

For all the Saints: Autobiography in Christian Theology

L. GREGORY JONES

The closing scene of the film *Places in the Heart* takes place in a small protestant church in Waxahatchie, Texas. The people are singing the chorus of "Blessed Assurance":

This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long;
this is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.

Following the song and a reading of 1 Corinthians 13, the film ends with the celebration of Holy Communion (which in the film subtly and powerfully turns into a reflection of the fullness of God's Kingdom).

Hearing "Blessed Assurance" sung in this closing scene seemed entirely appropriate and natural. After all, it is a favorite hymn among American protestants, particularly in small-town churches in places like Waxahatchie, Texas. Not only could I imagine people like Edna Spaulding and her family singing "Blessed Assurance," I also could think of contexts where I have sung it.

Moreover, the claim that "This is my story" seemed to fit the film as it drew together the particularity of the various characters' autobiographies, the cosmic sweep of God's story, and a specific slice of the story of what it means to be a Texan and/or a Southerner. But I must confess that I only know about the latter second-hand, for I am neither a Texan nor a Southerner. I realized as I watched the film that I did not fully understand the story about which they were singing. What did (and does) it mean to be a Texan?

L. Gregory Jones is assistant professor of theology at Loyola College in Maryland.

ON BEING A UNITED METHODIST PREACHER AND A CHRISTIAN—BUT NOT A TEXAN

Ten years ago my friend and teacher Stanley Hauerwas gave a lecture at his alma mater, Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. The title of his lecture was “A Tale of Two Stories: On Being a Christian and a Texan.”¹ Much of what I know about “being a Texan” I have learned from people like Stanley, not only from a lecture like the one he gave but also from spending time with him. Stanley would remind me that “being a Texan” is a story that has given shape and form to his life as well as many other people’s lives. Now of course there are actually many stories of “being a Texan,” and Texans carry on arguments about which story is right and about how that story ought to be told.

In his lecture, Stanley told one particular version of what it means to be a Texan by drawing on William Humphrey’s novel *The Ordways*. But Stanley’s focus was really larger than an internal argument among Texans about which story is the right one. His argument was directed at the presumptions of modern culture which suggest that we can “choose” whatever “identity” we want. From this perspective, life presents us with a “make your own self” kit. In contrast, Stanley wanted to show that people are more fundamentally formed by stories we did not create than by stories we think we choose. We are born into stories that have shaped our past, are shaping our present, and can give form to our future.

“Being a Texan” does that for Stanley and, I suspect, for many others. Yet Stanley also wanted to argue in that lecture for the importance of “being a Christian.” For while Stanley is rightly proud of what “being a Texan” has taught him about loyalty and hard work and overcoming hardship, he is also aware of the limits of that story. He knows that Texans have too often attempted to make virtues of some of Texas’s worst sins, as evidenced by the sign that hung over the main street of Greenville for many years: “Welcome to Greenville: The Blackest Land, the Whitest People.” Stanley argues that part of what “being a Texan” has meant is an inability to admit failure and tragedy. Hence it has too often turned into “an ideology that denies that injustice is part and parcel of our history.”²

The fact that he is a Christian, however, enables Stanley to place that injustice within the context of a larger story. Stanley argues that “being a Christian” is a story that enables us to see how, despite our complicity in injustice and sin, we are forgiven by God’s grace and enabled to live a new life. Hence “being a Christian” presents a challenge to “being a Texan.” Being a Christian requires that Texans (and the rest of us) learn to acknowledge not only the virtues and wisdom that comes from their identity, but also the vice and sin which have been a part of their (and all of our) history.

For a long time I have envied Stanley’s story of “being a Texan.” I was born in Tennessee, but when I was six months old my family moved to Illinois. Along the way I have lived in Indiana, Colorado, North Carolina and now Maryland. My parents were from Iowa and Kentucky, and my family is now spread out over Maryland, North Carolina, Colorado, Japan and even Texas! I am a geographical mutt, whereas Stanley is a pure breed. So I have presumed that I have no story to tell about myself comparable to Stanley’s.

Yet I have also realized that the reason I am a geographical mutt is because of a different kind of story into which I was born. It is a story of Methodist preachers. Preachers populate both sides of my family, and the heritage goes back for several generations on my mother's side. My father was a Methodist preacher, and the heritage has continued on with my brother (who is currently serving the Howe United Methodist Church in Howe, Texas) and with both my wife and me.

