

STORYTELLING SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

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Introduction

In systematic theology, we typically teach speculative concepts, systems of thought, propositional proof texts from the Bible, and—if time permits—we end with personal experiences and application. The problem with this typical method is that it privileges literate learners and disadvantages oral learners. Another problem is that it reverses the definition of theology from “Faith Seeking Understanding” to “Understanding Seeking Faith.”

An alternative method of teaching could be to begin with Bible storytelling and case studies (where the learners immediately experience the biblical phenomena and personal experiences) and then ask the learners to generate their own questions and thoughts. The learners could then integrate their questions and thoughts with those of historic and systematic theology.

The Challenges of Teaching Theology to Oral Learners

When we teach theology, we need to accommodate oral learners. Nonetheless, there remain challenges.

First, **most theological educators are not oral learners.**

Reasons

- Theological education privileges literate learners
- Advancement in theological education privileges literate learners
- Theological educators become accustomed to literate learning styles

Effects

- Educators don't see a need for oral learning styles
- Educators won't know how to teach oral learners
- Educators might perceive the oral learning style as inferior or “light”

Second, **conservative traditions privilege literate learning.**

Reason

- Emphasis on propositional revelation, expository preaching, inductive Bible studies

Effect

- Suspicious of the use of stories, illustrations, or personal application

Third, **higher education typically measures literate learning outcomes.**

Reason

- Students need to demonstrate analytical, critical, and constructive thought to earn a degree

Effects

- Learning outcomes are typically measured with readings, written reports, and written exams
- Hard to conceive how such learning outcomes could be measured orally

Suggestions for implementing Orality in Theological Education

First, **begin with a case study**. Theological education typically begins with the *abstract concept* prior to talking about the personal experience. For example, we might begin the lesson by saying, “Today, we are going to talk about the sacraments,” and then proceed to talk about the *concept* of the sacraments. Then, we might describe what the *different schools of thought* (e.g., Lutherans, Baptists, Roman Catholics) say about the sacraments. Then, we might describe what various *influential thinkers* (e.g., Augustine, Luther, Zwingli) have said about the sacraments. For most learners, especially oral learners, this is all meaningless without a personal experience of the sacraments.

An alternative method could begin with a case study:

You have just given birth to a baby daughter. Your spouse asks you, “So when are we going to baptize our daughter?” But you say, “We’re not going to baptize her, because our family has never baptized infants.” But your spouse replies, “But in our family, we’ve always baptized infants.” So what are you going to do— are you going to baptize or not baptize your daughter?

The case study begins with the *personal experience* of infant baptism. It engages the learners at a concrete relational, existential, and pastoral level. After this case study the learner is better orientated to discuss the topic of sacraments at the level of concepts, different schools of thought, and the history of influential thinkers.

Second, **begin with Bible storytelling**. A similar alternative teaching method is to begin by storytelling from the Bible. That is, instead of beginning with the concept, we begin with the biblical phenomena. In doing so, the learner *experiences* the original biblical stories and then engages in conceptual thought, rather than the other way around. Here are some examples that I have tried:

- Acts 16:12-34 (the conversion of Lydia, the slave girl and the jailer) for the doctrine of salvation
- Mark 15:1-39 (the crucifixion of Jesus) for the doctrine of atonement
- Luke 18:9-14 (parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector) for the doctrine of justification
- Matt 22:1-14 (parable of the wedding banquet) for the doctrine of election
- Genesis 3, 4, 6:1-7, 11:1-9 (the Fall, Cain, the pre-flood world, and the Tower of Babel) for the doctrine of sin
- John 20 (the resurrection account of Jesus) for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit

Example 1: Acts 16:12-34

After storytelling, I ask the class to discuss the following questions in pairs. Afterwards, I ask them to report to the rest of the class what they discussed.

- What impressed you about the story (i.e., made you go *hmmm* or *wow*)?

- What questions about the story would you like to be answered?

Sample questions

Why did Paul wait so long to cast out the demon from the slave girl?

How did the families of Lydia and the jailer come to be believers?

Did the slave girl experience a conversion?

Why was it so important to get baptized immediately after believing?

- What were they being saved from?
- What did they have to do to be saved?

The whole exercise takes about 30 minutes. After this, I proceed to teach the doctrine of salvation as it is typically taught in systematic theology (e.g., looking at different views and looking at different debates). For example, typical debates might be:

- What is the role of the sacraments in salvation?
- What is the scope of salvation (i.e., is it spiritual, social, or existential)?
- What is the object of salvation (e.g., is it the individual or is it the collective)?

Amazingly, the story of Acts 16 raises many of these same issues—as expressed in the students’ questions that they want answered. I can refer back to the story as an example of how different schools of thought can use Acts 16 differently to answer the questions. For example, with the scope of salvation, we could ask, “What exactly was the jailer saved *from*?” Was he saved *spiritually* from his sins? Or was he saved *socially* from an oppressive socio-economic structure (e.g., as a member of the working class poor)? Or was he saved *existentially* from his own internal, psychological situation (e.g., was he looking for purpose in life)?

