

‘A TRUE STORY’

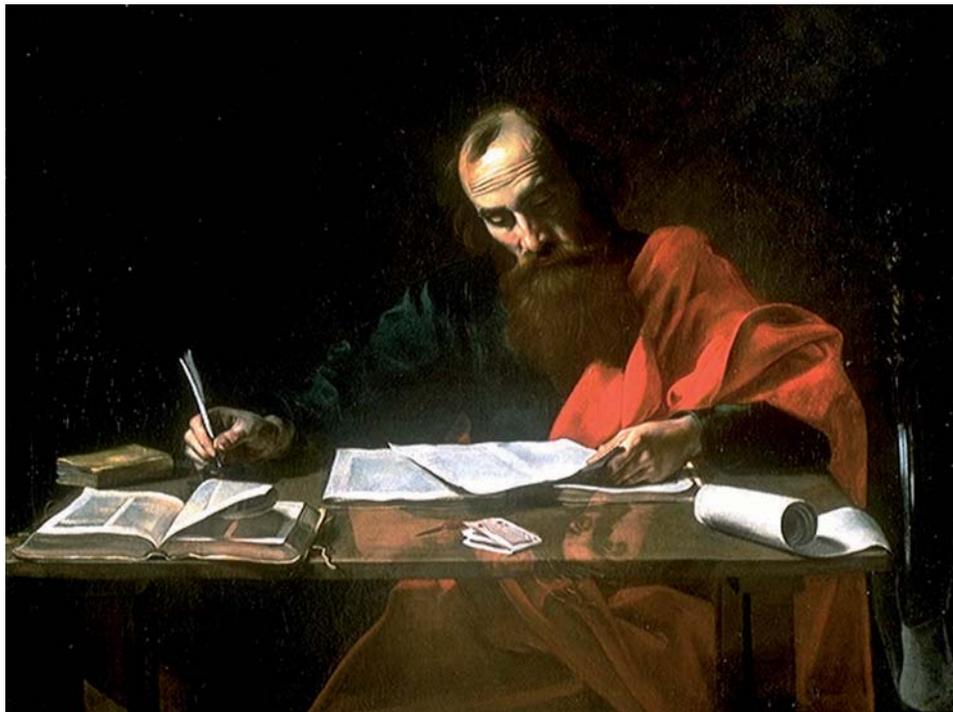
The words we choose when talking about Scripture

SOMEWHERE IN THE PAST—we’ll say in the delivery room—God gave me an unpracticed ability to read stories aloud extemporaneously.

In my young childhood, I brought poems to life in local festivals and dabbled with classroom plays. Later, in high school, my list of activities included forensics (competitive speaking), including both original oratory and dramatic and humorous interpretation.

But all of that was rehearsed. The more helpful talent I had apparently been born with was cold reading—bringing literary words to life for an audience though I’d never read these words before. Of course, I wasn’t really born with this skill. I did have to learn to read first. But after all that decoding work was accomplished, the out-loud interpretative part just seemed to kick right in.

My normal audiences through the years have been two. I taught junior high and high school English for fourteen years, which gave me ample opportunities to read aloud with my classes, revealing for them that there are voices behind those million little symbols on the page.



Saint Paul Writing His Epistles. Valentin de Boulogne or Nicolas Tournier, 1620.

There is an intended cadence to each sentence, dictated by the punctuation and pivotal stress on some words. Dialects and syntaxes evoke locales and the people who inhabit them. And every character has a personality, so often revealed through the words they say and how they say them.

And then there was the dinner table. For a large chunk of my boys' growing up years, perhaps the leading responsibility I had as their father was to read after dinner. This might have been fifteen minutes or forty-five. We read mostly novels, Newbury Medal winners and classics and fantasies. I think Tolkien would have approved of my Gollum in those days before the *Lord of the Rings* movies came out (though I think Tom Bombadil was my favorite voice to read—certainly a lot easier on the throat than Gollum!).

All of this leads to one important foundational statement ahead of the rest of what I am about to write: I love stories. I think it is important that you know my bias, because in a way I am about to argue against it.

IT IS HIP THESE DAYS to cast two very important things as “story.” One of these is our own lives. “Everyone has a story to tell,” we hear with frequency, and there is truth in that. Each person has a narrative to relate about their life, whether or not they are adept at storytelling.

The other of these things is Scripture. We have long included in our vernacular the term “Bible stories” to describe the various episodes of Scripture, such as Daniel in the den of lions or Paul being lowered in a basket outside the city wall. But more than that, we now often hear talk of “the story of the Bible”—that is, an emphasis on the fact that an underlying narrative about sin and promised salvation and a fulfilling of that promise and an eternal opportunity for everyone who believes is woven through the pages of the Bible, from beginning to end.

