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# Narrative Beings: What Virtual Media Is Revealing About Our Youth

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NARRATIVE BEINGS:  
WHAT VIRTUAL MEDIA IS REVEALING ABOUT OUR YOUTH

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

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## The “Technology-an” Captivity

“Amazing shirt!” As I sat across from one of my youth, separated only by a tipsy table delightfully bearing a supreme meat pizza, I couldn’t help but chuckle as our waiter delighted in the baring of the cartoon characters ingrained on the youth’s shirt. “That show is just awesome! I love *Adventure Time*.”<sup>1</sup> For a brief moment a common bond formed with the two that went beyond the initially established pizza into a TV Show, meeting each other with grunting and head-nodding affirmations. When the mid-twenties waiter bounced back to his duties, I smirked at my youth who only confirmed my suspicion: “Oh, it’s great. I get reactions all the time when I wear this shirt.” Though more surprised by his comment than the situation itself, I gave a concurring nod and he continued our conversation as normal – normal, that is, with pizza in one hand, smartphone in his other.

I admit that last observation is a bit of an exaggeration, but probably not by much. It is no secret today, nor any small concern, that youth ministry in our age continues to wrestle with the booming reality and integration of technology amidst the lives of our youth (and maybe even our adults!). Not but several years ago statistics poked at generational and contextual fears as studies declared the exuberant amount of hours youth were spending in front of the TV. As the years have gone on, that number has had to be re-contextualized to include video game time, computer time, codifying to total “screen time,” and now all of that able to be absorbed in the definition of “phone time.” Indeed, in their most recent report, PewResearch observes that 78% of teens own cell phones, half of that being smartphones, 23% owning tablets, and nearly all (95%) have

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<sup>1</sup> *Adventure Time* is an animated television show broadcasted on Cartoon Network. Although assumed to be aimed at younger ages, the show is said to have unintentionally but interestingly gained a significant following amongst older youth and young adults.

access to the internet – an access increasingly streamlined and mobile.<sup>2</sup> Whether it is video games, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, phone texting, YouTube, endless apps, online gaming communities, smartphones, tablets, TV shows, Netflix, or even the basic movie experience, our youth seem only more and more captivated by these technologies – they have become natural and normal “dwelling places.”

Often this issue comes under the larger guise of “technology,” and the ecclesial response seems just as captive to the phenomenon as our youth, usually battling to pick a side and landing on one or the other horns of this debate. On the one side, the church goes “pro” and opts with missional intentions to meet youth on “their own ground” and integrate to the times. So, a pastor rejoices at the success when he sets up a system for youth to text him questions during the sermon,<sup>3</sup> and a parent is amazed to see at Sunday School teenagers deeply drawn into a YouTube video: “The video spoke their language.”<sup>4</sup> On the other side, the church goes “foe” and considers tech a threat to the timeless message it is nurturing. One is then left with the options of either the gospel needing technology, hindered by it, or trying to find some middle balance that usually just equates to employing one or the other thinking based on contextual presuppositions (no tech at camp, but we need it for videos on Sundays!).

The problem in all this, I suggest, is that both end up making the issue about the device and not the one who is holding it – our *telos* seeks the giver and not the receiver. We start off on the wrong foot and so treat these captivating media as the answer, key, or obstacle to reaching our youth. Put simply, we come asking our youth to teach us about the technology, rather than asking what the technology is revealing about our youth, and thus boil down the phenomenon to

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra Cortesi et al., “Teens and Technology 2013,” *Pew Research Center Publications*, March 13, 2013, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Teens-and-Tech.aspx> (accessed April 4, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Duane Brooks, “Text Me During the Sermon,” *Family and Community Ministries* 23 no.4 (2010): 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> See Cathleen Falsani, “Why I Hate Religion but Love YouTube,” *Sojourners Magazine*, April 2012, 14.

semiotics and linguistics – a failure to communicate. By the end of it, we come out of the issue with little to no theological or ontological reflection on our own youth, drowning in methodology, and having bound ourselves and the Gospel to relevance.

### **A Virtual Revelation**

To begin to start off on a better foot, I offer that our *telos* be phenomenological: it is not why technology should be meaningful to us, but why *it already is* to our youth. If these devices, sites, tools, and technological forms are so attractive and integrated to their lives, then not just *what* is it but *why* is it? What about their own being do these things meet and "get" well? How can these media be more than just a tool but actually an ally – a lens – that can reveal and teach us about their own existence (and maybe even ours)?

