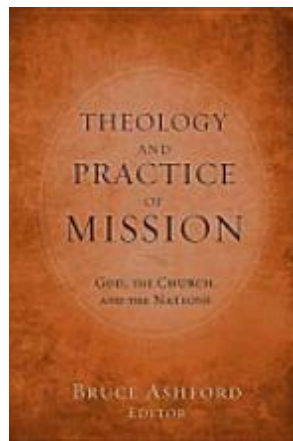


THE GOSPEL AS STORY AND EVANGELISM AS STORY TELLING

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We were made to worship and commune with our Creator. The primary effect of the fall is not the presence of sin, but rather the absence of authentic worship. Thus, the primary goal of the gospel is the transformation of wicked sinners into awe-struck worshippers. Anything less is reflective of our reductionist approach to communicating an otherwise comprehensive gospel message. If the gospel is indeed the greatest story ever told, it must be retold in a robust and compelling manner that elicits authentic, biblical worship.

The Story of a Missionary God

Most good stories follow a coherent theme from beginning to end. Plots may shift and different characters may take the story in unexpected directions, but the theme must remain consistent if any sense is to be made of the story. This volume started with a theme – our God is on a redemptive and restorative mission that originated in His divine character. God, and not man, is the primary character in the biblical story. And so God, not man, is also the primary storyteller by virtue of biblical inspiration. In John Stott’s words, the Bible is the story of a Missionary God.¹ Christopher Wright adds that the term “mission of God” or in Latin *missio Dei*, “originally meant the sending of God – in the sense of a Father sending of the Son . . . All human mission . . . (therefore) is seen as participation in an extension of this divine sending.”² And this mission in its totality is good news because it does not leave the outcome up to chance or speculation. What God started and intended from the beginning, He has been working toward and will certainly accomplish in the *telos* (end). Andreas Köstenberger adds, “God’s saving plan for the whole world forms a grand frame around the entire story of Scripture.”³

Each part of God’s mission – creation, fall, redemption, restoration – is not only God’s plan, but is also His story. This chapter will be dedicated to the dual theme of the gospel as a comprehensive story and evangelism as the faithful, contextual re-telling of that story. We will examine how the whole canonical grand narrative is in reality *gospel*, or good news. We will also focus on how this missionary God has commissioned us to become master storytellers through the art of evangelism.

¹ John R.W. Stott, “The Living God is a Missionary God,” *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3rd ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 3.

² Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006), 63.

³ Andreas Kostenberger, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 263.

An Altogether Unique Story

God chose to bring His gospel to the world in the form of an unfolding story, so why then have we reduced it into an outline of propositional statements? In *The Convergent Church*, Mark Liederbach and Alvin Reid, assert that North America has become virtually biblically illiterate. In light of that fact, they warn that, “our approach to communicating the timeless truths of Scripture must change as well.”⁴ Rick Richardson adds that the lost will be reached, “not first through logic and proposition and dogma . . . (but) through the renewal of the Story.”⁵ In a world where the relativism is the norm, it is apropos that we have unchanging and exclusive truth to communicate in the form of a story. Lists of propositional truths may come across impersonal and be quickly dismissed. We must recognize that God has chosen to write us into His story and part of our role is to learn how to faithfully retell that story to the changing world around us.

Though the grand narrative shares some commonalities in its structure with other stories, it is altogether unique with regards to meaning and implication. As you will see later in this book, many world religions have their own story to tell that attempts to define reality. Hinduism has the Vedas and Upanishads which contain their own creation epics. Islam has the Qur’an. Most cultures have their own narratives which attempt to explain where the world came from and where it is headed. When we talk about the gospel as story, however, we must understand that the Bible is not merely the chief among equals in the world of literature. The gospel is not *just another* explanation of reality. Instead, it

⁴ Mark Liederbach, and Alvin L. Reid, *The Convergent Church: Missional Worshippers in an Emerging Culture*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 231.

⁵ Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 86.

is *the story* by which all other stories are to be evaluated. Though other stories may contain elements of truth, the Bible alone is the infallible word of God and thereby sets itself up as the standard for all truth (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Augustine claimed that all truth is God's truth, meaning that when we read literature or other narratives, they are true only insofar as they accord with the Bible.⁶ Kallenberg notes, "In deeming the gospel truth, Augustine was not only allowing the story of God to make sense of his past, he was also allowing it to shape his future by joining its storyline."⁷ Bryan Stone makes application of this to us all by adding, "To become a Christian is to join a story and to allow that story to begin to narrate our lives."⁸ Thus, evangelism must be characterized by more than a mental assent to abstract propositions. Biblical evangelism invites people into worshipful obedience as a part of God's story.

Lesslie Newbigin speaks of the unique and comprehensive nature of the biblical narrative in saying, "The Bible gives us the whole story of creation and of the human race and therefore enables us to understand our own lives as a part of that story."⁹ Newbigin goes on to tell of A Hindu friend who once said to him regarding the biblical story:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us . . . as a book of religion . . . we have plenty of books of religion . . . (and) we don't need any more! I find in your Bible *a unique interpretation of Universal history* (emphasis mine), the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore (it is) a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.¹⁰

⁶ Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 2.2.