There are many interesting things about being born into a family of Methodist preachers, some of which worry me (especially raising my children in a family where both parents are preachers—but that's another story for another time!). Part of what it means to be a Methodist preacher is to move. Often moves are confined to the bounds of an annual conference, but my father moved around the country. One of the costs of being a Methodist preacher is the loss of a sense of place. There is no particular house, no particular town, no particular area that I identify as "home."³ But it also means I haven't had to worry about allowing such stories as "being a Texan" or, to take another example, "being Irish," to become ideologies.

Indeed from a Christian perspective, I have been blessed because my life has been most determinatively shaped by a version of the Christian narrative. "Being a United Methodist preacher" is a way of describing *both* my history and my understanding of Christian life. I remember my family's concern with holy living, whether it was my grandfather's parents worry about the dangers of card playing and going to the movies or my father's abhorrence of alcohol or my parents' convictions about the importance of Christian communities serving in the world. I remember my father the preacher providing leadership in the midst of racial turmoil in a small town in Indiana during the 1960s. Such concerns and convictions have significantly shaped how I understand what it means to be a Christian.

Thus it might appear that I am in better shape than people who are also Texans or Irish. For whereas such people have stories that give shape to who they are, those stories also must be (at least in part) "unlearned" if persons are going to "learn" to become "Christians." So Stanley indicated a need to "unlearn" the triumphalist and violent parts of "being a Texan" if he is to learn the narrative of a crucified God.

Since my being from a family of United Methodist preachers means I have already been learning what it means to become a Christian, so it would seem, what could I possibly need to "unlearn"? Methodist triumphalism, for one thing. Methodism can be turned into no less an ideology than being Texan or Irish, and that becomes particularly problematic because "being a United Methodist" can so easily be *equated* with being a Christian. This can cause us to presume that there is no other story of "being a Christian" which might correct the ideologies of "being a United Methodist."

Even so, the more determinative thing I have needed, and still need, to unlearn is Methodist institutionalism. By the time I was in college I knew more about the various institutions and people of United Methodism than I did about either the Bible or God, despite the obviously central place both the Bible and God had in the lives of my family members. Though I had learned much about the

centrality of the church from my family's commitments, I had somehow missed seeing that the church exists as a witness to God. Thus the church was attractive to me not so much because of its practices, but because I had strong institutional loyalties. When people would ask me why I was going to seminary, I would sometimes joke that I had no choice; it was the family business.

And yet, from the perspective I now have, there was more truth than joke in the comment. I had planned to go into the ministry more because that is what people in my family did than because of any convictions I had about God, Jesus or the Bible. I had great respect for the diverse kinds of ministry embodied in the lives of various family members, but I had found it all too easy to think that being a Christian simply meant being a loyal United Methodist.

Then an unexpected thing happened. During the summer before I began seminary, my father died. He had been a very influential figure in my life, and I had relied on his wisdom and guidance in many ways—perhaps too many. I did not really know at the time of his death what a pivotal event it would become. I found myself asking questions about the purpose of life. Such questions compelled me to think more seriously about whether Christian convictions about God, the world and human life are true or not. I could not resolve such issues adequately in the abstract. However, in reflecting on my father's life and its relation to my own, I began to realize that I couldn't explain his life adequately without pointing to his belief in the God of Jesus Christ.⁴ Most important was not my father's story or even my story, but the ways in which those stories were and are configured in relation to the Triune God.

As I discovered the importance of so configuring my life, the seminarian who was a United Methodist-preacher-to-be became a Christian.⁵ Or better put, I found myself beginning a life-long process of learning to be a Christian. And a crucial part of that process has involved unlearning some of the story of "being a United Methodist preacher." I remain a United Methodist preacher to be sure, and that identity continues to be important and to give form to my life. But I have also begun to learn that my life ought to be more determinatively shaped by the story of the Triune God. Thus my continuing allegiance to "being a United Methodist preacher" is tied to my ability to conform that story to the story of God.

Describing my life in these ways reflects presumptions about the place of autobiography and narrative in Christian theology. I want to turn now to explaining some of those presumptions in order to suggest why autobiography is important to Christian theology.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The first presumption is that narrative is central to understanding human life. Theologians, no less than the rest of humanity, grasp their lives in narrative form. As Charles Taylor has suggested, "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going."⁶ Narrative is thus critical to the evaluation of a person's character. If you want to know who I am, you need to know about my past and the convictions which guide my sense of the future. There is an irreducible particularity to the story of my life, just as

my character is irreducibly particular.