Firstly, such a step requires that we better clarify our ally here. "Technology" and "social media" are both true names, but the former is too general and the latter too exclusive to address a common element in this phenomena. Rather, I offer that a more helpful defining element for us is to be working with a *virtual* phenomenon – the most captivating technologies, at their core, are *virtual media*. It is the means in which it enables the ability to create or express reality through an indirect and inferred form. While that reality will reflect "real" existence to varying degrees, the phenomenological element is its virtual nature.

Secondly, there is a necessary technological element that must also be observed. This technological phenomenon is not unique alone in its virtual nature, for by that definition one could also argue for the virtual nature of books, paintings, and art.<sup>5</sup> Rather, its uniqueness exists also through which technology enables these virtual media to be expressed in dynamic visual and

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<sup>5</sup> That is, in their ability to resemble the effect or essence of reality, though it is not formally observable as so. While admittedly a looser definition than it is used in common occurrence, it is one that I believe holds true to the core of the term and allows us to briefly recognize a virtual interpretation of particular human creations throughout all history.

sensory means. We may not be living in a time unique to the presence of virtual manifestations, but we are living in one unique with their existence as a primarily and particular sensory, especially visual, form.

*Virtual Media: The Doing of an Image*

The net result in this unique collision of virtual media and its unique visual technological form is that you get a "movie-ish" experience, what Francesca Aran Murphy observes by nature is the phenomenology of the "doing of an image."<sup>6</sup> By this, Murphy points out that the movie – and here, by extension virtual media – carries on the nature of melodrama. When it came to the fore in history, melodrama distinguished itself by accompanying a drama (a narrative) with music,<sup>7</sup> but its larger effect was to shift narrative from *verbal meaning* to *visual meaning*, to shift its effect and meaning making to the realm of sensory, emotional, and visual spectacle.<sup>8</sup> It ascertained to achieve impact by focusing on the means of "doing the image" to an audience.

The phenomenological nature of this process though, and its continued corollary today in virtual media, is that it requires a synthesizing of meaning and achievement of coherence by image deletion and manipulation – a good movie is not shot, but built.<sup>9</sup> Each scene and experience is guided by the desired effect – that is, towards meaning – so that elements unable to cohere are removed while the process unifies elements that seem otherwise rather unrelated. Even an actor, character, or existent – as Murphy observes – undergoes this process so as to not

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<sup>6</sup> Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

be represented as he/she/it truly is, but come to represent an image and idea; they become not an actor, but an *action*. In this, then, audiences do not achieve participation but identification.<sup>10</sup>

This, of course, is not unique to the movie process, but movies being stories – being narratives – it is the very process and phenomenon of narrative itself. As Christian Smith explores,

"Narrative...bestows meaning on [human] actions and events by specifying their interactive or cause-and-effect relations to the whole. Narratives seek to convey the significance and meaning of events by situating their interaction with or influence on other events and actions...[they] always have a point, are always about the explanation and meaning of events and actions in human life, however simple these may be."<sup>11</sup>

Just as it is mirrored concretely in the movie-making process, the narrative phenomenon is characterized in how it exists sequentially, achieving coherence and effect through the culmination of edited events and elements that synthesize smaller meanings into an overarching *telos*. What happens to separate movies in its particular narrative form is its visual nature – it is the “doing of an image.”

The point here is that it is not just movies but all our concerned virtual media that can stake this claim: what virtual media does well, in part by its very nature, is narrative. Whether it be the more obvious, like movies and Netflix, or whether it be the more subtle, like smartphone apps, each employs the user by means of narrative, even if that narrative “telos” is a simple high score. Facebook engages one in a more obvious narrating of one's life, and Twitter calls for the same but in a moment-by-moment form. Under them all, each employs the editing and synthesizing process of meaning-making through sequence which suspends or completes a larger *telos* that bestows varying ontological significance and effect. Virtual media *does* narrative.

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<sup>10</sup> As Murphy states, it is a closed-reality that is created: one forgets the world and enters into the narrative's own and loses a sense of distinction between actor/action and viewer. See Murphy, *Story*, 4; 65-66.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Smith, *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 65.



*Narrative Beings*

In all this, however, we must again be pushed back upon the "why" towards our youth's own experience. Murphy anticipates this connection in movies when she further recognizes that in its visual and melodramatic nature (the "doing of an image"), the "electronic technology... 'extends' our '*senses by imitating them in the way in which they act.*'"<sup>12</sup> Virtual media stands unique in that not only does it do narrative, but it does it well because it becomes a technological imitation of our own neuronic processes in the way the brain and consciousness edit sensory event input into structures, interrelated connections, and finally meaning.<sup>13</sup> By its very process and presentation, virtual media becomes a purified mirroring of our own cognitive and conscious experience.