Thus, by beginning with the story, the students could *relate* to the conceptual world of systematic theology. They could also *imagine* what the issues in systematic theology *looked like*. And they could see the *pastoral* and *existential needs* that were met by systematic theology.

Example 2: Mark 15:1-39

After storytelling, I ask the class to discuss the following questions in pairs. Afterwards, I ask them to report to the rest of the class what they discussed.

- What impressed you about the story (i.e., made you go *hmmm* or *wow*)?
- What questions about the story would you like to be answered?

Sample question

What did the centurion see that made him believe that Jesus was the Son of God?

- How does Jesus’ death on the cross save us from our sins?

After this, I teach the doctrine of atonement as it is typically taught in systematic theology (e.g., looking at the different theories of the atonement). Amazingly, many of the theories can be *seen* in the Mark 15 story. For example, the sufferings of Jesus illustrate the satisfaction theory; the cry of “My God why have you forsaken me?” illustrates the propitiation theory; the freeing of Barabbas illustrates the substitution theory; the splitting of the temple-curtain illustrates the reconciliation theory; and the centurion’s confession could be an illustration of the moral example theory.

Thus, by beginning with the story, the students can *imagine* and *see* what the theories in systematic theology *look like*. They can also see how the doctrine of atonement is trying to answer their question: How does Jesus' death on the cross save us from our sins?

Example 3: Genesis 3, 4, 6:1-7, 11:1-9

In this example, I divide the class into four groups, and each group reads one of the stories. I then ask each group to discuss the following questions in pairs. Afterwards, I ask them to report to the rest of the class, including the other groups, what they had discussed.

- What impressed you about the story (i.e., made you go *hmmm* or *wow*)?
- What questions about the story would you like to be answered?
- What does the story tell you about sin?

The stories vividly express the *intensification of sin*—from Eve eating a fruit, to Cain murdering his brother, to a pre-Flood generation becoming so wicked they need to be wiped out, and to the Tower of Babel story, in which people try to become like God. The stories also vividly express the *magnification of sin* from something that affects individuals to something that affects collective peoples.

After beginning with the stories of sin, it is much easier to explore the theological doctrine of sin, in which we explore questions such as:

- What is the *essence* of sin?
- Does sin have an *ontological existence*?
- Is sin a state of being, or is it an action?

Guiding Principles for Storytelling

- Before storytelling, tell the students that this is an exercise in post-literate learning—so it works better if they don't look at their books, Bibles, and computer screens. Instead, they should look at you. Warn them that there will be questions afterwards, so they need to listen carefully.
- After storytelling, ask them to discuss in pairs because this generates peer-to-peer discussion (it removes the teacher-student hierarchy) and gives them the warrant to talk out aloud.
- Have them share their answers with the whole class. This gives them the warrant to talk out aloud.
- Resist the temptation to comment or summarise what they have said. This removes the teacher as the all-knowing expert from the discussion. It keeps the discussion at a peer-to-peer level. More importantly, it means that you will neither patronize their answers nor shame them if they say something you perceive to be wrong.
- The sequence of questions is important. The first question: "What impressed you about the story?" is a safe question, for which there is no wrong answer. The second question: "What questions do you want answered from the story?" is also a safe question, for which there is no wrong answer. The subsequent questions (e.g., "How does Jesus' death on the cross save us from our sins?") introduce them to the questions that are generated by systematic theology.
- "What questions do *you* want answered from the story?" also exposes the class to

different questions. This demonstrates that systematic theology exists to answer questions generated by people from their own cultural and existential contexts.

- When each student asks a question from the story, don't answer it; instead, open it up for the whole class to answer. In this way, the students are responsible for helping each other to learn. It also removes you as the all-knowing expert from the discussion.
- If a student asks a significantly important question, divide the class back into pairs and ask them to answer the question, and then have them report back their answers.
- After this time of storytelling, when you are back into the traditional mode of teaching systematic theology, frequently refer the students back to the story to give them a concrete reference point.

Conclusion

In systematic theology, we typically begin abstract concepts, and then apply these concepts to concrete situations. The difficulty with this method is that it both privileges literate learners and reverses the definition of theology into "Understanding Seeking Faith." I have suggested an alternative method in which we begin with concrete situations—either with Bible storytelling or case studies—and then integrate them into the concepts typically learned in theology. Such a method engages the oral learner and is truer to theology as "Faith Seeking Understanding."

Questions and Challenges

The biggest challenge is the issue of assessments. Institutional education measures education primarily by "learning outcomes." Undergraduate learning outcomes are typically "outline," "describe," and "identify." Graduate learning outcomes typically add "analyze" and "compare and critique." Traditionally, *written* assessments such as essays and exams have been used to assess these learning outcomes. However for *oral* learners, perhaps we could try the following suggestions:

- Ask the student to *storytell* from the Bible, and then use that story to "define," "describe," or "outline" a particular concept.
- *Storytell* from the Bible, and ask the student to "describe," "compare," and "critique" how different theological viewpoints would interpret the story.
- Use case studies and ask the student to "describe," "analyze," "compare," and "critique" how different theological viewpoints would engage differently with each case study.