Testimony as a Means of Grace

Andrew Wood

The telling of stories is the primary language of human experience. When friends meet, when people join a workplace or college, when children discover what it is to be part of a family, stories are told. Newspapers long discovered that story is the most potent way to convey information, whilst TV offers narratives not only in documentary and soap opera, but also in the seductive power of advertisements. Our life-stories are no less significant, we share fragments of them with friends, with therapists and if we belong to a Christian community we are encouraged to share our testimonies, what we know about God from our experience and how the shape of our lives displays God's grace. If, as Stephen Crites has maintained, we are story-shaped people (Crites 1987), then the bearing of our stories reveals our identity, our community and our potential for rebirth. Such bearing of testimony, has long been a common feature of Christian life and praxis, and offers the way to enable people, particularly those not skilled in formal discourses of the church., to articulate their desires, and to make their claim for justice. Testimony is perhaps the way in which the horrors and joys of the last century have been told; it is a typical way in which people today articulate themselves through the all-pervasive news media. It is increasingly seen as a key biblical genre, as Brueggemann claims: "the largest rubric under which we can consider Israel's speech about God is that of testimony." (Brueggemann 1997:119) Ballard & Pritchard conclude that narrative is also a fruitful new source of theological reflection, particularly as it: "enables people to be carried along who would be anxious about being told they were going to be involved in a process of theological reflection" (Ballard & Pritchard 1996:129).My own experience in ministry is that it is in the telling of story often in small groups that people's voices, often silenced by the institution and power of the church, can be heard. It will be argued that testimony ensures that justice is done, and transformation possible.

To do this, Paul Ricoeur has been chosen as a dialogue partner whose work opens up the idea of testimony. We will then explore the connection between testimony and the praxis of early Methodism, to discover whether it is possible to describe it as a means of grace, and finally offer some conclusions for the bearing of testimony within the community of the church. The writings of Paul Ricoeur, the French Reformed Protestant philosopher and theologian, cover an impressive range of concerns from philosophical anthropology to hermeneutics to critical theory and theology. He has been called: "one of the most original and provocative philosophers writing today.." (Wallace 1995:1) and his theological reflections explore primarily the nature of selfhood and symbol. These lines of thinking have been gathered towards the end of his life in the theme of testimony, or attestation as he puts it. The bearing of one's testimony, the telling of a life-story, holds together his belief in human identity and his political and ethical commitments. Indeed he goes so far as to say that the story of the suffering ones particularly deserves to be told. He speaks of: "the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole

history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative" (Ricoeur, 1984:75) and "by remembering and retelling, we not only prevent forgetfulness from killing the victims twice; we also prevent their life-stories from becoming banal" (Ricoeur "The Memory of Suffering" in Wallace 1995:290) Ricoeur's thinking on testimony can be divided into 4 broad areas: as a philosophical & biblical theme, as narrative, as a life-shaped story, and as a way of speaking about the temporality of human identity In his essay "A Hermeneutic of Testimony" (Mudge1980), Ricoeur explores the biblical model of testimony as the unity between event and meaning, a moment in which an individual or community interprets its effort to exist an desire to be. For the Christian community this is located in the relationship between event – the life and death of Jesus Christ – and meaning, the ways in which our life is interpreted "in Christ". Philosophically, testimony raises the issue of contingency and the absolute – how far can any one contingent event relate to the foundations of our existence? For Ricoeur, however, there is more to testimony than a biblical model or philosophical conundrum. There is always an intersubjective dimension. There is a point at which absolute descriptions fail and we are left with the word of one person or another. This is what interests Ricoeur – his writings focus on the limits placed on our absolute freedom by events, circumstances and relationships. The telling of another's life-story is just such one limit on our actions & choices. The word of testimony is never told in a vacuum, but is an appeal to our judgment, opinion & action. If we listen, we are changed in the process. So, stories of liberation seek to involve us in the struggle, and stories of suffering seek to invoke our compassion and action. Testimony is praxis: the very way in which people learn to speak of themselves. There is a process going on, a creative process which gives birth to new possibilities by involving others in the story, and thereby making new stories. This process is moreover carried by narrative. Ricoeur's essay "Life: a Story in Search of a Narrator" (Valdes 1991:425-437) lays bare his assertion that we have to approach testimony through the category of narrative. Ricoeur's insight into narrative, explored much more fully in his 3-volume work Time & Narrative (Ricoeur 1984-8) is that narrative works by binding up what appears disjointed. The events and circumstances of a life are largely "givens" (birth, family, life-chances, death), they are often disjointed and broken, but we can emplot them together into a meaningful whole. Narrative plots a series of events and characters together, and "squeezes time" to give a picture of reality we can grasp in one. He says that although narrative is in one sense a simulation, in another it is a necessary fiction: "A life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it is not interpreted" (Valdes 1991: 432). Narrative is, in essence, "discordant concord", the play of concord and discord in which a story involves us (Ricoeur 1984:70-75). This play is itself a process, something always being created anew. Ricoeur's most important philosophical move comes next: the gathering together of our experiences, roles, circumstances and actions in a single line of narrative is what identity is all about: "for that which we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent succession of occurrences, nor an immutable substance capable of becoming. It is exactly the kind of identity which the narrative composition alone, by means of its dynamism, can create" (Valdes 1991:437). Just as human being are entangled in stories, so there is a kind of narrative identity, which