The culminating point is that this is no coincidence. As Stephen Crites asserts, "the form of active consciousness...the form of its experiencing, is in at least some rudimentary sense narrative."<sup>14</sup> In the cognitive processes of consciousness, sensual experience grasps the world and its objects in a temporal way (a before and after) through the ability and chronicle of memory, and it is memory that enables us as beings to abstract those chronicles into a coherent unity. Indeed, we are not just a collection of chronicled images and experiences but our own existence – our own being and living – is marked by our temporality: our present conscious moment is always infused with past, present, and future.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Murphy, *Story*, 35, italics original.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 72.

<sup>15</sup> Crites, *Why Narrative?*, 78.

Crites asserts, though, that in this only the narrative form is able to hold these temporalities separate and yet unified at the same time.<sup>16</sup> Our own conscious moment is the process of image recollection and manipulation (past), reinterpretation (present), and finally coherent culmination that moves us in anticipation (future) towards an overarching *telos* (meaning). Stories are not just something we do, but something *we are*.

We can begin to see, then, the significance of narrative in all times, and especially in our day as it exists in virtual media. Narrative doesn't just captivate us because it is good art, but because it is the higher, purified form of the crude narrative that is our own being. Our youth are no different. Virtual media, in doing narrative – especially in a form closer to our own crude formation of narrative (via the senses)<sup>17</sup> – captivates our youth well because it meets them as they are: as narrative beings.

### **A More Narrative Ecclesiology?**

If virtual media is able to reveal the narrative nature inherent in our youth, it would seem proper, then, to move forward in further pursuing an ecclesiology centered in the narrative task. Indeed, since the late twentieth century and continuing today, the Western church has seen narrative movements be further explored, pushed by proponents like George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, and Robert Jenson, while also gaining practical movements like the Narrative Lectionary. So we see Michael Root asserting narrative is constitutive to soteriology;<sup>18</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre exploring narrative's role in epistemological progress (individually and

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<sup>16</sup> See *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>17</sup> As Murphy notes, "Movies attain a chemical purity of storytelling beyond the reach of novels and theatre," precisely because it has a greater freedom to manipulate the narrative into a form as an actual observer would experience it. The technology allows narrative to reach the observer with little mediation and more closely mimic how one would actually "feel" and encounter it in real life, hence a purer "doing of the image." For quote, see Murphy, *Story*, 106.

<sup>18</sup> See Michael Root, "The Narrative Structure of Soteriology," *Why Narrative?*, 263-278.

communally);<sup>19</sup> David Kelsey and Nicholas Lash similarly claiming that narrative ultimately “creates” its speakers while constituting and transforming their identity;<sup>20</sup> and Hans Frei pushing in his *The Identity of Jesus Christ* to reconstruct classical Christology where Jesus’ identity is in his narrated becoming by “consenting to God’s intention and enacting that intention.”<sup>21</sup>

In this manner, most narrative theologians have sought to make significant observations about narrative’s function in human life, but their telling core is their goal. It would seem in part from postmodern critiques, expounding anthropological reflection, and from Western church decline, narrative theology has come to the fore in an effort to recapture an authentic and holistic integration of faith into the lives of the *ecclesia*. It stands as both a contextually significant and alternative critique against modernity’s tendency to treat persons – in its societal and especially educational spheres – as propositional, segregated beings rather than as holistic, temporal (that is, storied) ones.<sup>22</sup> I believe in this it has contributed much and still pushes forward as a significant voice today.

But narrative theology – even in observing with Crites our own basic narrative ontology – also ends up leaving us with some significant problems as it relates to any narrative ecclesiology and, I think ultimately, the gospel. As was explored above, one of the aesthetic and organic requirements of story is that it culminates in an explicit or implicit *telos*, even if that *telos* is characterized by its elements’ complete disunity.<sup>23</sup> Elements, then, that do not function towards

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<sup>19</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *Why Narrative?*, 138-157.

<sup>20</sup> See Murphy, *Story*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Frei as read and quoted in George Stroup, "Theology of Narrative or Narrative Theology? A Response to *Why Narrative?*," *Theology Today* 47 no.4 (1991): 429.

<sup>22</sup> For further reading on this modern agenda, see Stephen Crites, *Why Narrative?*, 84-88.