Moreover, just as we do not invent our character from day to day, so the narrative that we tell is not something we invent or simply choose. It is constrained in a variety of ways. It is constrained by the story or stories into which we are born, as Stanley Hauerwas's "being a Texan" and my "being a United Methodist preacher" illustrate. Thus Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"⁷ We need to learn to "tell our stories" if we are adequately to understand how we have come to be who we are. That is so regardless of whether we want to continue to narrate our lives in continuity with the story which has formed us.

A person's narrative is also constrained by others. So MacIntyre insists that "I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives."⁸ We are at best the coauthors of our own narratives. Again as MacIntyre describes it, "We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others."⁹

The story of my life has been constrained by my father's death and the lives of people whom I have come to know over the years, and I have played a subordinate part in the dramas of their lives. Moreover, my story has also been constrained by the ways in which other people have embodied and told the story of what it means to be a United Methodist preacher.

Most determinatively, however, our lives are constrained by the fact that we are all participants in God's drama which constrains our own. Learning to tell our story in that way will undoubtedly require both an "unlearning" of parts of the narratives that we have told about ourselves and a gradual process of "learning" to locate our lives in relation to God.¹⁰ Thus a second presumption is that telling the story of our lives is central to the shaping of Christian life and the activity of Christian theology.

That might seem strange. After all, isn't Christian life a matter of learning the right doctrines, memorizing the right Bible verses and then simply being sure to love your neighbor? And isn't Christian theology primarily the study of propositions about God and the world? While such concerns are obviously not unrelated to Christian life and Christian theology, focusing on them tends to distort both. As James W. McClendon has argued,

By recognizing that Christian beliefs are not so many "propositions" to be catalogued or juggled like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities, we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one which begins by attending to lived lives. Theology must be at least

biography.¹¹

Christian life is learned not so much through study of doctrines and texts (though those are important) as it is through seeing how those doctrines and texts are embodied in people's lives.

For example, if I were to ask a group of Christians to name the five sermons that had most decisively influenced their understanding of Christian life, the question would be whether anybody could think of five sermons they remembered—regardless of whether they were good or bad sermons. But if I were then to ask them to name the five people whose lives had most decisively influenced their understanding of Christian life, the question would be how to narrow it down to which five. Our character is formed by the way in which we “see” the world, and that “seeing” is significantly shaped by the lives of our friends.¹²

Christians believe the primary friendship a person is called to have is with the God who befriended humanity in Jesus Christ. Through God's forgiveness people are enabled to remember and reconstitute the past so that friendship can be possible in the future. Through friendship with God, we begin to unlearn the ways in which our vision has been distorted and to learn to see the world differently from the perspective of the God of Jesus Christ.

But that is to put the matter too simply. For friendship with God is manifest also in the friendships of Christian community. The process of unlearning and learning, of locating our lives in the story of God, depends on our ability to learn from each other how we ought to tell our stories. One of the dangers of autobiography is the tendency toward self-deception.¹³ We learn to combat that self-deception as we help each other learn how God's story enables us to develop the courage and the skill to narrate our engagements with the world truthfully.

Our characterizations of our lives are thus inextricably interrelated with the perspectives others have (including God) of us. This is shown quite powerfully in a poem entitled “Who am I?”¹⁴ It was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer while in prison, shortly before he was martyred by the Nazis. In the poem he contrasts the calm and cheerful disposition he would present to his jailers with an angry and impotent feeling within. He asks himself “Who am I? This or the other?” But he asks this question as a way of exposing the notion of my “private” self to suspicion. As Rowan Williams comments on Bonhoeffer's perspective, “Why should the analysis be in terms of a false exterior persona cloaking a ‘real’ weakness; what if the truth is that the interior self is in flight from the ‘victory already achieved’ of the visible person?”¹⁵ Bonhoeffer acknowledges that others may have a better perspective on his life than he does, and he concludes the poem by noting that “Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”

Because we recognize that our lives are in God's hands, we give the gift of our autobiographies to the Church as a testimony to God's grace. Thus a third presumption about the place of autobiography in Christian theology is that Christian community thrives on the exchange of such stories. The story that I tell is no longer my possession, it is given to the Church. It is no longer something I claim as a story that is unique to myself, it is a testimony to God. And yet the

particularity that is *my* story is a gift I present to the community. As Williams has put it, "My charism, the gift given me to give to the community, is my *self*, ultimately; my story given back, to give me a place in the net of exchange, the web of gifts, which is Christ's Church."¹⁶

Moreover, I not only give the gift of my autobiography to the community, I receive the gift of others' stories as well. But these exchanges of gifts are not simply ways of telling stories about ourselves. They are more determinatively narrating the ways in which our lives are now located in the larger context of God's story. Or at least they ought to be.