On one level, it seems a bit silly to contend with this use of “story.” But the trouble is that story itself is discussed on two levels. One of these is what we have already considered: the progress of lives presented narratively, pictorially, personally. But the other level at which stories are discussed pinpoints something more specific: fiction. And sometimes this is done pejoratively. “You are telling stories again” is a critique that, given the right tone of voice, invariably implies that the original speaker is using exaggeration at best and lies at worst to convey a supposedly true experience.

What raises red flags for me here in regard to Scripture is that those who want to classify the Bible with so many other ancient texts very often do so under the broad context of “myth.” And myths, we pretty much all agree, are not factual. They

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may contain certain “truths,” of course—surveying as they do the attempts of people to interact with forces far bigger than they are. But on the whole, every myth is dismissable by those who wish to dismiss them because, after all, they are only *stories*. We have no evidence that these things actually happened.

I wonder, then, if it is unwise for us to play along, calling the accounts of Scripture “stories” and the people who inhabit them “characters.” I wonder what connections are forged in the minds of our children when they hear similar literary terminology in Sunday school for the episodes of Scripture that they do for stories they are learning in school—stories like *The Lord of the Rings*, known to be fictional, even if they do carry rich philosophical thought or important allegorical meaning.

Thus we need, I suggest, to maintain an important separation between what is fiction and what is not. To accomplish that, there are two particular approaches I take when I write or edit articles or books that assess Scripture (including those we produce at Links Players International, where I serve as chief organizational officer of the ministry):

• **First, I avoid the use of the word *story* when referring to a narrative passage of Scripture.** Instead, I lean on the word *account*. I recognize that this may connote a journalistic presentation. And this does present some problems in that the oral

traditions of Jesus’ time, for instance, did not obligate the teller to exacting precision with regard to detail, as we now demand from professional reporters. However, the emphasis I am trying to maintain is on the factual nature of what we read in Scripture over and above the inference readers/listeners make toward “fiction” when they hear the words *story* (and *character*) in a literary context.

This does not mean that *story* is always inappropriate. I just take great care to make sure the context is clear. For instance, I might write: “We find no one else in Scripture who has a personal story like this one.” Here, we make it clear that the “story” is the outline of one’s life (or at least a portion of it) and therefore falls into the non-fiction category of biography as opposed to a fictional narrative.

• **Second, I encourage the use of past tense verbs and original contexts when referring to the writing of the apostles.**

Many writers and editors, when referring to a passage such as Ephesians 5:25, will offer something like this: “Here Paul tells us husbands to love our wives.” While it is true that this teaching can be universalized to all believing husbands for all time, Paul lived in a specific historic place and time, and his audience was the local Ephesian church. So I would go in this direction: “Paul told the Ephesian husbands to love their wives, something we modern husband should be doing as well.”

In an editorial sense, this is quite similar to what we would find in the broader literary arena. We do not say, for instance, “Thomas Jefferson *writes* in the Declaration of Independence,” but rather “Jefferson *wrote*...” While we might choose the present tense *writes* or *says* or *argues* for living authors, it is unusual, even odd, to do this in reference to writers who are dead.

There is room for stylistic diversion here, but we must recognize that placing these writings in historical context through use of the past tense and original target audiences, we enliven the important fact that these people actually lived. More than that, they had lives like our own. Paul—or any of the other apostles—was not esoterically philosophizing; he was supplying practical instruction to God’s people.

This leads to another important point. The enduring nature of Scripture comes from the fact that they are God’s words, not Paul’s or Peter’s or James’ or John’s. Though not so bad as writing “Ephesians says that...,” falling into the present tense “Paul says that...” serves to weaken the inspirational role of God as the real author of the everlasting Word. That said, I would certainly allow for the present tense when the credit is being pointed to God—*e.g.*, “This is why God tells us in Ephesians that we should love our wives.”

Some editors choose the present tense because it is argued to be more lively, or because it captures the “living and active” nature of Scripture. I understand

that. I do not choose it, partly because, as I have addressed, proper historical placement accomplishes a similar purpose by attaching the historical accounts of the Old Testament and Gospels, as well as the content of the epistles, to the real people who lived then and there. And in the case of the epistles, it turns out that some of the instruction given is most definitely set in a past tense context and is not meant for all believers for all time.

IF YOU ARE NOT A PERSON who thinks that much about words, this article has probably been far too much ado about nothing for you. But maybe you can take up this commitment, no matter who you are or what you do: guard the integrity of Scripture in the way that you talk about it. The work of protecting the content of Scripture has fallen to the scribes, both Jewish and Christian, who have toiled meticulously through the centuries to give us extremely accurate copies of the original manuscripts. Now it is our turn with the role of protecting the character of Scripture. It is not a collection of myths or stories in the common use of those words that suggests fiction. Rather, the Word of God is a container of historical accounts, as well as the prophecy and poetry and letters of those who lived lives pointed toward God, whose work God chose to preserve for us, so we might know him and the *true story* of how he has loved us and made a way for our salvation.