⁷ Kallenberg, 37.

⁸ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 39.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Walk Through the Bible* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1999), 82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Christians have a timelessly relevant and unique story to tell. God is by nature the master communicator and He chose to use a narrative story as a means for disseminating the gospel. Our identity as Christians is tied to the faithful telling and re-telling of the biblical story of redemption.¹¹ So what can we learn from God's methodology? Next we turn to look at how the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the New Testament to tell the story of God by tying it to the OT Scriptures.

According to the Scriptures

In his book *Introduction to Evangelism*, Alvin Reid notes that, "the noun form (of gospel) is *euangelion* and is found seventy-six times in the New Testament. It can be translated 'gospel,' 'good news,' or 'evangel.' It emphasizes not just any good news but a specific message . . . that Jesus died and rose again."¹² We have a story to tell and there is a bloody cross at the center of that story. Many well-meaning evangelists though have unintentionally reduced the comprehensive message of the cross to only a few verses of Scripture. Plenty of people died on a bloody cross throughout history, but only one did so as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world. My fear is that the term "gospel" has often been communicated in a reductionistic manner. The lost may in fact be skeptical about the gospel because we have been telling only parts of the story, failing to provide adequate context that is crucial to understanding. It is the identity of the one on the cross that makes all the difference! Understanding that Jesus was no ordinary man, but rather the Creative force behind all that exists, provides a depth of meaning that is not only helpful, but crucial. Chester and Timmis affirm that our message "can be summarized in simple gospel outlines or even the three-word confession, 'Jesus is Lord.'

¹¹ Kallenberg, 38.

¹² Alvin Reid, *Introduction to Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 10.

Yet it is also a message that fills the entire Bible. It is the story of salvation from creation to new creation.”¹³ In fact, when we look at the grand narrative through the interpretive lens of the cross of Christ, we see that it is the cross that not only makes sense of the story; it makes our part in the story possible.

How did the New Testament writers tell the story of the gospel of God? Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:2-4, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the Scriptures*,” (emphasis mine). What Paul is communicating here is the very heart of the gospel and must in no uncertain terms be told. Notice, however, that the gospel that Paul mentioned is tied to the broader story of the mission of God. Paul saw the triad of truths – that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day – all to be built upon the foundation of “the Scriptures.” The Scriptures that Paul was referring to was most likely not the written Gospels of the New Testament canon, but rather the Old Testament.¹⁴ This implies that Paul’s communication of the *kerygma*, or content of the gospel message, was directly tied to the broader story of the mission of God which predated the crucifixion and resurrection. So here we find that Paul inadvertently addresses our common problem of isolating the events surrounding Jesus’ sacrifice of atonement by giving the gospel deeper biblical and historical moorings that reach back into earlier parts of the story.

What about the narrative accounts of Jesus’ story – the four Gospels? Do they follow a similar pattern to that which was documented by Paul as being a matter of first

¹³ Tim Chester, and Steve Timmis. *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 32.

¹⁴ It is generally believed among Evangelical scholars that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians c. A.D. 55 while in Ephesus. While it is possible that at least Matthew and Mark were written by this time, it is highly unlikely that Paul is making reference to them here, but rather to the uncontested Old Testament canon of his time.

importance? Matthew, in addition to identifying Jesus as the very presence of God among men – the “Immanuel” of Isaiah 7:6 (see Matt. 1:23) – started his gospel by tracing the lineage of Jesus back to Abraham (1:1).¹⁵ Luke’s precise historical account makes a similar assertion in tracing the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to God Himself in addition to tying the birth of Jesus to several Old Testament promises (Luke 3:23–38). John’s Gospel takes the story back even further stretching the mind of his readers into eternity past displaying Christ as Creator (John 1:1– 3). If the Gospel writers saw the story of the good news reaching back like this, then we must acknowledge that what we commonly refer to as the “gospel” is more than the few truths that dot the landscape of the New Testament canon. The gospel is truly eternal and cosmic because the story of Jesus is eternal in scope and cosmic in its implications. In all, *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* notes that there are at least 343 direct OT quotations in the New Testament and at least 2,309 allusions.¹⁶ This interrelatedness between the canons demonstrates that there is a single theme uniting all of Scripture – the story of the gospel. Wright adds:

The New Testament, then, building on the massive foundations of Israel’s faith in YHWH, their saving God, sees the climactic work of God’s salvation in the person and work of Jesus. And since the mission of God could be summed up in that one comprehensive concept that so dominates Yahweh’s character and intentions in the Old Testament – salvation – the identification of Jesus with YHWH puts him right at the center of that saving mission.¹⁷

Since the New Testament is the story of Jesus, and that story cannot be told by the apostles without providing Old Testament context, then why do we attempt to do so?

¹⁵ The importance of that lineage will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

¹⁶ Walter A. Elwell, "Entry for 'Old Testament in the New Testament,'" *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* <<http://www.biblestudytools.net/Dictionaries/BakerEvangelicalDictionary/bed.cgi?number=T523>>. 1997.

¹⁷ Wright, 121.