That is to say, I ought to be *primarily* concerned not with narrating *my* own life but with narrating how my life is embedded within the story of God. As a way of thinking about the contrast between autobiography and a concern with the biblical narrative's account of God, return to that closing scene of *Places in the Heart*. I suggested earlier that the chorus claiming that "This is my story" draws together the particularity of the characters' autobiographies, the cosmic sweep of God's story and a specific slice of what it means to be a Texan and/or a Southerner. But the singing of that chorus is also linked in the film to the celebration of the Eucharist.

Thus we might ask about this scene: whose story is really being told? Should it be "This is *MY* story," emphasizing my autobiography? That seems to be the case within the context of the song. The focus is on *my* blessed assurance that Jesus is *mine*. Or should it be "This is my *STORY*," emphasizing the narrative of God's creation, redemption and sustenance of the world? That would seem to be the case in the context of the Eucharist, whose liturgy recalls "On the night in which he gave himself up for us." The focus is on God's story and what Christ did for our salvation.

I do not mean to suggest that these represent mutually exclusive options, though recently some have sought to characterize the issues in such terms.¹⁷ But they do represent contrasting emphases, and there has been a resistance to autobiography in Christian theology because in too many cases the primary referent of the story being told seems to be not God but humanity (or, more particularly, me).

I want to suggest that the resistance is not to autobiography *per se*, but rather a resistance to how autobiography has typically been understood in modernity. Thus I want to explore three different reasons which might be offered for resisting autobiography: (1) the focus of Christian theology should be God, not humanity; (2) the focus should be the community of God's Church, not the individuality of particular people; and (3) even if the Church ought to narrate people's lives, the focus should be on narrating saintly others, not my own life.

RESISTANCES TO AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Autobiography, particularly as it has typically been understood in modernity, seems to emphasize the story of *my* life. In contrast, Christian theology presumes that my life ought to be narrated in relation to the story of God. The tensions between these two views can be seen by juxtaposing two "autobiogra-

phies" which are significant in the history of Western thought: Augustine of Hippo and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.¹⁸ Both wrote *Confessions*, but the two accounts represent vastly different conceptions of human life.¹⁹

Augustine of Hippo, writing in the late fourth and early fifth century, is widely credited with having written the first autobiography in Western thought. He is recognized as a saint, but many people who have not read his *Confessions* are unaware that for much of his life Augustine was anything but a "saint"—at least as Christians typically use that term.

Augustine tells about his misadventures and his treachery in the *Confessions*. But he does so from the standpoint of someone who has been converted to the gospel. He is reconstructing the narrative of his life while reorienting his constructive narrative toward communion with God. Augustine's "autobiography" is thus qualified by his relation to God. It is this qualification that explains why Augustine treats only rather briefly some serious acts of treachery while spending several pages analyzing the seemingly unimportant childhood theft of some pears off a tree.

Augustine focuses on the pears not because of the theft's intrinsic significance in his life but because, in the context of the *Confessions*, it represents a gratuitous act which reflects the corrupted desires of a self separated from God. The pear tree thus represents a counter-image to the fig tree under which Augustine is converted to the gospel.²⁰ While under a fig tree he hears a voice urging him to "Take it and read" (*Tolle, lege*), which Augustine understands as a call to read the Bible. When he does so, he reads a passage which dramatically changes his life.

Thus, just as the pear tree becomes the means of identifying sin, so the fig tree becomes the means of identifying redemption. The pear tree becomes an allegorical reference back to the tree of good and evil, whereas the fig tree refers (as it often does in the Bible) to the promise of redemption. In John Freccero's terms, Augustine's "conversion marks the transformation of autobiography into biblical allegory."²¹

Hence Augustine is less interested in telling the reader about himself than he is in narrating how his life has been located in the story of God. Augustine confesses his sin in order to confess his faith in God. His autobiographical turn inward is at the same time a turn outward to the God in whom he lives and moves and has his being.²² At the time of writing the *Confessions*, Augustine sees the narrative of his life in the context of God's providence.

