JOHN PAUL CURRY

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John Curry lives in southwest Germany encouraging existing churches and aiding in the planting of new churches in increasingly secular contexts.

The church in the Western World has not only seen decline in church attendance, but also a shift in long held moral stances. Within the same congregation, there is often disagreement between generations on issues such as same sex attraction or abortion. Culture in the West has clearly shifted, but what accounts for this change within religious institutions, even within evangelical Christianity? This article interacts with the concept of the social imaginary as presented by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age,* and how explores how story has helped lead to this shift we have seen. Recent generations such as Millennials and Gen Z have particularly been shaped by the changing meta-narrative of modern American culture. The article concludes that as story has played a central role in shaping thought processes and moral standpoints, so story should be used to reshape worldview under the biblical narrative. The article demonstrates how the Church can utilize story in the realms of evangelism, apologetics, and moral formation. In addition to utilizing story, the Church should also teach young people critical thinking skills so that they may be able to process the stories which they are receiving from culture at large.

Keywords: *Millennial, Generation Z, Moral Formation, Apologetics, Evangelism*

Introduction

The Christian Church in the West (Europe and North America) finds itself in a precarious state. The last few decades have brought a cultural shift which has left the church reeling. The effects are easy to see within the statistics. Looking primarily at Generation Z, Twenge reports that Church attendance declined slowly until around 1997 and then plummeted (2017,147). A third of young adults within the United States do not affiliate with any religion (2017,145). Yet even after 1997 as people were skipping

out on attending church, many still believed in God and prayed. However, even that has changed. Twenge writes

> In 2004, 84% of young adults prayed at least sometimes, but by 2016 more than one out of four said they "never" prayed. Fewer young people believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God; by 2016, one out of four instead thought it was "an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men". Thus, it is no longer true that Americans are just as religious privately. More and more Americans, especially Millennials and iGen'ers (Gen Z), are less religious both publicly and privately (2017, 152).

However, this shift does not simply consist of people leaving the church or abandoning faith in God. The church, and culture at large, has also seen a shift within the social imagination towards certain long-held cultural and moral institutions.

One such example is same sex attraction. The cultural view of homosexuality has shifted significantly in the last three decades within western nations. While Christians (especially evangelical Christians) in general do tend to hold a more traditional understanding of sexuality and marriage than their non-religious peers, views among younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) have been changing. David Kinnaman writes in his book, *You Lost Me*, "Christian or not, younger adults tend to be more accepting of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals than older adults" (2011,162). Caryle Murphy states, "Roughly half (51%) of evangelical Protestants in the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) say homosexuality should be accepted by society, compared with a third of evangelical Baby Boomers and a fifth of evangelicals in the Silent generation" (2015). Generational differences with similar patterns were seen across other denominations and faiths as well. Regarding the generational shift in views towards homosexuality, Twenge states, "These are some of the largest and most rapid generational and time-period differences in existence" (2017, 274).

In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor shares the story of how western nations went from a state of enchantment, where it was almost impossible not to believe in God (or gods), to the state we currently live in where it is quite natural, and for many the default option, to believe in the absence of a creator (2007,14). In presenting his story, Taylor combats the subtraction theory which implies that secular humanism is the natural outcome of scientific and evolutionary progression. Within his story a combination of philosophical, theological, political, as well as technological shifts led

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to an age of secularity, which, while including atheism, is characterized more by a sort of "Nova Effect" with an explosion of varying belief systems characterized by self-fragilization as numerous views seek to coexist but inevitably collide (Taylor 2007,299). If the church wishes to be successful in making disciples, it must learn how to successfully communicate within this secular age.

A vital form of communication and moral formation, which in many ways the western church has overlooked and undervalued, is story. Storytelling has been used for generations in cultures across the world to pass down important aspects of society (Vitz 1990). Within this article I will first seek to look at Taylor's concept of the Social Imaginary as it is important to the way people perceive themselves and the world around them. I will then look at the importance of story and show ways that stories have impacted the secularization of young people in the west. I will conclude by addressing what this means for Christian apologetics and faith formation.