<sup>23</sup> For coherence in disunity, I am reflecting on a certain YouTube series ("ASDF") that some of my own youth relish in, seemingly for the very reason of its complete disunity and randomness.

this "point" are cut or mitigated. Ironically,<sup>24</sup> particularity becomes a problem in this, so the more particular a character or element is – the more it exists and has *being* – the less susceptible it is to generalization and the more of a problem it is in narrative's necessary move towards coherence, unity, and finally meaning.<sup>25</sup>

The consequence, Murphy observes, is that narrative theology – in attempting to avoid, like Karl Barth, an epistemological “boomerang” of human psychological self-projection onto God by looking for God outside the Biblical narrative – ends up allergic to history and reality (life outside the narrative) and equates theology with a methodology: the “doing of an image.”<sup>26</sup> It knows God only through the narrative, but narrative functions to achieve its *telos* and so will undermine any incoherence and freedom in God that undermines this, making God secondary to it and the product of it – God is a story, or the Story is god. God, then, is not who God is in God's *being*, but in God's *becoming*. In the movie *Batman Begins*, Batman remarks, “It’s not who I am underneath, but what I do, that defines me.”<sup>27</sup> Narrative theology makes this more specific to mean, “It's not who I am, but what I do, that *is* me.”

We might say, in anticipation of the sections below, that narrative theology reacts to the hiddenness of God in the world and reality (where God is most incoherent and free; where God is “not preached”) by forcefully masking it with a methodology that makes God un-hidden (that is, coherent). God, Murphy observes, exists like a movie actor: an actor isn't known or experienced in a story as who she is in her actual person, but plays *herself* repeatedly in roles

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<sup>24</sup> Ironic because while narrative is able to engage the human person more holistically, it also is threatened by incoherence in its characters and object, and thus must undermine or circumvent such aspects.

<sup>25</sup> See Murphy, *Story*, 55-56.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; 32; 120. By “boomerang,” Murphy seeks to name an assumption among postliberal theologians that thinking about god outside of revelation results in humanity really thinking about itself, hence God just comes to represent human self-projection.

<sup>27</sup> Inspired but expounded from Murphy’s own use as an example. See Murphy, *Story*, 118.

through an associated type the audience has come to identify her with.<sup>28</sup> So actors like Reese Witherspoon constantly reprise romantic roles and Jim Carrey comedy. They don't live before us in film as actual persons, but as a specific pattern of actions – a story, an *identity*. Just like Frei does above, *God is God's* story; *God is God's* becoming. The cross and resurrection are not so much events but *eventful descriptions*: they give us the idea of God. As Murphy poignantly asserts, narrative theology finally makes Christ an *identity* and not an existent.<sup>29</sup> It responds to God's hiddenness and incoherence in the world by attempting to uncover it (or, rather, mask it) through cohering scripture's concrete, particular events into an abstract concept – that is, with a description of God – like "love," or "good."

The point of all this is not to completely nullify narrative theology, especially in light of the narrative nature of the human person and our youth, nor is it meant to object to confessions about the goodness or love of God. Instead, it is to suggest that narrative theology *per se* cannot be our default conclusion for ministry, as it finally fails to give the Gospel in making the Gospel an ascent to an idea, a description. The Gospel is no longer the event of Christ's cross and resurrection, but *God's identity*, where the cross and resurrection are but the chief descriptions in that manifestation. Francesca Murphy wants to argue that narrative theology fails because it falls back into foundationalism, yet I want to argue that it fails to give the Gospel because it trusts in its own system and so swallows the cross to be subject to its own method.

But if the cross and resurrection is the definitive event, the event and historical moment in which all our hope rests, then the cross must be that which instead swallows us up and all our methods. It is not just a culminating element in God's *telos*, but *is* God's *telos* on and over us. Thus, to begin to affirm where this takes us with our "narrative youth," I suggest it is helpful

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

(though not sequentially necessary) to start with what most narrative theology never takes up: sin.

*Death and Glory: Salvation by Story*

If we bring up the issue of sin, here, it is in part because ironically in the midst of the postliberal theologian's intent to avoid the psychologizing of God, sin itself has still been much psychologized. Whether individually or communally, it tends to exist as a behavioral problem, and for modernity – and perhaps even postmodernity – behavioral problems are always at their source psychological ones. Thus, on one end, sin becomes a psychologically *moral* problem which one overcomes (even if not fully in this life) by obtaining and employing right morality through mental and behavioral obedience to Law. On the other end, sin becomes a psychologically *contextual* problem which one overcomes through embracing what is life-giving for oneself and others (the pursuit of self-esteem and the inner "true self"). Both draw heavily on the language of "brokenness," and while honest language seeking to name experience, it also tellingly paints sin as largely only a part of us (the negative, the unhealthy) and *apart* from the cross.<sup>30</sup> The net result is that sin ends up being only about our behavior and not our ontology – only about our *badness* and not our *goodness*.