In direct contrast, the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* are a "portrait" rather than a meditation on providence.²³ Indeed Rousseau's *Confessions* is striking because it is structurally similar to Augustine's, but with a radically different focus. For example, Rousseau narrates petty thefts as a child, but he does not characterize them in terms of sin. Moreover, Rousseau narrates an event in which reading a passage out of a book (the *Mercure de France*) changes his life. But Rousseau attributes that change to "madness," and sees the change as little more than an accident that is, in some sense, the source of his miseries.²⁴

In contrast to Augustine, Rousseau's *Confessions* points not to God but to

himself. He thinks that the *Confessions* will do honor to his memory. He is convinced of the uniqueness of his enterprise and of his own uniqueness as a person. His "autobiography" will serve to honor him and enable other people to celebrate his goodness. The portrait which he paints of himself is the portrait of "man according to nature." That is why he is "the best of men."

Rousseau's *Confessions* are designed to suggest that if a person turns inward to examine his own life he will discover not God (as with Augustine) but his true self. As Charles Taylor puts it with reference to Rousseau, "The source of unity and wholeness which Augustine found only in God is now to be discovered within the self."²⁵ Rousseau's *Confessions* thus points to the development of those typically modern understandings of the self in which self-exploration and self-determining freedom are the key virtues.

In this context we can see the first reason for resisting autobiography, if autobiography is understood in Rousseauian terms. For once Rousseauian autobiographies become the characteristic ways in which people think about the self, the question of God becomes secondary. Even if God plays a role in the telling of my story (and that is by no means guaranteed in modern creeds of self-exploration and self-determining freedom!), only insofar as God can be incorporated into my life can God have a role. The ultimate referent of the story is *me*—or, more generally, humanity.

Even so, this resistance does not entail a rejection of autobiography per se. For Augustine and much of the Christian tradition (at least prior to the Enlightenment), autobiography can be important as a means of locating our lives in the story of God. The ultimate referent of the story is the *God* in whose providence our lives are to be found.

The contrast between Augustine and Rousseau also enables us to understand the second reason for resisting autobiography. Rousseau's narrative emphasizes himself as an individual who is utterly unique and novel. His narrative is his own possession, designed to enable people to remember him as a great man. Once autobiography is understood in this way, not only God but also the community receives, at best, a secondary status.

Once again, however, the resistance does not entail a rejection of autobiography per se. When Augustine becomes a Christian, he narrates his own life. But that narrative is no longer his possession. It becomes a part of the larger story of God's Church. That larger story includes the narratives of people's lives, but the focus is not on *unique* autobiographies. The crucial element is not the originality of "my story" but the ways in which my story imitates the story of Jesus Christ.

To be sure, the imitation of Christ does not typically happen without mediation. So we have the stories of other people's lives that help form our character. Augustine's conversion is linked to a discovery of the story of Anthony and Anthony's imitation of Christ.²⁶ Because people's lives are significant means whereby people glimpse examples of how we ought to live, the Church came to recognize the importance of narrating saintly lives in order to provide mediations of the imitation of Christ.²⁷

But the stories of saintly lives are best told not by the saints themselves but

by the Church which wants to remember them. Thus a third reason for resisting autobiography is that, if we are going to tell stories, we ought to focus on narrating others' lives rather than our own. For example, when the Early Church began to narrate saintly lives in the early fourth century, their narratives were biographical rather than autobiographical.²⁸ They narrated the lives of quite diverse men and women. As Robert Wilken notes,

Some [of the lives] are written in an elegant and refined style, self-consciously contraposing Christian saints to the heroes of Greek and Latin antiquity, others are homespun and unaffected tales, ignorant or disdainful of the conventions of the literary culture. Some works dwell on the eccentric and grotesque, men who sat for years on pillars or who dwelled in huts too narrow to stretch out in; some read like romances and adventure stories; some depict fierce inner struggles, others describe unexceptional acts of mercy or almsgiving; some are frankly apologetic, using the life of the saint to defend a particular theological position, for example, the christological formulas of Chalcedon, or the view of its critics.²⁹

What virtually all of these biographies have in common, however, is that they hold up imitation as the path to virtuous living patterned in Jesus Christ. But it is important to remember that the biographers are the ones who claim that these are people to be imitated. The people themselves do not make that claim.

