

Speech & the Imagination

Jesus was “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Jesus himself said that his “words” were *words of life* (John 6:63). And his Apostles clearly gave priority “to the ministry of *the word*” (Acts 6:4). The Apostles did not control the word, but the word which was “planted in them” (James 1:21) was “compelling them to preach” (1 Cor. 9:16). We can make a distinction between the word *as Jesus Christ* and the word *as the holy Scriptures* (see *The Ordinary Means of Grace* for more on that subject).

Another helpful distinction can be made between the word *as we read it* and the word *as we speak it*. The *written* word of God enhances our ability to *speak* the word of God. Throughout history, many believers only *heard* God’s word as it was *spoken* to them. In my view, *speech* continues to be the most prominent means of influence on earth. And this seems to have been true from the very beginning: God *spoke* creation into existence, Adam *called* things by name, and the blessings and curses of the OT were *pronounced* by the Prophets, etc.

So, what does this mean for us today? The written word—the text of Scripture—certainly enhances our knowledge of God. And yet knowledge *unvoiced* seems to lack something essential. It seems that knowledge was meant to be *spoken*. And because speech is such a powerful mode of communication, Christians should learn to learn speak God’s word *with conviction*. Reading and writing have their place in Christian development, but too often those disciplines foster a *private* lifestyle instead of drawing us near to those who dearly need *our* testimony—not from a distance, not mediated, but up close and in-person. So then, students of God’s *written* word should be careful to constantly practice *speaking* God’s word—both to ourselves and to others.

There are many different genres represented in the Bible. The simplest (and perhaps the most powerful) genre is *story* (narrative). In our modern context, it might be necessary to emphasize that storytelling is not the same as fiction. We tend to equate those two words—fiction and storytelling—but the distinction between the two is very important. The most mundane retelling of an event—such as describing our commute to work—*is* storytelling. When we give shape or form to a series of events, then we are *telling a story*. And while these stories are *in a sense* objective (factual), our stories are also loaded with subjective (personal) value judgments. Virtually all history books *tell a story*. We need to keep that in mind as we discuss storytelling. We aren’t talking about creating fictions. Here is a working definition for storytelling: Storytelling is giving shape, form, or coherence to a set of observations.

The Bible is filled with all kinds of stories. Yes, the Bible contains a lot more than stories (narratives)—but the story is central. The story provides a coherent framework for the other contents of the Bible. If we are serious about speaking the word of God in daily life, then we ought to become very familiar with the stories of the Bible. As mentioned earlier, storytelling is an inescapable mode of communication. We can *neglect* this faculty and remain poor communicators; or we can *abuse* this faculty by creating false or distorted narratives; or we can *nurture* this faculty through constant and careful practice.

The stories of the Bible are all concentrated around *key people*. If we follow the lives of these key people, then we can easily trace—from Genesis to Revelation—the overarching Story of Redemption. So, here’s a practical suggestion: Become deeply familiar with the stories surrounding the key people of the Bible, *and then* begin sharing these stories with other people. It’s worth mentioning some cautions at this point: If we *deliberately reinvent* these stories to suit our own purposes, then we distort God’s wisdom and expose our own ignorance. In addition, we should avoid shortchanging the testimony of the Bible by *intentionally neglecting* certain parts of the story. *Intricacy enhances appreciation*. Now, of

course, there are various constraints that will limit our ability to delve into all the details in our everyday conversations, but this principle is clear—i.e. *the more detail, the better*.

That brings us to one of the great challenges of our contemporary culture: Many of us are deeply immersed in a culture of *screen-watching*. In addition to the lack of serious content, which seems to be part-and-parcel of the entertainment culture, there is a deeper concern: screens tend to do most (if not all) of the *imagining* for us. When we *watch*, our minds are passive. When we *hear*, our minds have to *imagine the scenarios* being described. And this might be one of the reasons why so many of us fail to bring the word of God into our everyday conversations—i.e. we have lost the ability to imagine these stories *for ourselves*.

A curious person might ask the following question: Can't we learn the Bible from watching videos? The first problem I see with that mentality is this: Bible stories *on-screen* tend to be extremely loose with interpretation. In many cases, filmmakers simply rewrite the narratives. Generally speaking, videos that have remained true (or at least close) to the biblical text are either too low-budget or too boring for consumers. The stories of the Bible are clearly *not boring*, but the medium *of a screen* is very different from that of a *hearing-only* medium. Modern videos require a certain amount of dialogue and plot development that a book (especially an ancient book) does not provide. So then, filmmakers have two options: add their own creative content to the story *or* produce a boring film.

And even if the Bible were presented in an accurate and compellingly series of videos, then we would still not be using *our own* imagination. When we *imagine for ourselves*, then the stories begin to *take up residence within us*. Now-a-days, videos are dime-a-dozen. We watch videos primarily for entertainment, and the content typically does not *shape or re-shape* the way we think. But when a certain text (or a certain speaker) *captures our imagination*, that content might *permanently alter the way we think!*

So then, if we want to learn to *speak the word* in everyday conversation, then our imagination *must be trained* to do so. Therefore, I highly recommend getting deeply acquainted with *the stories of the Bible*. And the resource labeled *Existential Bible Reading* will introduce one compelling way to do that.