In the background of all this psychologizing in our time stands a significant counter from the *secular* cultural anthropologist and (ironically) psychoanalyst, Ernest Becker, who in the mid

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<sup>30</sup> Krister Stendahl, for example, accuses the Western church tradition for psychologizing guilt as a part of the Christian experience to faith by the influence of Luther's reading on Paul. While Stendahl may be right about the Western tradition, he himself also employs the psychological hermeneutic against Luther and so comes out psychologizing sin in Luther, thus missing Luther's greater pointing to our boundness as revealed in the cross. See Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

Similarly, Dr. Robert Albers represents a contemporary psychologizing move in which, following after Paul Tillich, sin is understood in our context as mental shame compared to mental guilt, thus forgiveness of sin is no longer considered the Gospel but rather acceptance (that is, self-esteem). Not coincidentally, such a move ends up also psychologizing the cross, disconnecting it from any ontological significance. See Dr. Robert Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*. (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1995), 86-87.

1970s on his deathbed published his *The Denial of Death* and, intentionally or not, threw the problem of sin out of the mind and back into our own being. Humanity, Becker observed, lives every moment of their existence in the most paradoxical dilemma: to live as both symbolic self but also as fully animal, a mind and imagination “up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish...”<sup>31</sup> Theologically speaking, it is the dilemma to be both spiritual and creature, a creature not god but made in the “image of God.”<sup>32</sup>

But this, however, is a most terrifying dilemma, and the one Becker argues the human creature will by necessity spend their existence denying. It is the terror to “have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die.”<sup>33</sup> It is the denial – the *terror* – of death, that while every other creature is spared the knowledge of its fate, we like Adam and Eve are denuded. It is the irreconcilable awareness that we are a self-conscious animal, who “not only lives in this moment, but expands himself to yesterday, his curiosities to centuries ago, his fears to five billion years from now,” and yet is a worm and food for worms, bound to go “back in the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.”<sup>34</sup>

Though we would oft believe that it is the adult who holds any such fear of death, Becker asserts it is the child who bears the brunt of this dilemma. From the moment of entering into the world, the child is thrust into the terrifying mystery of the world and, more importantly, thrust into the conundrum that is him – a self and a body. As an infant, it is all too mysteriously raw, tremendous, awe-full, sensually and consciously paralyzing, so gradually the child learns that to

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<sup>31</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (1973; repr., New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 26.

<sup>32</sup> The “image of God” is more often used to assert our goodness and make a claim upon our identity. I, however, want to offer that it rather suggests a certainly ontological distinction and at the core is the theological equivalent to the paradox Becker is trying to address: to exist as animal yet more than animal.

<sup>33</sup> Becker, *Denial*, 87; 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

function he must shove raw experience from his awareness. It is why children begin life in wonder yet why adults become numb to it, for our wonder must give way to functioning in order to exist in an adult world.<sup>35</sup>

The deeper concurrence, though, is that the infant already encounters death as a complex symbol in a world and body that sends it into paradox and forces inevitability. There is no “innocence” as our romantic ideals have us believe, yet not because the child is morally guilty but because one exists with “pure,” or natural, guilt – “guilt as inhibition, as determinism, as smallness and boundness.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, it is our creatureliness and the world’s incomprehensible created-ness over us that throws one into terror, always pulling us back into determinism, limits, and finally death.<sup>37</sup>

The purpose here is not to use language like “terror” to vilify our created being in itself, but to point to what becomes our necessary yet mysteriously “sin” response to it all. The reaction to our dilemma is that the human creature takes it to deny its own creatureliness – its own death – and so takes up what Becker calls the *causa sui*: the *vital yet impossible* task to be our own cause.<sup>38</sup> Our reflex is to attain “cosmic specialness,” and so by our *goodness* or relation to goodness justify ourselves as objects of primary value over and against death’s reign on us.<sup>39</sup> It is why we will burn ourselves up in passions, blindly follow leaders and heroes, stockpile the digits in our bank account, count the degrees of separation to our movie stars, and ultimately annihilate each other (for the “other” is often a threat because they risk or challenge my own *causa sui*). At

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 18-21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>38</sup> Vital, because one becomes bound to overcome death, yet impossible because no human accomplishment, whether concrete or symbolic, can actually do so.