Social Imaginary

Within the term social imaginary, Taylor seeks to evoke something deeper and broader than the way people may actively think about social reality in a disengaged mode. It is the way in which people imagine their social existence and how they fit together with others. The social imaginary includes the expectations we have and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations (Taylor 2007,171). Summarizing Taylor's concept, John O'Neill writes, "The imaginary is essentially a commonly shared moral conception of the ideal society" (2016).

The concept of the social imaginary is important, because it is how we perceive (imagine) the world around us as individuals, but also as a collective. The social imaginary is not just abstract theories from academia or political elites, but rather, the common popular understanding of what is right and worth striving for (O'Neill 2016). Within the age of secularization, we have seen people of different walks of life and different religions come together and live within the same land as relative equals. What this also has led to is a core of shared beliefs to allow for general human flourishing. However, there have been subsets of issues which remain to be contested by differing groups within this society. Therefore, we see an overarching social imaginary which predominantly dominates a land (or even our world) at a moment, but within that are still the imaginaries of different groups and individuals. O'Neill writes, "The conception of the social imaginary enables analysis of the dominant moral purpose and moral order of a society in terms of private (or familial) and public (or systemic) economic agency" (2016).

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At one point in history Christian thought was the primary driver of the social imaginary in the west. However, this no longer remains the case. The "Nova Effect" has led to an explosion of beliefs, and with it an ever-increasing number of ideas contributing towards the concept of what is morally good and acceptable. At the same time there has arisen an "Immanent Frame,"[1] which traps modern society within the immanent, not needing the transcendent in everyday life. Evangelical Christians have often stood at odds within modern western secular society on certain moral issues, such as same sex marriage and abortion. The concept of the social imaginary is important because we see the way that values of secular society have influenced evangelical Christianity through the power of story. The way many younger generations of Christians imagine modern society to function and what is moral, differ from older generations within the church, despite the fact that in many churches the teaching on these issues has not shifted. These facts lead to a logical and important question: what has caused such a shift in the imaginary of these different generations? The social imaginary has been shaped by, and is continuing to be shaped by, that which has shaped imagination since man began communicating: story.

The Importance of Story

Story is vitally important. Without story our world would be a much blander place, and we would have lost so much of who we are. The very act of storytelling is a part of the human experience (Hunter & Eder 2010, 223), and stretches back to the very origin of language and the mind (Tolkien 1947, 8). Stories are not just a western enigma but are present in every culture throughout time. Western culture is oversaturated with stories. Noble writes, "Our stories are more pervasive, more diverse, and more immersive than ever. What these stories give us are ways of imagining meaning and justification in life" (Noble 2018,76). Within this section I hope to highlight three areas in which story plays a vital role.

Within Development of the Individual

Stories are vital to the development of a child. Hunter and Eder write, "Through the use of stories, young children make sense of the world surrounding them" (2010,223). Story can help educate imagination and feeling and contributes to intellectual as well as emotional development (Mowl 1972,19).

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[1] Taylor coins the term the Immanent Frame to explain the state of our secular world. The frame has been composed of the understanding of science vs. God, the narration of subtraction, modern understanding of ethics and the understanding of the autonomous self in authorizing values and morals. From Taylor's analysis we live entirely in a context and social imaginary that needs no reference to the transcendent. We may live in a closed frame (not acknowledging the existence of transcendence), or an open frame (open to the spiritual), but either way our society is formed by this frame (2007:545).

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Narrative has shown to be important as it conveys truth to our brains in a different way than analytic abstract thought (Stratton 2021,60). In many ways people, especially children, think in images. Abstract ideas are almost impossible to grasp apart from association to some form of a metaphoric image (Starr 2018). What does it mean to be nice? To help a person understand what we desire by them being "nice," one might share a story about a person going throughout his or her day, sharing with others, allowing others to go first, and encouraging others. The narrative allows us to stop simply talking about a moral life and instead give real examples (Vitz 1990,718). Brett Sanders writes, "Stories are the most powerful way to learn anything, or remember it, because they rub with the deepest grain of our nature. One of the most important things children gain from stories is moral formation" (Saunders 2018,59). Paul Vitz, in his argument for the use of stories within education, after summarizing many psychologists works regarding narrative communication writes, "a very effective way to introduce children to the moral life, short of actually placing them in morally challenging situations, is to have them hear, read, or watch morally challenging narratives" (1990,716).

