

Book Review

Tom Steffen and Ray Neu, *Character Theology: Engaging God through His Cast of Characters*

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Authors Tom Steffen and Ray Neu, in their book *Character Theology: Engaging God through His Cast of Characters*, call for a relational, narrative, and participatory way of doing theology. The systematic theology developed by Western Christendom comprises abstract propositions that neglect God's revelation through the lives, voices, conflicts, struggles, sufferings, and journeys of the characters. God's revelation is in fact through characters in the biblical stories, hence theology cannot be separated from those stories. Furthermore, the biblical characters in the Scriptures mirror the stories of the readers.

Character Theology Defined

Character theology is caught experimentally, rather than thought rationally. Character theology is a relational theology that compellingly connects all cultures and religions. God appointed characters as storytelling emissaries to help others understand God and his salvific history, and to experience a relationship with him. God's revelation relies on earthly, concrete, biblical characters to frame, enliven, and demonstrate divine abstract truths and ethics. Stories form and reform our worldview. "Character theology, composed of a cast of characters who represent universal human experience, serves as the mother of meaning, meditation, modeling, modification, and memory" (29).

Character theology consists of Come and see; Taste and see; Figure it out. Biblical characters represent universal human experience and serve as the mother of meaning, meditation, modeling, modification, and memory. Stories provide a concrete basis, whether written, aural, or visual. The divine author of the Bible stories wrote for a purpose. "Writers are word shepherds. Storytellers are character shepherds" (34). The Bible is not a quiet printed text; rather, it is a speaking printed text. The goal of Bible engagement is to faithfully transfer the written text to the table of one's heart. Narrative or story is a fundamental instrument of the heart.

"Character theology offers choices between characters who offer the futility of foolishness, the well of wisdom, and everything between. Characters forge character" (55). Character theology has a unique way of arresting and retaining people's attention, making us wonder. Character theology encourages an amateur army of foot soldiers to interpret the Bible stories. Character theology extends and enhances existing theologies. Character theology provides an interpretive lens, providing a fuller, sharper vision of the glories of God.

Overall, *Character Theology* is a stimulating, creative, and deeply challenging contribution to contemporary theological reflection. It calls readers back to Scripture as drama, witness, and encounter, urging them to pay closer attention to the persons through whom God's truth is

disclosed. The result is a work that is academically suggestive, spiritually enriching, and practically relevant for teaching, preaching, discipleship, and mission.

Big Forgot and Fatal Flaw

According to the authors, orality is the “big forgot” and the absence of voices is the fatal flaw in most hermeneutic models. Stories are forgotten, and God is reduced to a subject in a seminary.

Ethno-theology

Is Systematic Theology the West’s ethno-theology? The Reformation endeavor was to relate Scripture to tradition. “For the Enlightenment, it was how to relate Scripture to reason. For today, the urgent question becomes, how do we relate Scripture to authority and experience?” (25).

Five Elements

Character theology needs five elements: stories, characters, orality, Oral hermeneutics, and character-centric questions.

Stories

Like honey attracts ants, stories attract people. In fact, stories create an insatiable hunger for more stories. Of course, stories take time to tell, but they percolate and perpetuate in the listener’s mind. Humans are image-making and image-using creatures. When people hear stories, they view them in the theatre of their minds. The invisible becomes visible; past events become present experiences. A story lingers in minds, resulting in awe, amazement, and anticipation. “The integration of symbols, stories, and rituals continues to shape and reshape one’s worldview” (42). Stories increase and perpetuate memory. “Stories show rather than tell, enact rather than explain, illuminate rather than spell out, demonstrate rather than define, embody rather than conceptualize, encounter rather than detail, exhibit rather than exhort, suggest rather than state” (42). Stories refuse to become history and easily become contemporary. “The Bible is replete with stories, comprised of some eight hundred major stories plus myriads of mini stories found in the Psalms, songs, Proverbs, and elsewhere” (44). The unified sacred story centers on Jesus Christ, the Perfect Person and Chief Character. Narrative is embedded in theology, rather than theology embedded in a narrative. Hence, Christ’s Character drives theology. Story is important because “The Holy Spirit loves beauty, teasing mystery, built-in ambiguity, creating emotive fascination, contradiction, wonder, discovery” (50-51). The Holy Spirit is the grand interpreter. Hermeneutics is never culture-free, nor is Bible interpretation.

Characters

Modern theology is dependent on de-dramatized propositions, statements about God, taken out of context. “A character is a person, spirit, or personified entity that advances or surrounds a conflict” (67). The Chief Character is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Grand Interpreter is the Holy Spirit. Steffen and Neu highlight pivotal characters who exhibit a kaleidoscope of faults, failures, and feats. Characters are compared and contrasted as some become heroes and some become villains, and others are flat characters who tend to remain in the background. “Mystery, unpredictability, silence, tension, conflict, confusion, starts and stops, crises, catharses, conundrums developed in the plotline all create curiosity” (73).

Character-centered thinkers read characters and discern characters. “Relationally based character thinking goes beyond rationally based critical thinking by including emotions, life experience, and spirituality” (77). Character thinking is as complex as critical thinking. The Bible has a collection of characters sovereignly selected and sequenced within the Story. Characters centralize and consolidate as a story.

All interpretations are a risk. Only Jesus interpreted the Hebrew Bible flawlessly. Characters carry concepts and are involved in conversations, conduct, and commitment. Concepts require characters to dance together. Truth requires characters, and characters require truth.

