

## The Crux of the Story

There is a vacuum at the heart of our culture. As Saul Bellow argued in his 1976 Noble Laureate lecture, "The intelligent public is waiting to hear from art what it does not hear from theology, philosophy, and social theory and what it cannot hear from pure science: a broader, fuller, more coherent, more comprehensive account of what we human beings are, who we are, and what this life is for. If writers do not come into the center, it will not be because the center is pre-empted; it is not." Very simply stated, there is no center to hold things together. Or to put it differently, there is no overarching story to life by which all the particulars can be interpreted. The pursuit of knowledge without knowing who we are or why we exist, combined with a war on our imaginations by our entertainment industry, leaves us at the mercy of power with no morality. May I illustrate this?

On many different occasions while driving and listening to music, every now and then a piece comes on that I find either unmusical or jarring. I usually shut the radio off. But then one day I was taken to see a play called *The Phantom of the Opera*. Suddenly I realized that some of the music I had not quite enjoyed was from this play. I was amazed at the difference knowing the story made, whenever I heard the music subsequently. In fact the music in some portions is utterly magnificent. The love songs, the discourses, yes, even the arguments made sense when you know the story. Life needs a story for one to understand the details. Life needs to hold together at the center if we are to reach to distant horizons. But our culture owns neither a story, nor holds at the center.

If such is the reality of our culture, where does that leave us? The challenge, as I see it, is this: How do you connect with a generation that hears with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?

Ironically, postmodernism may be one of the most opportune thought patterns because it has cleared the playing field. All disciplines have lost their "final authority." The hopes that modernity had brought, the triumph of "Reason" and "Science," which many thought would bring the utopia, have failed in almost every respect. With all of our material gains, there is still a hunger for the spiritual. In virtually every part of the world, students linger long after every session to talk and plead for answers to their barren lives. All the education one gets does not diminish that search for inner coherence and a storyline for one's own life.

As much as postmodernism can confuse language and definitions, there is a yearning that the postmodernist's cavalier attitude does not weaken. Moreover, there is indeed a story and one who stands at the center who

answers this yearning. Only in the gospel message that culminates in worship is there coherence—which in turn brings coherence within the community of believers, where both individuality and community are affirmed. The worship of the living God is what ultimately binds the various inclinations of the heart and gives them focus. A worshipping community in spirit and in truth binds the diversity of our culture, the diversity of our education, the diversity of our backgrounds, and brings us together into a corporate expression of worship.

With all that the cultural terrain presents to us, the injunction that "to find one's self, one must lose one's self," contains a truth any seeker of self-fulfillment needs to grasp. Apart from the cross of Jesus Christ, I know of no other hope. The songwriter said it simply: We've a story to tell to the nations. The last stanza of that great hymn says:

*We've a Savior to show to the nations, Who the path of sorrow hath trod,  
That all of the world's great people,s Might come to the truth of God. For  
the darkness shall turn to dawning, And the dawning to noon-day bright,  
And Christ's great kingdom shall come to earth, The kingdom of love and  
light.*

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