In Shaping Society and Culture

One should not underestimate the power of a good story. Stories have been one of the primary ways throughout human history through which cultures have passed down their history and their values to future generations. The stories we share show the current values of a society and shape the culture further. Quoting Michael Margolis, Susan Stratton writes, "If you want to learn about a culture, listen to the stories. If you want to change a culture, change the stories" (2021,57). In his paper *Storytelling within the Context of Apologetics*, which is culled from his book *Doing Apologetics with an African Mindset*, Ebenezer Afolabi shares three functions of storytelling: mediating and transmitting of knowledge and information across generations, conveying information to the younger generation about the culture, worldviews, morals, expectations, norms, and values, and supporting and reinforcing the basic doctrines of a communal participatory experience (Afolabi 2022,2).

The values and morals of a society will impact all aspects of life. If a core value is family and respecting elders, then this will greatly impact family structure and housing. If a core value is success at all costs, with little emphasis put on truth or honesty, then one should not be surprised at cases of embezzlement. Stories have a way of showing what a culture values and conveying those values to future generations. Yes, stories have an entertainment factor, but even that which entertains educates. Even play for children is not simply entertainment, rather children learn through play.

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Forming the Future

Stories help form the future in many ways. First off, the values which we pass on help form not just the society of today, but of the future as well. Stories were passed down from generation to generation, not just to record history, but also to help maintain those elements of society worth keeping.

Stories have also been integral in leading towards social change. They have often done this by shedding light on atrocities which the larger part of a culture either didn't see or overlooked. For instance, slave narratives were used by abolitionists to help end the North Atlantic Slave Trade. The novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was also written shortly before the American Civil War to help create support for Abolitionism. Harper Lee's book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has also been cited as factoring in the success of the Civil Rights movement.

Another way in which stories impact the future is by helping us to imagine what could be. Science fiction narratives have often portrayed technology not yet present in the time of writing. Such fanciful ideas have then driven technology forward to reach such ideas (Jordan et al. 2018,1).

Conclusion

Story is vital to who we are as human beings. Stories help us as individuals, working to instill morals and imagination, they help form society, and they influence the future. This shows that narratives which gain traction and have a wider audience are important. What we consume as individuals has the potential to influence us, our concept of what is morally good and acceptable, as well as what our values should consist of and what constitutes human flourishing. Furthermore, what is consumed by the larger society as a whole, can thus impact the social imaginary.

The Role of Story in the Secularization of Young People in the West

The last section showed the importance and influence of story. Yet the way in which story has been presented and consumed has greatly evolved throughout time. Before written language there was oral tradition. The invention of the printing press revolutionized the ability of the masses to consume literature. The advent of the radio allowed for audio narrations to be heard by masses at the same time. And then came video and television. Today young people hardly read unless required to for school and primarily consume story through electronic media (Twenge 2017,75). Nevertheless, story is woven throughout all aspects of media as well as life in general and continues

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to impact the social imaginary. Even businesses are interested in the power of storytelling (Fryer 2003). This section will seek to look at three forms of stories which have influenced and are continuing to impact younger generations, namely: story in the form of historical narratives, story through media (written as well as digital), and conclude by addressing personal stories, often referred to as testimonies.

Story Presented Through Historical Narratives

Throughout the course of civilization story has been integral to passing down history from one generation to the next. However, in the past this was mostly controlled by elites and a formal system, whether through religious educational systems such as the church or secular educational systems. The advent of the internet has drastically changed the distribution of information and has thus had an impact on known history. New technologies and websites such as Wikipedia have allowed for a shift away from traditional top-down narratives and the surge in "counter narratives" or "history from below"[Waterhouse 2016:6][Mora 2014:1][2] (Waterhouse 2016,6). The average person has access to a myriad of competing narratives with regard to historical events, such as the stolen generation in Australia (Waterhouse 2016) or the Tulsa race massacre in the United States (Wikipedia contributors 2025c). Such counter narratives have shown younger generations that there are sides to history which have often been hidden. This has naturally caused younger generations to be wary of traditional historical narratives presented by organized institutions, whether it be a nation or religious institution. Twenge states, "The percentage of 12th graders who say that institutions such as education, government, the news media, large corporations, and religious organizations are doing a good job reached an all-time low in 2014" (2017,334). Digital sources have become a main source for news with 54% of adults reporting at least getting some news from social media, primarily from Facebook or YouTube (Pew Research Center 2024). This trend increases in younger generations, showing that from the age range of 18-29, 86% prefer to get their news from digital media.

