

**David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*. Wheaton: Crossway, 1995. 284 pages.
Reviewed by Leonard W. Pine**

One of the most subtle areas of Postmodernism's influence in the Church is found in the pulpits of congregations of every denominational stripe, from the liberal (where it is most obvious) to the conservative evangelical (where it is the most "sensitive"). A plethora of books on preaching inductively (so-called), preaching to the seeker, and preaching through narrative has recently sprung out of the evangelical camp, fueled by the awareness that people just don't want to listen anymore to truth. The writers of many of these books have unconsciously bought into the idea that in order to make the truth relate to a congregation, you have to "make" it palatable.

An excellent example of the genre is David Larsen's *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching*. The book's description on the back cover ought send shivers up an absolutist's spine: "A tradition as old as the human family, story-telling is also one of the hottest mediums in our society right now. . . . And in our present age, narrative preaching provides a culturally relevant means of sharing the Word of Life with power and clarity." This is story shaping meaning, which is the pragmatic credo of Postmodernism. Undiscerning evangelicals are lapping it up, especially when it takes the form found in Larsen's work, which mixes truth with error.

David Larsen chairs the pastoral theology department at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He graduated from Stanford and Fuller Theological Seminary. He has pastored seven churches. Though his credentials are less than inspiring to conservatives, it is his writing that causes the greatest concern, representing as it does the mainstream of evangelical thought concerning the direction contemporary preaching ought to take.

Aside from the fact that the book is essentially an annotated anthology of other writers' ideas, Larsen pulls together many useful and well-known principles into one place in his work. His style is truncated, and he strives too hard for effect in continual axiomatic fireworks (they lose their impact after awhile), but he still communicates some basic, fundamental truths about preaching of which every preacher ought to remember. His work's credibility is hampered by his attempts at being clever: to quote one of his own quotations, ". . . manner is to matter what powder is to ball" (p. 126). That cleverness shows up in his fascination with alliteration, by repetition of favorite quotations (as if they weren't repetitions), and using Latin phrases for no discernible purpose other than to appear theologically astute (p. 190, etc.). His fondness for grand epithets and big words (like "subcutaneously," p. 191) when a simple one would serve as well give a posturing feel to the book that is just irritating after awhile. In fact, Larsen unwittingly describes his own style on page 258 when he writes, "Some preachers have a cruising mentality and degenerate into mere word-spinners. The result is opaque sermons that are very thin." Occasionally he gets so wrapped up into trying to make his assertions dramatic that he ends up contradicting himself because he overstates a problem. On pages 261 and 262, He insists that finding the "big idea" of a narrative passage is "more demanding and difficult" than other types of literature. Four sentences later he says with aplomb, "It is not difficult to see

the extraordinarily relevant application” of the example passage he chose to look at. Again, Larsen writes or quotes many helpful things, but he never accomplishes his purpose in my mind. I found myself still asking at the end of the book, “So, how *do* I preach narrative?” He never really said, being so enamored with axiom and proverb. Having been an oral interpretation major myself, I appreciated the emphasis upon preaching the author’s intent, about bringing the stories to life, and delivering them with vigor. While I often wrote in a margin, “Good point!” I seldom found a place where he followed up on his axiom with solid development. For example, he keeps repeating over and over that the preacher must not practice what he calls “content dump” (e.g., p. 260). Fine, but he never gives any criteria for selecting content! Not only that, but he violates his own principles repeatedly. Chapter Sixteen, “Encouraging Spirituality and Impaction,” while containing great thoughts, has absolutely nothing to with preaching narrative! Generally speaking, Larsen speaks volumes of generalities but never really gets beyond those general principles.

Style problems, as irritating as they may be, can be overcome if the content is solidly biblical. There is a greater problem with the book that would keep me from recommending it to others. Specifically, Larsen is willing to sacrifice biblical content for the sake of story-telling prowess and effect, an all-too-common malady in contemporary preaching. This is in spite of his insistence upon being governed by the text! He writes on page 103, under the heading “Narrative Thickness,” “The story is action, and we want some narrative zip, some narrative propane. We should seek to avoid the heavier, too weighty background bypaths [sic] or doctrinal *excursi*.” (He then refers us in an endnote to a Barthian for further insight on preaching the infallible, inerrant Word!) Narrative, like all other Scripture literature, is given to instruct, not entertain (1 Corinthians 10:11; John 20:30). Speaking of the narratives concerning Christ’s passions (p. 189), he writes, “Since the narratives tend to be lean and quite spare, we probably will have a difficult time keeping the homiletical seams from showing unless we use a dramatic monologue or first-person sermon around one of the characters of the Easter account.” What foolishness! Never mind that God through inspiration obviously intended for the account to be “spare,” knowing the tendency of sinful man to focus on the maudlin and sensational rather than truth! Larsen is too ready to add to or subtract from Scripture if it suits the story-teller’s purpose.

While I certainly found many quotations to use in my own homiletics teaching, I just as certainly would never put this book in the hands of my beginning homiletics students (and it isn’t substantive enough for graduate work), for the frequent misapplication of the many fine principles that Larsen touts would easily mislead the uninitiated.