<sup>39</sup> Becker, *Denial*, 4.



the rumbling of our core is the individual and *communal* quest for heroism, or what Martin Luther asserted centuries ago as glory.<sup>40</sup>

What we get is a creature who lives life in a basic narrative form but one who works it – in the terror of death and the denial of their own creatureliness, that is, the theological phenomenon of sin – in the search to identify with glory. We exist as narrative beings seeking our salvation in glory stories, and glory bares new skin today: the video game hero, the highest app score, our Facebook "story," moments in Instagram, or the submersion into limitless (yet tellingly unquenchable) glory stories within movies. That our youth dwell in these worlds is but the same task and cosmic rehearsal that adults work in their career, morality, political fervor, and consumption, yet how much more for youth as they stand before possibility to negotiate what they will absorb or what will absorb them. They are bound, like all, to establish a *Telos*, not meaning but Meaning, to culminate oneself into a *telos* who counts more than death or at least identify with one that does, even if that *telos* is a strange anti-glorying of it all.<sup>41</sup>

### *The Cross: Narrative's Fracture*

We can begin to understand why the cross is such a problem in all this. When Paul takes up sin in what is our first few chapters of his letter to the *ecclesia* in Rome, he *narrates* to his readers the totalizing problem of sin, the point to which they are participating in it and finally under its power. But Paul's "all...are under the power of sin..." (Rom 3:9)<sup>42</sup> and "since all have sinned and fall short..." (Rom 3:23) are not mere systematical statements. They are confessions

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<sup>40</sup> Thinking, of course, here in reference to Luther taking up the issue of "theologians of glory." See Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 69-70.

<sup>41</sup> As Becker points out, and as we ourselves can observe, achieving glory is not necessarily about ascension, but can be its opposite, not an assertion over against our creatureliness but an attempt to win over death by surrendering to the body in sensual animalness. But one just ends up trying to get answers out of the body it cannot give. See Becker, *Denial*, 44-45.

<sup>42</sup> This and all subsequent verses are NRSV.

only made possible in Paul's anticipation of the cross: "they are now justified by his grace as a gift..." (Rom 3:24) Similarly, Luther's claim of *The Bondage of the Will*<sup>43</sup> and our boundness to be theologians of glory are not mere phenomenological observations as they are for Becker, but is instead the sharp point in which the cross reveals the totalizing of sin on our being because the cross demands it totalize us. "But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, *so that* what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."<sup>44</sup>

It is in this way that Gerhard Forde notes, "The cross is in the first instance God's attack on human sin...God's 'alien work,' Luther called it. As an attack it reveals that the real seat of sin is not in the flesh but in our *spiritual* aspirations..."<sup>45</sup> Its attack is on our narratives, on our glory stories, because in them we seek to establish our *Telos*, our own Meaning, and the cross will have nothing else establish us but itself. Becker came to discover our boundness and could finally only despair it,<sup>46</sup> but Luther came to discover our boundness *in the cross* and could finally only rejoice.<sup>47</sup>

For those who are narrating their own *telos*, the cross is absolute foolishness because on it God dies – Christ fails as narrative would have it, so *telos* fails because there is none. As Roy Harrisville puts it, the cross is not a culmination, but "anomaly," the complete fracture and

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<sup>43</sup> Drawn here from Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2d ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 168-170.

<sup>44</sup> Galatians 3:22, italics mine.

<sup>45</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 1. Italics original.

<sup>46</sup> Becker can only finally conclude in his book that one's boundness is set, that knowledge or awareness of it still can't free one from it. We are bound to glory projects that never will accomplish what we seek in them, to overcome death, even if symbolically. He can only conclude that the most anyone can do is "fashion something – an object or ourselves – and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak," and hope that it just might contribute to the only solution to humanity's boundness: a new nature. See Becker, *Denial*, 285.

<sup>47</sup> Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 195.

breaking that nothing should interpret it, but it everything else.<sup>48</sup> The sinner can't stand this (because it means an end to one's glory story) and so either goes somewhere else for glory or tries to uncover God in it, to use methodology and so abstract from the event to what was *really* happening, the hidden *telos* underneath, who God *really* is in his being (as we noted earlier, a description of God).

But three days later Christ rose from the dead, was exalted, and that which is “no-*telos*” at all to us is actually made our *telos*. There is nothing unhidden in the resurrection, only instead the confirmation that indeed it was as it seemed. The Messiah suffered, was rejected by all, crucified, and died under the curse of the law, yet three days later was justified quite apart from it. The cross remains as it happened, the death of God who is all glory, and so completely breaks the glory narrative. It is the forgiveness of our sin – the end of our glory stories, our task to story our own *telos* – and the establishing of our *telos* quite apart from ourselves.