This movement feeds into the Nova Effect coined by Taylor, in that it allows for a range of views on any particular subject or historical event to be given. This has led to terms such as misinformation and malinformation to become prevalent. Teens and young adults are often learning narratives to history which are counter to that of what their parents and grandparents know. These narratives may or may not be true. Regardless of validity, this well of narratives works not only to erode trust, but also

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[2] "The concept of 'history from below' is the demand for the stories of subjugated and oppressed peoples to be told, and the rewriting of official histories to include their experiences" . "'Counter-narrative' refers to the narratives that arise from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized" .

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enables people to search for articles, videos, and various media to support their stance on any given issue. Many teens are also receiving access to a wide range of information without consent or knowledge of their guardians as many older generations are simply uneducated and unaware of how to limit internet access for minors. Many older generations are also unaware of what narratives are presented on social media sites such as YouTube and TikTok.

Story in Media

> Movies and television fueled the entertainment industry. They were, and are, critical components in forming the modern understanding of the self. They must feature in any narrative that seeks to explain how and why the ideas of the intellectual elite come to shape the social imaginary as a whole (Trueman in Hansen 2017,20).

Today young people may be reading fewer books (Twenge 2017,75), but that does not mean that they are not being bombarded with story. To the contrary, younger generations spend a vast amount of time with new media, spending about two hours a day on the internet, one and a half hours a day on electronic gaming, and about two hours a day watching TV (Twenge 2017,64). The social media explosion has led to the growth in short term narrative content across platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

Videogames must not be overlooked when it comes to narrative impact. Many videogames provide a unique narrative experience in that they allow the player to guide the story by making their own choices which will impact the development of their character and outcome of the story. This puts the player into simulated moral issues in ways that other narratives don't because they actively participate in the story and the choice. Even games that do not provide this sort of choice still deliver rich narratives full of moral, psychological, and philosophical issues.

These statistics are vital for the church to grapple with and to understand because media control the flow of ideas and information across the globe (Sivasubramanian 2019,1). The Swedish sociologist Mia Lövheim already wrote in 2012, "Among younger generations, the media is a more frequent arena than family and church for encounters with religious ideas and values" (2012,164). Media has become an active culture agent of all forms of communication (Sivasubramanian 2019,1). Margunn Dahle writes

> Consciously or subconsciously, children and youth find answers to many of their lifestyle, ethical and existential questions in the media messages. These media images and stories give an impression of what is important

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in life, how to live, whom to trust, what to believe in, and what to think about themselves (Dahle 2017,62–63).

Young people's use of media has continued to rise with the continued growth of high-speed internet and social media platforms. Even chat rooms and social media sites are filled with narrative stories that conflict those of traditional faith values as young people are able to interact with people from all over the world, with all sorts of values and moral frameworks.

Story from Personal Experience (Testimonies)

Christians have long understood the importance of personal testimony when it comes to sharing the gospel. The Christian does not simply profess a belief in the resurrected Christ, but demonstrates a change and new life through Christ (Penner 2013,101). However, Christians are not the only ones with a story to share. Ever increasing amounts of communities are coming together to share their stories with one another, and the world around them. Therapists and educators have begun seeing the importance of a person sharing his or her story.

In her paper, *Morality Work Among the Transabled*, Jenny Davis examined the process by which stigmatized persons resist moral denigration by utilizing a process of discursive remoralization techniques. She coined the term *morality work* (2014,436). Her research tracked blog-posts and social media sites of transabled individuals (or BIID). Transabled are individuals who feel some sort of sexual attraction to people with a disability, desire to have a disability themselves, or even pretend or seek to become disabled (Davis 2014,435). Her work showed that in sharing their feelings and stories among one another, this community created techniques of overcoming the moral stigma surrounding their condition and actually succeeded in "taking the moral high ground".