can only be told. For Ricoeur, the temporality of human existence is a huge problem. It threatens human identity and disrupts our sense of the present as it asks the question: *how can I be the same person over time?* Ricoeur's way forward is to see human beings as possessing narrative identity. We can be the same over time if we belong to the linked story, and we can say, "this is me!" if we can see ourselves plotted through time. This narrative identity is also an interdependent reality: "the life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of others – of my parents, my friends, my companions in work and leisure.. this entanglement of the history of each person in the histories of numerous others." (Ricoeur 1992:161). Ricoeur seems to believe that this entanglement in stories, which is a basic human reality, can only be disentangled by the truthful and faithful rendition of a life- story, by bearing testimony. In the end, our basic ethical challenge is to be able to say who we are in a constant way. We could draw from this that our Christian vocation is to bear and hear faithful testimony, which alone can constitute us as God's people and enable us to be renewed. We do this, in Ricoeur's language, by holding the *discord* of our lives in tension with the *concord* of God kingdom. When we do this interdependently, we are continuing the work God does in making and remaking creation – and we offer the possibility of putting right those discordances of injustice and oppression. Ricoeur's description of testimony as that which is rendered to make ethical sense of a life, interdependently, opens up a helpful perspective on early Wesleyan praxis: the class meeting or band. Class meetings were famously set up by a Captain Foy in 1742 to help clear the debt on Bristol's New Room. Foy suggested that he should take it upon himself to visit members each week, collecting a penny towards the fund, and classes were immediately adapted to suit other needs. They became prayer meetings, places for settlement of theological dispute, and control of members, for declining to issue a class ticket was a straightforward way to expel unruly members. Wesley himself drew up rules for the more elitist "bands" – in meeting they were to address the questions: "What sins have you committed since our last meeting?" or "What temptations have you met with?".(Armstrong, 1973:66) It is not difficult to see how such meetings became the place for answering these questions in the form of testimony, telling their life-stories in the path towards Christian holiness. Wesley himself adapted the class idea from Moravian and other evangelical practice of the day. Some Moravian class rules give us more detail as to the shape of the conversations: "A strict form of mutual examination was practiced in the bands.. To spy out the hidden territory, the secret sins and resistance to God" (Schmidt 1962:232) Surely it is significant that ideas of mutual examination and questioning common features of these groups. They allowed people to say what they perceived God had been doing with them, in a relationship of mutual accountability and commitment. As such there is a case that such sharing of testimony can be described as a means of grace. Maddox emphasises that Wesley had a gradualist sense of the working of grace, in that it was important for the Christian to be in touch with the liturgical, communal and devotional context in which God's grace could be channelled (Maddox1994:192) One such context was the class meeting, and one such channel was the bearing of testimony. Wesley, unlike many of the theologians of his day, refused to confine grace to the formal channels of sacraments, and was concern that his people

experience not just the presence of God, but the identity and character of God, which provided a pattern for their lives (Maddox, 1994:194). One characteristic of testimony is that it is intersubjective, it demands a hearer and makes claims upon that hearer. So, in telling another's story of faith, it would shape the hearers more into the character and identity of God's actions and invitation to faith. Wesley considered any model of spirituality which relied on individual pursuit of holiness to be inappropriate: "The Gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.. I mean. that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with others." (quoted in Maddox 1994: 209). But was the class meeting a means of grace? Maddox defines the means of grace as: "any area where human performances are related to God's gracious work" (Maddox 1994:192). The bearing of testimony, the sharing of life-stories in such classes were human performances, which related intimately to God's gracious work in the individual for the edification and up building of the group. Maddox moreover considers the primary purpose of the class meeting not to be fellowship as such but transformative praxis: "members' responsible participation in the transforming work of god's grace". As such they were themselves part of the process of new creation which God is working out in the hearts of people and communities. If, then, to borrow part of Ricoeur's definition, testimony is the bearing of a life-story, or part thereof, which makes God's grace coherent, where is its action today? How is it a means of grace for us? Testimony makes a gift and a demand of the church community Testimony makes a gift by empowering new forms of Christian community. One such new form in the UK has been the Cell Church. Cell Church UK understands the cell church as a small group in which every member shares ministry, and "shares a mutual accountability to obey the commands of Christ" also "empowering people and encouraging them into a sense of destiny and purpose in what they do on a Monday to Friday basis" (www.cellchurch.org). This emphasis on mutual accountability and on generating a shared sense of purpose and destiny fits well with an understanding of testimony as that which makes sense of our life-story and enables us to share responsibly the stories of others. The Cell Church has however been confined largely to theologically conservative church groups, and its impact in mainstream, established churches has been limited. Nevertheless, it is a powerful example of where sharing stories of faith in a specific context of commitment to fellowship and growth has seen the rebirth of what church can be for people, and what they can be for God. In the Methodist Church, as in other established churches in the UK, classes still operate largely as monthly house groups, often without the intimacy or commitment of the Cell church – the class sees itself as a means of support for the main organism of the church, as indeed Wesley initially saw his classes. However, cell church may have important lessons for us in our contemporary culture in which people yearn for connection, meaning and intimacy. One of the sharpest questions for our mission in the UK in this new millennium is how we make meaningful contact with those completely indifferent to the church. Studies of postmodern culture conclude that it is often the non-verbal sharing of testimony which connects with this new generation – people are looking for models of living which have integrity and depth, and we may yet have to return to the maxim of St Francis: "preach:

use words if your have to". Jean-Pierre Jossua goes further and speaks of the silence, even the emptiness, of the witness as an introduction, an opening rather than a hoarding for God: "a blank space in the text, a patch of silence, a sudden pause while talking ought to be the first introduction of God into speech or writing." (Jossua 1985:25). He is more explicit about the non-verbal possibilities of testimonies. It is the quality and shape of a life which is the most convincing form of witness: "a possibility of existing among other people with a certain style of personal and community life. Not existing in order to testify, but existing in order to live, in testifying." (Jossua 1989:120) The gospels witness to Christ not only in his words, but in his life, orientated towards the Kingdom of God. So Christ is located by narrative in Galilee, setting his face towards Jerusalem, and a final silent encounter with his judges. There is a sense in which the narrative pattern of the life and death of Jesus, rather than his words, teaching or actions in isolation, is the most adequate way of describing his witness.

Perhaps the rather anticlerical French environment that produced Ricoeur and Jossua has something to teach those of us struggling with the indifference of many to the message of Christianity in our culture. In any event, the category of testimony, in both its intersubjective and non-verbal senses is a gift to a church struggling to come to terms with postmodern values and indifference to the formal doctrines and institutions of the church. If testimony offers gifts to us, it also makes a demand: that the church, whatever its size or organisation, be an open place where people's stories are valued and made part of the community's story. The church should first of all be a community which does justice to the particular: the individual member. Such a member belongs not so much by shared belief, but by finding in the church a place to testify, finding that the community gives her space to say: "this much I know, because I have experienced the God whom Jesus proclaimed as living and present in our lives". All too often testimonies do not bear witness to the individual's expressions and insights, but to the desire or necessity to confirm. Stanley Hauerwas has pointed to the reciprocity between a community which is sensitive to the life-stores of its members and the truthfulness of those narratives to the story of God born by the church: "the limits of community and the narrative which sets its topography constitute the conditions for providing us with the skills to live truthfully" (Hauerwas, 1977:10-11). As such, the church is an institution which is constituted by the epiphany of God among his people, and the signs of that epiphany are the testimonies of its members held in tension with the testimony of God. How might the church become the place for such an epiphany? Here, the understanding of testimony as a means of grace comes to our help. Following Maddox, the means of grace are defined as: "any area where human performances are related to God's gracious work". The church must understand itself as just such an area, testimony as human performance, and should develop ways of relating such performances to the story of God's gracious work. Testimony therefore is intimately connected with the work of New Creation, because testimony is not just giving an account, but about building and offering meaning. It is a genuine act of grace, because there is nothing the hearer does to deserve it, and is a gift from the teller. And, as Christian testimony, it bears witness to the presence of God, which invites us into new worlds of meaning that we did not make. The bearing of

testimony therefore points us forward, and its narrative form, the makes if concord from discord, is a microcosm of God's working to bring harmony and justice from a broken world. Nor is it confined to those who make explicit testimony to the experience of Christ in their lives, story knows no boundaries, and if as is explored below, the church community is a powerful hermeneutic for testimony, we are bound to listen to those who tell their stories. Testimony to what Ricoeur calls the *horrible*, those limit situations of human suffering and oppression are particularly important. Much has been written about the Shoah, and much from those testimonies to its horror which also lays bare the power and function of narrative and testimony. As Elie Wiesel, speaking for the numberless victims of the Shoah, gulags, year zeros commented: "To survive was one thing, but alone it was insufficient. It was necessary to testify. The victims elect to become witnesses." Perhaps testimony, as it connects stories with response and remembrance is an act of grace to those who, like us, need to hear. That is not to say that privileging of the category of testimony is without its problems. How do we apply any criteria for life-narratives; are there good and bad stories, lies as well as truth mixed up in the telling? And what about those unable to remember; memory is itself a crucial aspect of our sense of self – if we cannot remember our stories, or they cannot be made to make sense to us, how can we take our place within any community, let alone the church? One way to approach such problems is to see community as a hermeneutic for testimony: the place where stories are tested as they are put alongside other life-stories and the story of God as it is discovered in the scriptures. There is a call on that listening community not to collude with the strong investment the teller might have in self-deception. The community may also become tellers for those who cannot remember. All this is not to say that testimony is unproblematic, but it is to say that, in Ballard & Pritchard's words, it: "(uniquely) builds on the narrative structure of human consciousness"(Ballard & Pritchard:129)` and can be for people and church a means of grace. Andrew Wood Oxford Institute 2002

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