Thus, to receive Christ is to receive the end to your own meaning-making, to be given your *telos* “already,” ahead of time, apart from any contribution you'd like to give it. It is in this way we claim with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:19b-20a) “It is finished.” (John 19:30) The Kingdom of God comes without you, apart from your doing, which is precisely your freedom for it – no longer a slave to glory, but free to it; no longer a slave to meaning, but free to meaning. It is the freedom into meaninglessness, i.e. foolishness, to those things that have “no point,” no greater *telos* building activity: to suffer, die, and be poured out for your neighbor. It is the release from narrative as culmination to narrative as unraveling – no longer towards a *telos*, but now from the *Telos*.

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<sup>48</sup> Roy Harrisville, *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 76-77; 271.

There is, however, one final point that must be made here. The Gospel is only the *Gospel* to the point that it is particular, that it stands in relation "for you." The cross is only the beginning and end in you to the point that it ends *you* and begins in *you* a new creation – you individually, you communally. This is not a reasoning that the cross needs particularity, but that *it is* particularity, and so will exist only "for me" as one who is particular. To the extent that the Gospel is abstract, or general, it is dead – it is just "a story," but not one that swallows my own and gives me Christ. The cross is itself its own story, but it only becomes mine, it only becomes ours, not when we are made to identify with it ("I am like Peter, Mary," etc.) or when it identifies with us ("God suffers") but when we are actually made our own real particular character in it – when the cross swallows *me* in all my particularities, incoherencies, and inevitabilities into its own *telos*.

This is what we began to observe above as problematic in narrative theology itself, that it and similar theologies takes the cross into its own *telos* and so tries to uncover God "as he really is in his being" through the cross, so the gospel no longer is the doing of God's *Telos* (that is, Christ) but is abstracted to a concept, to God's identity. The Gospel becomes a description of God and not God's doing, and it is why Forde can point out that Karl Barth, in attempting to make reconciliation completely objective, never can finally bridge it to the subject.<sup>49</sup> Faith becomes an ascent to an abstraction, a description of who God is, and only to the point that I can relate to that description is the Gospel ever any *Gospel*.

I am, instead, biased with Luther and Forde here that proclamation doesn't seek to solve the problem of who God is outside God's Word – outside the giving of Christ.<sup>50</sup> Indeed it can't, and when it tries to it only comes up against a God who still hides from our glory story-ing and

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<sup>49</sup> Forde, *The Preached God*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> See *Ibid.*, 54.

so one ends up having to deny, repress, or ignore our experience in its particularity (our suffering; our terror; life's failures and incoherencies). We end up having to mask the world's and our particularity with an abstract description (like love) and so narratively have to cut the "elements" that don't fit the glory story, thus trading our own particularity for the sake of identification.

Rather, our proclamation moves to what Luther describes as "calling a thing what it is,"<sup>51</sup> which is not a hermeneutical move but a phenomenological one.<sup>52</sup> It's not to call "what happened" but call "it happened" (add "sh" to that last one and you get the best contemporary equivalent). Glory narratives are always threatened by incoherent particularities, especially when they threaten one's culminating *telos*, and it is why they desperately try to find "reason" for them and so *interpret* the "thing" beyond what it is. But the cross is its own story, and so claims our *Telos* (Christ) over our particularities and makes us its particular subject. It is not threatened by them, or me, and therefore frees us to "call them" and finally freely "calls me." To expand upon Forde, the only solution to the incoherent God is not coherence but the coherence-breaking *Telos* that comes to you specifically, not inferentially.<sup>53</sup> The proclamation must be narrated specifically – the "doing" of the cross must be "done" particularly.

### **Into Narrative Particularity**

This is most certainly our hope, but I believe it is also most certainly our ministry's freedom. Our first turning back toward's our youth, amidst their virtual world and all their

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<sup>51</sup> See Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 81.

<sup>52</sup> I'm thinking here of Dr. Andy Root, "A Theology of the Cross and Ministry in Our Time: How Do You Call a Thing What It Is When You Don't Know What the Thing Is?," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48 no. 2 (2009): 187-193. In it Root brings up the problem of defining the "thing" and seems to make it a hermeneutical move, even for his own answer to the problem he observes. I propose that it is much less about interpretation but rather honesty, about calling a reality (admitting it exists) and not necessarily naming it.

<sup>53</sup> See Forde, 54.

"narrative-ness," is not a heavy but a light step, because the hope of the Gospel does not hang on our ability, especially our ability to do virtual media or narrative. The church now takes it up, in a Lutheran phrase, in its proper place: as it concerns our youth and their creatureliness. There is, however, I think still sharp points in this freedom where the church must move forward unbound for the sake of our youth and their narratives at work, reconsider its own glory storying, and finally do what no other community can: claim our youth in the fullness of their particularity.