Over the last few centuries, the Western world has come to view authenticity as a sacred moral value. Taylor has coined this the "age of authenticity" (2007,475). Therefore, to live a "good", "righteous", and "fulfilling" life means being true to oneself. Davis writes

> This discourse of authenticity renders claims of sexual perversion irrelevant; turns the greedy use of resources into the essential use of tools for self-fulfillment; reworks the need for attention into a need for self-verification; and justifies lying as a necessary evil in the sacred quest for an authentic and fulfilling life. (2014,445–446)

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The process of *morality work* requires a process of "frame lifting and frame shifting" as well as skillful navigation of cultural repertoires (2014,447). Through the process of frame lifting and frame shifting, those who would originally be seen as morally deviant or in a stigmatized group attempt to shift their status by sharing their personal stories. Through this process they show that this is their authentic self and re-work frames of certain structures around them. In the case of transabled individuals it varied based upon the case (whether the person acted disabled or was simply attracted to disabled individuals) but throughout the process of their morality work they reworked the frames of health and illness, as they favor mental well-being over physical dexterity (2014,448). In navigating cultural repertoires, we see communities shift their dialogue to help fit in and become accepted within culture. Through her research Davis found that at the beginning of one blog site there was frequent discussion of sexual activity with regards to BIID, but this began to shift. Many have found cultural acceptance by re-imagining their identities not as a mental disability which should be treated, but a marginalized group of people. What is interesting is that both detractors and supporters can have different bents on the same moral issues. Whereas detractors see them as "sick" and "in need of help", transabled individuals saw this as a signifier of blamelessness, one that shifts their stigmatization out of the moral realm (2014,450). In the conclusion of her work, Davis writes

> By appealing to the value of inner-truth, abnormal embodiment becomes not only acceptable, but a righteous pursuit. With this logic, those who stand in the way of such a pursuit become the object of moral derision (2014,451).

Sarah Combellick took the concept of morality work and authored a paper in connection with women sharing abortion stories online. Many pro-abortion sites have begun sharing such stories to help encourage women who are standing before an abortion decision. The stories showed a wide range of stances, from individuals who saw no moral problem with their decision to abort, to those who wrestled with the decision, but felt like it was overall the best decision to make. Within her research she noticed that some women even wove their faith into their personal accounts. Combellick notes that these women can be seen as holding two seemingly contradicting ideas at once while maintaining a coherent narrative (2023,99).

Everyone has a story to share. And these accounts show us the power of personal testimony, especially when shared within a contained group. Personal testimonies become all the more powerful the closer we are to a person. We are much more concerned about the life of a close friend or dear relative than about a stranger. Yet, the

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rise of the internet has allowed virtual strangers to build deep friendships without ever meeting face to face. The stories we consume can either help push us towards God and his truth, or towards our own truth and self-justification.

A Christian Response

If the church wishes to be effective not only in apologetics and evangelism, but successful in moral formation of the next generation, it must evaluate the role of story within its theological approach to such things. As has been shown, storytelling is central to society, and it must have a place within the church as well. This section will seek to first look at ways of implementing story into theology in terms of apologetics and evangelism as well as moral formation. It will then briefly discuss the concept of a Christian influence in media. In conclusion, it will look at teaching critical thinking and analysis skills so that when young people encounter media, they are prepared to reflect on what messages are being conveyed.

More than Systematic Theology

As previously noted, in his book A Secular Age Taylor shares his story on how mankind went from a state of enchantment to disenchantment. Taylor identifies four significant shifts in world history that led to the anthropocentric secularization of culture. These shifts occurred from the collective repercussions of the Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the Scientific revolutions (Stratton 2021,9), which contributed to the creation of a "buffered self"[3] and a systematic approach towards looking at God and the universe. During this timeframe there was a shift in western thinking towards more abstract thought and to favor logical, scientific reasoning. As social imaginaries began to emerge which drifted from traditional church understanding as to the nature of God, even leading to the possibility of atheism, many theologians began to defend the faith and apologetics, as we often know it today, emerged (Penner 2013,6). Myron Bradley Penner writes in his book *The End of Apologetics*,

> In order to fend off modern attacks and establish itself as a legitimate branch of knowledge, modern theology focuses on articulating the contours of the Christian worldview in a coherent system that establishes Christan doctrine as a rational body of knowledge (2013,45).

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[3] The concept of the buffered self is that the possibility exists of taking distance from and disengaging from everything outside the mind. It is the concept that people are capable of influencing and changing their own situations, outcomes and destinies.

