



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Papers | Reviews | Essays

## Can We Still Afford Preacher Stories?

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Back in my days as a schoolteacher, the guest speaker for one of our school's in-service devotional gatherings related an experience he had when he was a young beginning preacher. The story was engaging, self-deprecating, and humorous. I'm also confident it was fiction—at least the part of it he said was autobiographical. I base that conclusion on the fact that I had first heard the story while in my teens, about twenty years before. Either the man who told it then, also as an autobiographical incident, had “borrowed” it from the devotional speaker—and if so, the latter had begun preaching as a really precocious youngster—or one or both of the men had used the same stock story, complete with the first-person pronoun.

The category for such accounts is “preacher stories,” told to engage an audience, interject a bit of humor, or illustrate a point. Many of us are sufficiently old to have attended enough revivals, lectureships, retreats, and the like to become quite familiar with many in the collection. Because of that, just as I was able to do with the story in that devotional, we can begin chuckling at the punch line early in the story's telling. We understand the point—and value—of these stories and make allowances for them. And generally, most who hear them, whether preachers or not, tend to do the same, even if they are well aware of, or at least suspect, their fictional nature.

This essay is not intended as an appeal to stop using preacher stories. But it is a plea to those of us who teach to tell them for what they are: reality-based fictional illustrations of significant truths.

And it is *truth* that is at issue here. By now it should come as no surprise to any of us that we live in a culture where truth is fluid—the usual term is *relative*—and where statements, both mundane and substantive, from public figures are greeted with skepticism or, more likely, cynicism because we know they are probably spin and hype rather than accurate depictions of reality. In such a climate, those of us who are called to preach the ultimate Truth must be especially diligent to safeguard our integrity as teachers. Carelessly used, preacher stories do not contribute to such diligence.

In his incisive little book, *Time for Truth: Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype, & Spin* [Baker Books, 2000], Os Guinness illustrates the contemporary disregard for truth in the West and exposes it for the destructive force it is. In one passage, he relates the example of a popular entertainer who included a story in his autobiography of a particularly embarrassing moment early in his career as a stand-up comedian. The problem is that it happened to someone else. He liked the story so much that he paid the other person to let him use it in his autobiography (Guinness, 40-41).

So, is he to be trusted or not? If that incident from “his life” didn’t really happen, can we be confident other things he tells us about himself did? What about statements he makes about current events, whether pertaining to himself or others? Or are we to dismiss his case as just one more example of a public figure—not to mention an authority figure—whom we allow to entertain us but don’t trust to inform us? And how does knowing he, and others we know about, didn’t accurately depict reality affect our willingness to trust any person who purports to inform us?

By way of reminder, disciples of Jesus are expected to know, believe, love, and obey the truth (cf. John 8.32; Rom 2.8; 2 Thess 2.10, 12; 1 Tim 4.3; 1 John 2.21). We are to put away falsehood and speak truth to our neighbors (Eph 4.25). We are to be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4.15; cf. 1 Cor 13.6), a participle phrase that can be literally translated, “truthing in love.” Following the example of Jesus and the apostles, preachers should be especially concerned to be truth tellers (cf. Matt 22.16, John 8.44–45; 18.37; Acts 26.25; Rom 9.1; 2 Cor 4.2; 6.7; 7.14; 11.10; Gal 2.5, 14; 4.16; Eph 1.13; Phil 1.18; 2 Tim 2.15; 2 Pet 1.12; 2.2; 1 John 3.18; 3 John 8).

Not too long after the devotional I described above, a Christian sister, a professional educator in another school who was also a friend, approached me after my sermon one evening and asked, “About that story you told, did that really happen or was it one of those preacher stories?” She was mostly kidding—I think—but I suspect she was also part of a growing number of people whose trust in what they hear grows weaker all the time.

Let me say it again: I think there is a place for a humorous anecdote, an engaging illustration, and even for telling a self-deprecating episode that shows that we preachers are also human. But not at the expense of our credibility as communicators of truth. In a world where cynicism has become all too common, where lack of credibility is too often assumed, we need to go to the trouble, both by research and more careful wording, to be sure we do nothing that even hints to our hearers that we can ever not be trusted to tell them the truth.

So, go ahead and tell the stories; make your presentations as amenable as possible; bring them to life and use effective techniques to keep your hearers with you.

Just don’t make your credibility suspect by saying something happened to you that really didn’t.

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