ever believe in me through their message' (John 17:20). Stibbe marvels at John's ability to simultaneously write for present and future audiences and attributes the apostle's success to his deft use of the narrative:

The story [John] creates out of his sources is one which manages to fuse the two horizons of the past history of Jesus and the present history of the community by exploiting the social function of narrative discourse. In achieving this, John configures time into a plot which succeeds in evoking the true significance of Jesus of Nazareth both for his own generation and the generations to come. This is, by any standards, a quite brilliant literary achievement (Stibbe 1992: 199).

While Stibbe does not use the term 'metanarrative', 'the past history of Jesus' to which he gives distinction alludes to the whole of Scripture up to the point of John's writing. Using the nomenclature of this paper, Stibbe's words may be rephrased to the following: 'John fuse[s] the two horizons' of the metanarrative of Scripture with the micronarrative of the audience.

The metanarrative-driven writing of John's Gospel is remarkably relevant for Western twenty-first century culture. John wrote with a journalistic style that has been known since the 1960's as 'creative nonfiction' or 'narrative nonfiction' (Gutkind 2012). Creative nonfiction is imposing the narrative arc, the techniques of telling a good story, onto nonfiction. This style is perfectly suited to John's thesis (John 20:31: 'These things are written that you may believe...') because 'while communication in fictional narratives can be described as a game of make-believe, in non-fictional narratives we meet a game of commitment and belief' (Merenlahti and Hakola 1999: 36).

While postmoderns reject metanarrative, they are entranced with story and enamored with the creative nonfiction genre. World War II turned Americans' interest from novels and fiction to news, and creative nonfiction has since become the number one genre:

Creative nonfiction has become the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities. These days the biggest publishers—HarperCollins, Random House, Norton, and others—are seeking creative nonfiction titles more vigorously than literary fiction and poetry... Even small and academic (university) presses that previously would have published only books of regional interest, along with criticism and poetry, are actively seeking creative nonfiction titles these days. In the academic community generally, creative nonfiction has become the popular way to write... Creative nonfiction is the dominant form in publications like *The New Yorker*... the front page of *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* (Gutkind 2012).

Gutkind defines creative nonfiction like this: 'Creative nonfiction involves writing nonfiction using fiction techniques. The word *creative* in creative

nonfiction might imply that it does not keep to the facts, but the aim of creative nonfiction is to tell the truth' (Gutkind 2012).

John was a vanguard of the creative nonfiction genre. Richard Bauckham writes, 'In all four Gospels we have the history of Jesus only in the form of testimony... In testimony fact and interpretation are inextricable; in this testimony empirical sight and spiritual perception are inseparable' (Bauckham 2006: 411). In other words, the Gospels qualify as creative nonfiction. Johannine commentators recognize that John's narrative is not comprised of precise chronology; rather, his narrative serves as the backdrop for his theological premises. C. K. Barrett argues that John's rearrangement of the events he records does not undermine 'the existence of valuable historical material in John; but the material has been digested and expressed organically in an organism which is primarily theological' (Barrett 1960:14). Stibbe concurs, praising the fourth Gospel as 'more than any of the others an artistic and imaginative whole' (Stibbe 1992:14). As the Gospel of John demonstrates, creative non-fiction may reorder a narrative while leaving the truth of the narrative intact and even more clearly exposed than before.

Christian leaders write, keeping an intentional audience in mind with the caveat that their intentional audience is not their full audience. Their words may be used by the Holy Spirit in the future. What they write now may affect future generations. Writing in light of the metanarrative makes writing relevant regardless of context. It is written in and for a place and time but is applicable elsewhere.

Conclusion

As Albert Mohler notes,

The Bible is not just a book of stories. It reveals one grand narrative from beginning to end. Borrowing from literary scholars, many Christians now speak of the Bible's metanarrative—its all-encompassing story line. In the Bible, God has revealed the story that underlies every true story, and in which every other true story finds its meaning.

That is the story of God's determination to glorify himself by saving sinners through the atonement accomplished by his own Son. As Christ himself made clear, every word of Scripture serves to tell this story... the great metanarrative that frames everything we think, decide, and do. It is also what allows us to die, knowing that the story will survive us and that we are still a part of this story after our death. Whatever context of leadership, the Christian leader is accountable to this story (Mohler 2014: 40-41).

The metanarrative was written for the church—those in the church and those who will be in the church: 'these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may

have life in His name' (John 20:31). For the church, the metanarrative's truth has been passed on through leaders who write, like the Apostle John (Olasky 2015). Through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, John's ability to ascend and descend the ladder of abstraction marked his legacy as a writer and leader. He looked beyond his own context and his own time to steward the truths he was given and communicate them for generations to come. Should contemporary Christian leaders consider their responsibilities any less significant? They too need to write and help their followers see their place in the metanarrative of Scripture.

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