Moreover, these biographies typically do not focus on the "lifestyles of the rich and famous." Rather they are stories of people who, as Wilken suggests, "bear the hues and colors of the communities which produced them." They are about "simple and unassuming men and women who loved God more ardently and served God more zealously than their neighbors and friends, the kinds of persons who are present in every Christian community, indeed in every religious community."³⁰ From this perspective, it appears that I should have begun by telling you the story of my maternal grandfather or the elderly woman in my community who cooks for the homeless shelter rather than telling about my own life.

Thus we can understand the third reason for resisting the place of autobiography. Even so, while biography is important in Christian life, and while we ought to focus our attention on narrating the lives of those diverse saints who have made it easier for us to glimpse the glory of God in Jesus Christ, we ought not draw sharp distinctions between biography and autobiography. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather are inextricably interrelated.

Indeed seeing how and why biography and autobiography are interrelated will help us understand the relation between the stories of our lives and the story of God.

BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE SAINTS

One reason why we ought not draw too sharp a distinction between biography and autobiography is that, as I have already suggested, others may be

able to describe our lives as well as—and perhaps better than—we can do ourselves.³¹ There is no privileged position that “I” have for narrating my life to which others do not have access. Nor would my obscurity to myself point to a need to have biographers “uncover” what I am really like. Rather we need *time* with others whereby together, by God’s grace, we can learn the words which enable us to narrate our lives truthfully.³²

Moreover, we need to recognize that Christian theology has a stake not only in biography (of the lives of saints) but also in autobiography (of the lives of saints-in-the-making). We need to remember that, whereas we point to those special saints whose lives reflect the glory of God in Jesus Christ, *all* Christians are called to be saints. Thus Christian communities need to foster those friendships and practices that will enable saints-in-the-making also to become saints. As Nicholas Lash has argued, Christianity “is a school for the production of saints.”³³

And in that school we learn from the narration of people’s biographies as well as our own autobiographies. As with the Early Church, the stories that we ought to be telling of our lives in relation to God are rich and varied. They include stories of lives from the tradition: Augustine and Melania the Younger, Julian of Norwich and (how could I leave out?) John Wesley. But we also, like the Early Church, need to tell the stories of people whose lives are (or are very nearly) contemporaneous with ours.

So we have Nicholas Wolterstorff’s poignant reflection on his son’s death in *Lament for a Son*. As you read those pages, you not only get to know Wolterstorff and the pain of losing Eric, you also come to understand the issues of suffering and death in relation to God in powerful ways. Reading his story helped me to locate the tragic death of a close friend in the story of God.³⁴ It also helped me to learn more clearly what the story of God is all about. To take but one example, in reflecting on Jesus’s comment in the Beatitudes “Blessed are those who mourn,” Wolterstorff writes:

Who then are the mourners? The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God’s day’s coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence. They are the ones who realize that in God’s realm of peace there is no one blind and who ache whenever they see someone unseeing. They are the ones who realize that in God’s realm there is no one hungry and who ache whenever they see someone starving. They are the ones who realize that in God’s realm there is no one falsely accused and who ache whenever they see someone imprisoned unjustly. They are the ones who realize that in God’s realm there is no one who fails to see God and who ache whenever they see someone unbelieving. They are the ones who realize that in God’s realm there is no one who suffers oppression and who ache whenever they see someone beat down. They are the ones who realize that in God’s realm there is no one without dignity and who ache whenever they see someone treated with indignity. They are the ones who realize that in God’s realm of peace there is neither death nor tears and who ache whenever they

see someone crying tears over death. The mourners are aching visionaries.³⁵

Wolterstorff's autobiographical meditation is not a means of drawing attention to himself. Rather it is a way of locating his life and thus all of our lives in the story of the Triune God. And that, as he so nicely shows, is a call to an aching visionary holiness.

We have Will Campbell's funny and profound story of his and his brother's lives in *Brother to a Dragonfly*.³⁶ It is an earthy story of a Southern family, its hopes and joys and commitment as well as its struggles and failures and tragedies. At the same time, it is a story of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

We have the stories of people of color and women who have refused to accept a second-class status and have found dignity in their vocation to Christian life: stories of such people as Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Romero and Dorothy Day. Such stories challenge the narrowness of our conceptions of God and of Christian life, and they may also challenge the very ways in which we describe autobiographies.³⁷