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One problem is that in defending the faith, or moral faith positions, many Christians still rely on "time proven" arguments with language formed from a different time. Penner states that "many attempts to articulate the reasonableness of Christian faith in our context paradoxically end up doing something different than defending genuine Christianity" (2013,6).

Another problem is that Christians seek to reason logically about the possibility of faith, or the reason for certain moral positions, while the surrounding culture is full of counter narratives. Every day the average person is bombarded with stories which reflect the absence of God, a grounding for moral truth, and contrast the values put forth by the church. Good theology must consist of good story or the church will continue to see decline.

Story in Evangelism and Apologetics

In his book *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and imaginary in a Disenchanted World,* Paul Gould appeals to the need for cultural apologetics which he defines as, "the work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying (2019,21). While traditional apologists focus on academic sources for providing evidence for arguments, cultural apologists seek "cultural artifacts" in illustrations taken from the world of art, music sports, entertainment, social relations, and politics (Gould 2019,20). Cultural apologetics seeks to demonstrate not only the truth of Christianity, but also the desirability of Christianity (Gould 2019,25).

This form of apologetics calls for "double listening," a Christian mind that's "shaped by truths of historic, biblical Christianity and also fully immersed in the realities of the contemporary world" (Wax 2023). This form of double listening is complemented by a "double refusal" of refusing to escape from the world, and a refusal to conform to the world (Wax 2023). If we want to effectively defend the faith and share the Gospel, then we must thoroughly understand that which we are sharing, and those with whom we are sharing.

As we reflect on the three forms of story (historical, media, and testimony), combined they have the ability to impact the social imaginary of the world around us and help people escape the immanent frame (Noble 2018,155). Story through media can help introduce a person to the concept of a creator and the concept of more than just human flourishing. Cultural Apologists can use references to books, movies, & songs to awaken within hearts the desire for the Gospel.

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The historical narrative of early Christianity tells a compelling story all on its own, as many apologists have already realized. The stories of the first apostles giving, traveling the distances which they traveled, and even offering their very lives for the sake of the gospel is fascinating. However, we must be careful not to just present these as simple facts in some sort of argument, but in a compelling way!

Testimony is an important aspect in evangelism. Churches should champion personal testimonies and allow people to share what God has done for them. These testimonies need not always be about radical transformation, but even those who grew up within the church have a story to tell. As Christian witnesses we should also not just give narrative testimony to the truth we have received in Christ by telling our stories, but also embody that testimony in how we live (Penner 2013,101). The way we interact with the world, and the way we serve others is a living testimony to the power of Christ in us. Penner summarizes this concept thusly, "With my words I engage my listeners with a narrative so that they can imagine a world with this particular truth, and by my life I show them it is possible to live in that world" (2013,102). In sharing stories the church should try to focus much more on who and what they are for rather than what they oppose (Kinnaman & Lyons 2012,26). The Gospel is life changing, and we must show that it is a change worth making. A shift towards a positive, better life, not towards the negative.

Story in Christian Discipleship and Moral Formation

Story can help awaken people to the existence of God, but story is an often-overlooked aspect of theology with regards to discipleship and moral formation. Betsy Childs Howard writes, "we'll be far more effective at reaching children's minds and hearts if we intentionally shape their moral imaginations through good stories" (2020). The shaping of the moral imagination does not stop in childhood. As we have seen, stories help shape the social imagination of today as well as the future.

Often moral formation within the church is approached systematically. A sermon will have three points on the danger of such and such an issue. Battling moral issues such as pornography is often done using statistics and facts showing the dangers of pornography. And when it comes to homosexuality, within many evangelical churches, often a list of verses is given as proof texts and little more to address the issue. I am not trying to say that these are illegitimate. We should utilize logic, and the Bible should be our ultimate authority, but we should also learn from the Bible in seeing how it often used stories to address difficult issues. Utilizing story to address difficult moral issues can, as shown earlier, help people to understand abstract concepts better. It can help a

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person understand the consequences of a particular action but as well as to understand the positives of a particular choice.