Orality

Unlike knowing, learning requires listening. No writing is found in the Garden of Eden. The Ten Commandments were spoken before being written. Just as text can be written or spoken, so the spoken can be inaudible or audible. Script requires speech, and speech benefits from script. Oral to manuscript; manuscript to print; print to silent print; silent print to digital. Literacy has blinded many to the oral features of Scripture. The Spoken Word influenced the Written Word. Storytellers use tone, volume, pace, and gestures. Scripture is speech-sourced writings. Written scripts are living, speaking scripts. Storytellers are text proclaimer-performers. A story does not have a unifying topic, but a unifying action. Orality connects not just people through stories, but hearts and places as well. The oral does not die, but its authority is subordinate to that of the written text. God spoke the first word, and he will speak the last word, and he always speaks in between. “Scripture was revealed, received, recorded, rehearsed, and relayed to others through oral-aural means” (122). Children learn orally by listening, observing, and mimicking the multiple sounds and sights, among others, that surround them. Orality is based on relationships, with discussion and dialogue (voice and sound). Because of Postmodernism, orality became a comeback kid. Orality plus digital and virtual is the new norm.

Oral Hermeneutics

People learn how to underline and circle, if they cannot read. Interpreting requires telling and listening. Bible study is teaching, while Bible discussion is participatory and oral-oriented. “Using the role of facilitator along with character-centric questions, spiritual-gifted teachers can turn bible studies into fruitful, memorable, communal bible discussions” (141). Philosophy and science (including words, syntax, grammar) were the basis for hermeneutics in the era of the Enlightenment. In the Information Age, mechanical, digital, and virtual AI have become the tools. Enlightenment resulted in the denarrativization of the Bible. Stories are not designed for one-liners. Authors ask a valid question: “Do movie goers anxiously await the first conversation so they can begin to analyze the grammar to determine the movie’s meaning?” (148). It is possible to control information, but one cannot control mystery. The Bible is not just a code book, but a case book.

“Christianity is a way of life—an imaginative, emotional, rational way of life—based first and foremost on a relational story driven by concrete characters rather than a rational collection of theological truths” (132). Interpreting stories is more understandable than philosophizing about abstract concepts. Oralists prefer modelling over principles. See and feel lived truth. In the Ladder of abstraction, the lower rungs represent the concrete, ascending to the top abstract rungs. Bible communicators find themselves fixated on the top rungs of the ladder. Reason is the organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning. “Oral hermeneutics is an art that cherishes and chases meaningful metaphor, mystery, and imagination without diminishing or devaluing the mind”

(156). Oral hermeneutics integrates, as well as dissects, the text. Textual hermeneutics: grammar, categories, ideas... persuasion through propositional logic. Oral hermeneutics: aesthetics, concreteness, symbols, stories, ritual, persuasion through revelation. Oral hermeneutics, driven by narrative logic, is an interpretive process that creates character theology. The Holy Spirit is always present to ensure clarity and credibility. Instead of analyzing grammar, decode concrete characters and contexts using imagination, emotions, and reason. Narrative logic relies on coherence, truthfulness, interconnectedness, and identification. Oral hermeneutics begins not with abstract grammar but with concrete characters: humans, spirits, animals, and insects. “Orality shouts, ‘Picture this!’ Oral hermeneutics shouts, ‘Experience this!’ Character theology shouts, ‘Watch this!’ Application shouts, ‘Routinize this!’ Christianity shouts, ‘Erupt with thanks to the Eternal!’ (Psalms 107:1)” (171).

Character-Centric Questions

A parable is a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence. Jesus was the message and model. He was a quintessential questioner. Mystery teaches truths rather than telling them. Telling eliminates participation and learning by solving the mystery. Jesus did not have Q & A sessions, but Q & Q sessions. Jesus asked ten questions when they forgot to buy bread (Mark 8:14-21). There is an art and science of asking questions. “Biblical characters reveal the Creator through conversations, conflict, conduct, and context” (181).

Questions originate from assumptions. Well-thought-through questions will help enlightenment to dawn more than an immediate answer would. Smart people are not those who have the right answers but those who ask the most perceptive questions: “The right questions asked by the right person to the right people in the right sequence and in the discovery of the right answers” (182). Curious people make for good Bible interpreters. Few have been taught to ask questions to discover what the text is asking. Character-centric questions are to reveal the Creator through the thoughts, actions, and interactions of the biblical characters. “Conversations, by design, are reciprocal, risky, yet rewarding” (190). Let the question emerge from the text. Who, What, and How are concrete questions, while “Why” needs more abstract thinking. Questions should advance beyond awareness to application. Questions need to be designed to address the specific moral value systems: 1) Innocence and guilt; 2) Honor and Shame; 3) Power and Fear; 4) Purity and Pollution.

Character Theology Demonstrated

The second part of the book demonstrates the method of Character Theology through practical engagement, especially in relation to the Jonah narrative. The story of Jonah was facilitated in a Bible discussion in three places on three continents: the Philippines (Asia), Africa, and Florida (North America). The story has to be memorized, internalized, and delivered. First, the storyteller should be walking into the story and then taking it to others. Character-centric questions are a bit like using a magnifying glass or spotlight, or a freeze-frame.

Challenge

The authors conclude that Tri-communicators, those who can teach through the ‘middle way’—a hybrid of oral, print, and digital—will reign in the twenty-first century. Character Theology complements systematic theology and makes effective communication of the gospel and the biblical truths to today’s postmodern and digital people. With an easy methodology of

communication embedded in culture, many simple, humble, amateur storytellers and facilitators could become theological educators for the local churches.