There are also stories that have been forgotten which we need to recover. They are stories of people who have much to teach us about the God of Jesus Christ. In some cases they do so by calling us to repentance for the tragedies of their lives and deaths, whereas in other cases they do so by showing us the disciplined grace of virtuous lives. Unfortunately, such people often rest in unvisited tombs.³⁸

All of us are called to become the saints whom God has created us to be. That is to say, we ought to live in such a way that the narratives of our lives won't make sense if God doesn't exist. If we can do that, then perhaps the stories of our lives might become stories that others want to tell about the saints.³⁹

I began this article with a reference to a hymn ("Blessed Assurance"). So, in keeping with some wisdom I learned from the story of "being a United Methodist preacher," I will conclude with a reference to another hymn. "For All the Saints" is, I think, an apt reflection of the place of autobiography in Christian theology and Christian life. It is also a hymn that has a significant place in my own autobiography, for it was sung at my father's memorial services. Its words serve as a reminder that, at the end of our lives, all that really matters is whether or not we have fulfilled our calling to become saints of God.

For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
 who thee by faith before the world confessed,
 thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
 Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might;
 thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight;
 thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.
 Alleluia, Alleluia!

O may thy soldiers, faithful, true, and bold,
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
and win with them the victor's crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost:
Alleluia, Alleluia!⁴⁰

Notes

1. See *Perkins Journal*, 34 (Summer, 1981) 1-15. It has also been reprinted in Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1988), pp. 25-45.
2. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, p. 37.
3. In this sense, however, my life reflects a rootlessness that is increasingly true of many people in modern western societies. See Oliver O'Donovan, "The Loss of a Sense of Place," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 55 (1989): 39-58.
4. It is significant to note that my reflections were significantly shaped by the sermons preached at my father's memorial services. In particular, Richard Lascars sermon helped me to place my father's life in the larger context of the Bible and God's story. He enabled me to see, in ways I am still only beginning to realize, the significance of the saints for Christian life.
5. I borrow this image from Eberhard Bethge's wonderful description of a time in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life when "the theologian becomes a Christian." Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Edwin Robertson, et al. (London: William Collins and Sons, 1970), pp. 153-156.
6. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 47.
7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 216.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

9. Ibid., p. 213.
10. I provide a more complete sketch of these issues in *Transformed Judgment: Toward a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).
11. James W. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974) 37.
12. For an excellent discussion of these issues, and one which has "an autobiographical beginning," see Paul Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).
13. This point has been explored quite powerfully by Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell. See "Self-Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*," in *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 82-98.
14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 347-348.
15. Rowan Williams, "The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer," in *The Grammar of the Heart*, ed. Richard H. Bell (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 43.
16. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), pp. 43-44.
17. See the so-called "Frei-Ricoeur" debate. As typically cast, the issue is whether narrative is a category to be applied primarily as a means of describing human life and human experience (Paul Ricoeur) or primarily as a specific reading strategy for understanding the God depicted in the biblical narrative (Hans Frei). While there are differences between Frei and Ricoeur on the place of narrative in Christian theology, it is a mistake to assume that these are the fundamental options in narrative theology or to assume that the positions are mutually exclusive. Useful discussions of Frei's and Ricoeur's positions can be found in Gary Comstock, "Truth and Meaning: Ricoeur Versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 117-140, and in William Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology: A Conflict of Interpretations?" *Modern Theology* 4 (1987): 35-52.
18. I use the term "autobiography" loosely here. For I am persuaded that neither account is, in a strong sense, an autobiography. Even so, they are typically linked to the genre. Moreover, I think they usefully display some of the crucial issues that need to be addressed in any discussion of autobiography.
19. Of course I cannot adequately describe those conceptions in this context. The issues have been described with great insight by Ann Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions: A Reply to St. Augustine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and in the context of a much broader historical argument by Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. I am indebted to both books for helping me to see the importance of Augustine and Rousseau for contemporary understandings of human life.
20. See John Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," in Thomas C. Healer, et al., eds., *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 16-29, for an insightful discussion of this contrast.
21. Ibid., p. 28.
22. I take the image of "inward" and "outward" from Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 127-142.
23. The language of "portrait" is Rousseau's. Hartle notes that Rousseau's understanding of his *Confessions* was essentially a work of art whereas Augustine's was a work of providence. Cf. Hartle, *Rousseau's Confessions*, p. 29.
24. Hartle, p. 26.
25. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 362.

26. Thus, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham has argued, "Augustine understands himself, awakens to himself, possesses himself, only as a repetition of other selves." Cf. *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 96. I am indebted to Stephen Fowl for directing me to Harpham.

