The Story and Leveraging Technology for the Sake of the Gospel

by J. D. Bridges

Over the last 5 years, Spread Truth has been developing an evangelistic resource called *The Story* (not to be confused with the chronological reading plan and supplementary resources offered by Zondervan). Our hope was to provide a concise explanation of the gospel looking through the biblical theology lens of *Creation, The Fall, Rescue,* and *Restoration*. In short, we wanted to provide the reader with the story behind the gospel in order to make sense of the gospel. In the past, our ministry had utilized other excellent evangelistic tools that presented the gospel using a propositional truth approach. Yet, as we interacted with thousands of unbelievers in large urban settings (i.e. New York City), we began to discover more and more people didn't have a context for the gospel. They didn't have a basic understanding of the Bible's plotline. Not only unbelievers, but also believers—we found—didn't understand the basic plotline of the Scriptures. This led us to write and publish *The Story* booklet, but not after asking several questions.

How long should it be?

One thing we quickly realized was that writing a short narrative of the Bible was incredibly difficult—which probably goes without saying. When producing a booklet like *The Story*, one thing you may not realize is that pages come in multiples of 4. So, if you can't fit everything on 8 pages, then you automatically jump to 12 pages. If not 12 pages, then 16 pages, and so forth. We ultimately determined a 12-page booklet would strike the best balance between cost-effectiveness and attention span of the reader.

Who is the audience?

First and foremost, *The Story* was written for someone with no knowledge of the Bible. Though our hope was that it might serve to encourage and sharpen a believer too. In a day where the Western Church is in a multi-decade decline in growth, we would do well to no longer make assumptions that people know much—if anything—about the Bible. Though there are certainly exceptions, the reality is the mission field for the Western Church is looking more and more like the setting for the Apostle Paul in Acts Chapter 17 as he engaged the philosophers on Mars Hill. Similarly, the West is becoming more and more a marketplace of ideas, ideologies, religions, and reasons that are void of any sense of Christ. That's not to say the only way we can share the gospel is if our listeners know the Bible. But, as Dr. Don Carson has once explained,

> [The] gospel is integrally tied to the Bible's storyline. Indeed, it is incomprehensible without understanding that storyline….But the point is simply this: the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ makes sense in the context of this storyline and in no other.

What should be included?

Without a doubt, the most difficult aspect of writing *The Story* was determining the content for the reader. Explaining and defining the gospel was of first importance. Yet, we had to make tough decisions and came to realize nothing we could state about God could be stated exhaustively, much less placed on twelve 4-1/2 inch pages. Some glorious doctrines and storylines could not be included or mentioned due to space constraints. And, those same space constraints would not allow for a full explanation of any particular doctrine we did include. For example, we felt it was important to communicate both the eternal and immutable nature of God by simply stating, "He has always existed, and He has always existed exactly as He is now." Much more could be said about God's nature as it relates to His eternality and His immutability.

In similar fashion, we explained Hell in two different places in the booklet, using phrases such as "misery and unhappiness" and "eternal separation from God" to explain it. Most would agree that more could have been said. Most would agree any description we might offer would ultimately fall short of the true severity and consequences of Hell.

Technology - How do we leverage it?

This may seem like a strange question given *The Story* was originally designed to be a 12-page booklet to be given away, but it proved to be one of the most important. The reason: more and more churches are embracing and leveraging technology to fulfill the Great Commission. Local churches and pastors have increasingly made an attempt to communicate their values and mission statements to an online audience through blogs and church websites. The average church designs most of its online strategy at communicating *Here's who we are. Here's where you can find us. Here's what we believe. Here's what we do.* All of these are helpful answers for our online visitors. But, how can we leverage our evangelism to take advantage of technology? And, how can we make The Story accessible to anyone and everyone yet firmly rooted within the context of each local church?

Technology continued - ViewTheStory.com

Spread Truth is committed to serving and working through the local church. The previous questions ultimately led us to develop ViewTheStory.com. The vision behind this website was to give individuals and churches free access to *The Story* booklet by embedding it on their websites, blogs, and/or Facebook pages to supplement their evangelism efforts. By giving churches and individuals the ability to sign-up for their own account, we could funnel all of the contacts and web traffic back to the person who created the account. We also built a powerful

dashboard and administrative tool that enabled each person to customize their account and take advantage of powerful features that could be turned 'on' or 'off'. This included mapping features offered by Google to track visitor locations by city or country. Other features such as the ability to share on social networks (i.e. Twitter and Facebook) provided additional opportunities for anyone to get involved with sharing the gospel within their spheres of influence. By God's grace we have now seen almost 650,000 unique visits on ViewTheStory.com from over 175 countries in less than 4 years, and has now been translated in 5 languages besides English. *So, what other opportunities have we seen?*

Technology continued – *The Story* app

Another way we wanted to leverage technology for the sake of the gospel was to provide *The Story* on mobile devices (both Apple and Android). We felt this was important, because many times mobile users don't have access to a cell phone signal, but they still have their phones with them. As a result, we created *The Story* app with the ability to be downloaded for free from the Apple iTunes and Google Play stores. The app carries both *The Story* booklet and *The Story Conversation Tool*. From the believer's smart phone, there is an accessible resource that provides a visual aid to engage in a gospel conversation with an unbeliever.

Equipping Believers with The Story

How did it all begin? What has gone wrong? Is there any hope? What will the future hold? Every religion attempts to answer these questions in some way. As followers of Christ, we know the answers to these questions flow from the Scriptures and form the basis for the biblical worldview with Jesus as the Hero. As ministers of the gospel we must be aware of the underlying questions behind the questions people ask and the comments they make. Where they

find the answer informs the decisions they make and reveals the motivations behind them. People pattern their lives around the answers to these questions. No matter what methodology of evangelism you prefer, the Great Commission stands before us. And, we need to be able to clearly present the gospel within the storyline of Scripture. Technology will never be a substitute for the proclamation of the gospel that must flow from hearts to our mouths. But, when God grips our hearts, we will use any means possible to advance His Kingdom. By grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, may we continually reveal God's redemptive purposes through any means possible. May we continue to equip believers with the story of God that they might become fishers of men.

About the author:

J. D. Bridges has served as the VP of Operations & Finance of Spread Truth Ministries since 2006. He and his wife, Amy, have two children (Ella & Reid), and live in Normal, IL. He served as co-author of The Story, and co-editor of The Story ESV Bible (released Feb. 2013 in partnership with Crossway). Learn more at www.spreadtruth.com and www.viewthestory.com.