In this way, we recall that virtual media does narrative well, but it succeeds because it meets narrative beings. The significance of the church's ministry, then, is not whether it is able to meet our youth in virtual media or not, but whether it will meet them as they are in their narrative-ness – that is, as beings forming meaning, moving ever towards coherence in their lives and making it their own. The great freedom in this is that any ministry can do this, and I suspect there are a lot of other narrative beings around in the church to help.

This is at the one time a strange, practical affirmation that the *ecclesia* already has what it needs at an ontological level, yet it ironically overlooks it as it ascends ministry into programs and experts. This is deeper than mere "relational ministry" but the point that when you have narrative beings meet narrative beings, you get a pairing to a depth that no virtual media can imitate. It is, also however, the freedom that any ministry can take up virtual media (or not!). Our youth's *Telos* has already been established *as* Christ. It is that in which we move and so now it is only up to the particular church to determine whether virtual media serves the creaturely narrative needs of the youth in question. It is not the key, nor the enemy, to reaching them!

Secondly, I suggest it is worth reflecting again the critique in all this. If narrative beings, then how often our attempts are to treat them as propositional ones. It is a pattern that plagues the Western church and its surrounding society, one that segregates our beings and so "it is hardly

surprising that there is both a fascination with and a longing for narratives that recreate an ordered world and provide meaning and direction...<sup>54</sup> The condition exists in our ministries that measure youth by facts and statistics, in culture that bases youth's meaning in degrees, and even in our preaching that might use contemporary stories but ends in driving to propositions: “What we can learn today...;” “God is love so we are called to love.” The telling mark is that we not only treat youth as separated beings (like head vs. heart) but finally make the Gospel and God a description and so it completely remains disconnected from their particularity.

The boon here is that the church need not be bound to its institutional form or to its ministries that are characterized by the propositional spotlight. If ministry is with narrative beings, then in Christ its freedom is to precisely go and *meet* narrative beings however best that happens for the creature. For example, I suspect that the issue of worship is not necessarily about relevance, but that it makes little room for our youth’s particularity and neither meets them in it.<sup>55</sup> So it is free instead to bring their particularity in it and shape the church around it: it is free to abandon the traditional building, put Bible iPads in the pews, reframe youth group to include adults (narrative beings with narrative beings!), or even reconstruct the minister’s role different from that of a career. The church’s service – its freedom – is to particular ones, but such ones whose being exists in search for integration, coherence, and yet who suffer the incoherence of the *cosmos* and more closely themselves. Every other “kingdom” is bound to either help them ascend it or deny it, but the church’s is its freedom to do what no other one can: call their particularity “like it is” and serve the creature as it must.

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<sup>54</sup> See Stroup, "Theology of Narrative," 431.

<sup>55</sup> We could say that the Story never swallows their own, and so they are never made a character in it but instead asked to only identify with it, just as we might with a movie actor.

Let us close here, though, with the very “thing” that makes this all possible, for the church has not been entrusted with freedom, with service, with love, nor even, dare I say, responsibility. It’s one and only possession is a Word – a Christ who was crucified most ungloriously on a cross and rose three days later – and it is that very proclaimed Word that is our foolishness and freedom for foolishness. Over our own teleogizing the cross comes and establishes Christ as our *Telos* alone, which is the end for the sinner but the beginning of the new creature into freedom, particularity, and hope – freed from meaning to finally be meaning-full. If the church does not take this up as its central task and narrate the Cross to our youth *specifically* – to enter their lives particularly and claim Christ on them particularly – then it only becomes another glory story in competition with all others, and our youth know plenty others who do it much better.<sup>56</sup>

The cross, though, is not a competition. For the Christian, it is life, joy, freedom, and lightness. It is its own story, and when we proclaim that story into who are youth already are, the Spirit binds itself to that Word and claims them as God’s own, that is, as true and not inferential characters in its *Telos*. Christ becomes not an assenting belief that he is “for me,” but is *really pro me*. It may seem like a daunting or difficult task to give, to narrate particularly, but I believe it’s often because we don’t know our youth in their particularity and so struggle to give it as such. So instead, go know them. Go meet them. Freely serve them in all their narrative creatureliness, in all their particular coherence and incoherence. Discernfully use or don’t use virtual media to do so. Rearrange rituals and the church of our propositions – it’s not bound to it. Ultimately though, claim the Gospel in all its particularity for narrative beings of particularity.

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<sup>56</sup> I see this as the danger of our time in where the church takes itself up as the task of individual morality or social morality, so that it ends up in a vehement fight between competing glory stories.



There, at the cross, our future is set, our hope made sure, and for freedom we have been set free:<sup>57</sup> Christ our *Telos*.

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<sup>57</sup> Thinking of Galatians 5:1.

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