27. It is important to note, however, as Harpham does, that Augustine thinks imitation is ultimately unnecessary when a person has been fully converted (cf. Harpham, *ibid.*, pp. 99-100). citing Paul in Romans 12:1-2, Augustine argues that when a person has "remade his mind and can see and understand your truth, he has no need of other men to teach him to imitate his kind" (*Confessions*, book 13, chap. 22). Still, while Harpham has some insightful things to suggest about the language of conversion and remaking the self in Augustine, he fails to recognize how Augustine's argument needs to be qualified by a more complete reading of Paul on the language of imitation.

28. It is not clear why the Early Church did not really begin to write lives of saintly people until the late third and fourth centuries (the first life we have recorded was written c. 260 C.E.). James Burtchaell suggests that there is a great deal of continuity between the early Christians' narration of martyrs' deaths and the later development of writing lives. See *The Giving and Taking of Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 11-22. By contrast, Robert Wilken argues that, prior to the fourth century, the existence of the gospels served as a deterrent to the writing of lives of other holy persons. Moreover, because the need for other examples seems to arise shortly after the Council of Nicea, Wilken suggests that perhaps the strong claims for Jesus's divinity at the council created a vacuum which was filled by other human faces. Cf. "The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue," unpublished manuscript, p.6.

29. Wilken, *ibid.*, p. 9.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

31. See Bonhoeffer's poem "Who am I?" discussed above, pp. 11-12.

32. I owe the notion of "taking time" for narrating our lives to Rowan Williams, "The Suspicion of Suspicion," pp. 49-50.

33. See Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1988), p. 162. Cf. also Stanley Hauerwas, "On the Production and Reproduction of the Saints," *The Reformed Journal* 40 (Feb. 1990): 12-13.

34. See my own meditation on the friend's death that draws on Wolterstorff in "Giving Voice to the Silences," *The Christian Century* (April 11, 1990): 359-360.

35. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 85-86.

36. Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: Continuum, 1977).

37. Freccero suggests that men and women may conceive of conversion and autobiography in quite different ways. According to Freccero, Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebooks* represent an argument within the Augustinian tradition that refuses to accept Augustine's attempt to write a definitive autobiography. Freccero suggests that in Lessing's account "the red notebook and the black notebook are partial views of the definitive golden notebook that, by implication, can never be completed short of death." Cf. Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," p. 18.

38. Toni Morrison's haunting novel *Beloved* (New York: Plume Books, 1987) presents a fictionalized account of the life of a freed slave woman in the 1870s. The novel, including the enigmatic epigraph from Romans 9 and the concluding comment that "This is not a story to pass on," raises important issues about whose lives manage to get narrated, how they are done so and how—if at all—we can locate the lives of slavery's victims in the story of God.

39. That is the judgment of Pontius on Cyprian's life. Pontius shows how Cyprian located his own life in relation to the story of God, and in so doing became himself a

model of imitation whose life deserved to be narrated for others' edification. Pontius writes that Cyprian's "usual manner of speaking on the subject was to say that if he had read about someone having been commended by the praise of God he would urge an inquiry into those actions which had pleased God. If somewhere it was said by glorious testimony that Job was a true worshipper of God and that there was no one like him in all the earth, Cyprian taught that whatever Job had done should now be done so that in doing these things we also would call forth the testimony of God concerning ourselves. When he was condemned with loss of his estate he gained so much in practiced virtue that he did not display a temporary loss of piety. Neither poverty nor pain broke him; the pleadings of his wife did not sway him. The awful sufferings of his own body did not crush him. Virtue remained fixed in her place. And devotion, founded on deep roots, did not cease—even amidst the attack of a tempting devil—to bless the Lord with heartfelt faith even in adversity. His home was open to whosoever would come in. No widow returned with an empty purse, no blind person went undirected by him as a companion, no one weak in step was not supported by him as a helper, no one barren of aid by the hand of one more powerful was not protected by him as a guardian. He used to say that those who desired to please God should do these things. And so by going through the evidence of all good men even as he always imitated the most worthy he made himself into a model of imitation." Pontius, *Vita Cypriani* (c. 260 C.E.), chap. 3, trans. Charles A. Bobertz. I am indebted to Bobertz for directing me to this passage.

40. This essay originated as a lecture at Austin College in Sherman, Texas. I am grateful to the audience for their suggestions and comments.