When it comes to the subject of why there is pain in the world, the Bible told a heartbreaking story of a man named Job who lost everything. Yes, the book of Job contains many philosophical diatribes, but contained within a story. Jesus often packed his truths within story. Stories can help us show how life should be, and what we as a church stand for. Stories can help show what a healthy marriage looks like. Stories can also show the dangers of something like pornography addiction. Instead of just saying that something is wrong and giving a few proof texts, a story of someone actually caught in addiction is compelling and illustrates the point.

Testimonies are a powerful form of story when it comes to dealing with moral formation. Allow people to share their stories. In recent years many same sex attracted Christians have written books about their experience such as *Washed and Waiting* by Sam Hill and *A War of Loves* by David Bennett. Such experiences can be a great resource when dealing with such a sensitive and important topic. As Christians we should listen to one another's stories and learn from them.

Christian Influence in Media

The average church only has a limited number of hours a week to form minds and hearts, while those same minds and hearts are being formed all week long through various sorts of media. David Sivasubramanian writes, "theology cannot afford to shun from media because of its culture determining role in the contemporary world" (2019,4).

Christians should seek to contribute to story through various forms of media. This does not simply mean the creation of Christian media, rather, Christian creatives should be encouraged to use their talents to influence media within the secular realm. We are capable of showing an alternative social imaginary, one that can help open the closed immanent frame, by validating and revealing truths hidden in their hearts (Nobe in Hansen 2017,144). Concerning the need to impact the arts Alan Noble writes "To pursue this approach, we need foundational investment in Christian liberal arts universities, creative writing and film programs, literary publications and more (2017,144). We need compelling, well told stories which reflect values worth pursuing and which can point people towards God. This is not a call for every church or every minister to be active on YouTube, but for churches to support those who have proper gifting, and for churches to be willing to invest in those individuals and projects to help have an impact.

Church leaders should also be aware of good media which they can use, or which they can tell others about. Since teens spend so much time on new media, then it can be significant giving them good media to consume.

Critical Thinking and Analysis

Christian moral formation through story does not imply retreat from all forms of non-Christian media, but rather sees how good stories help us see and pursue God stories (Saunders 2018,66). Young people are impacted by the stories they are hearing and seeing. The church needs to not just impact their lives with positive stories but also help them to understand how media impacts them and teach them to think critically and interpret the stories which they consume. Alan Noble states, "As participants in culture, all Christians are interpreters , and the framework Taylor provides can help us to more accurately and insightfully interpret art" (2017,138). Brian Godawa calls Christians to allow movies to challenge them, and even change them, by helping them to see the world through different eyes. He writes, "By entering into the story, we can experience a part of human existence and truth that we cannot reduce to abstract ideas or philosophy" (2009,176).

We must teach teens how to effectively engage and interpret media. A usable process is a two-step methodology which begins by decrypting. As a person consumes media, he or she can look for what is good, true, and beautiful (fragments) within stories, as well as what is ugly, wrong, or perverted (idols) (Anzenberger 2024). This helps us see fragments of the true biblical story, and ways in which it has been perverted. Fragments draw the spectator into the story, whereas idols have the power to imprison the spectator within the worldview of the story. The second step consists of re-encoding. Within this step we ask what sort of worldview is presented, with its values, philosophies, and morals. And the spectator asks how he or she should respond (Anzenberger 2024). This methodology helps a person to see redeemable aspects of stories and what type of philosophies and values undergird the narrative, helping a person to evaluate what is worth keeping and what he or she should discard. In our digital internet age, with its flood of information, it is also important to help young people learn how to sift through numerous narratives to discern what is true and what is not.

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Conclusion

Christians are currently living in a secular age. Over the last fifty years churches have been feeling the tension of this growing secularism as they have seen church attendance decline and a shift in values. Secular stories have contributed to the shaping of the social imaginary and have led to this current state. If the church wants to be effective in engaging people with the gospel, and passing along values to the next generation, then it must understand the importance of utilizing story. We do not need an abandonment of systematic theology, rather, we need a fuller theology that understands the vital importance of story to helping us understand complex abstract concepts. Stories have filled imaginations for generations, and they have the potential to play a crucial role in shaping the social imaginary in our current age to bring people closer to God.

John Curry lives in southwest Germany encouraging existing churches and aiding in the planting of new churches in increasingly secular contexts. Previously, John served as youth minister in Salt Lake City, Utah and worked with Kontaktmission in Wüstenrot, Germany.

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