The Rest of the Story

For the better part of the 20th century, the airwaves (first by radio and later by television) carried the voice of legendary broadcaster Paul Harvey. After decades of experience documenting history in the making through retelling people's stories for a broader audience, Harvey created a new program called "The Rest of the Story." The purpose of the program was to tell the little known facts from the earlier years of those people who made headlines. Harvey thought that it would be helpful for America to learn about the lives of great men and women and the story of how they became great.

What about Jesus? We have just seen that the NT writers often referred or alluded to the OT with great frequency when telling the story of Jesus. Why? In order to understand the fullness of the gospel people need to hear the rest of the story. So now we will take a look at the grand narrative of Scripture and consider the importance and implications of each "act" with regards to the gospel message. You will note that every act in the divine drama points in the direction of the cross, which is itself the climax of all history. That being said, we must not think of redemption as being contained within a single act in God's mission. Rather, redemption transcends all of the acts with creation and fall looking forward to the full expression of God's divine love at the cross of Christ, and restoration looking back on all that Christ accomplished via his atoning sacrifice. So the cross is not merely one-fourth of the story – it is the story. But the cross cannot be fully understood apart from the rest of the story.

Creation: Where Did We Come From?

In the world of literature “exposition” usually comes at the beginning of the story where the author sets the stage, or gives context for the audience. In this part of a story the main characters are normally introduced providing further development of the plot. Exposition takes place in the first several chapters of Genesis with the creation account and subsequent fall. Packer notes, “We must know what it means to call God Creator before we can grasp what it means to speak of Him as Redeemer.”¹⁸ It is fitting then that the Bible wastes no time in introducing the main character of history – “In the beginning, God!” By displaying God as the creator of all that exists, there is no questioning what His role in the story should be. And by virtue that we are told all things were declared “good” by Him, we learn something of God’s character by virtue of his expressive creation. That God created all things good and orderly indeed provides the setting for the story of all history.

For most of us the first few verses of the Bible which document the creation account are disinteresting because man is not around yet. The minor characters within the grand narrative, man and woman, are not introduced until the final verses of the creation account and owe their own existence to the creative will of the Protagonist. Unfortunately, humanity in its current fallen state consistently attempts to re-write the story. Our revisionist history is demonstrated in the fact that humans generally place themselves at the center of the story almost relegating God as a minor character on history’s stage. Bob Sjogren demonstrates the human propensity for trying to up-stage God by comparing the way we treat Scripture as if it were a high school yearbook.¹⁹ What was the first thing you did when you received your yearbook? You probably went

¹⁸ Packer, 59.

¹⁹ Bob Sjogren, and Gerald Robison. *Cat and Dog Theology: Rethinking our Relationship with Our Master*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic Books, 2005).

through scanning every page to find yourself. By the end of the day you knew every page that your photograph was on. Sjogren’s observation is both keen and cutting. When most of us read the Bible we are usually so busy looking for ourselves in the pages that we miss the main point – the God of glory. And interestingly enough, we normally read ourselves into the story as the hero. When we are taken back to Genesis 1 in the grand narrative, we are forced to accept that God is the protagonist in the Bible and not man. Part of the gospel then is reminding humans that our purpose on the stage of history is not to make much of ourselves, but rather to make much of God. John Piper reminds us that, “God is the absolute reality that everyone in the universe must come to terms with . . . To ignore him or belittle him is unintelligible and suicidal folly.”²⁰

Genesis 1:28 provides the first command to the humans that God had just created, and thus his purpose in creating. “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Prior to the creation of man and woman he had declared His work to that point to be “good” (v. 25). But after making man in the *imago Dei* and giving this command, God declared created order to be “very good” (v. 31). So it is obvious that with man something unique was added to creation. Being *imago Dei*, man and woman had a unique ability to communicate with their Creator in a worshipful fashion. The command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” contained within it the implicit concept that the earth was to be filled with worshippers. This is man’s primary reason for existence – to fill the earth with worship. This purpose is both reiterated and made conceivable as the fullness of the gospel mystery comes to light in the death, burial and resurrection of

²⁰ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 14.

Jesus. The very purpose of the gospel is to reconcile fallen humanity to God through repentance and faith in the finished atoning work of Christ on the cross. In short, the gospel makes worship possible. What we commonly refer to as “The Great Commission” is merely a restatement and clarification of that original Genesis 1:28 command to fill the earth with worshippers.

The Fall: What Went Wrong?

“Rising Action” is the series of complications that sets up the central conflict between the main character and the antagonist of a story. In this part of the story tension builds, and the story works its way up to the point of climax. In the biblical narrative rising action begins with the introduction of the Serpent as an embodiment of the antagonist in Genesis 3. The tension escalates from that point in the form of a tangled web of destruction that he spreads through all of creation. All the while as the tension builds, the mission of God continues to unfold like a scarlet cord that culminates at the cross of Christ. Thus, it is through a biblical understanding of what occurred at the fall of humanity that we come to understand and appreciate what Jesus has accomplished in his redemptive work.

A people not fallen see no need for the cross. Of course, Paul reminds us that “all have fallen and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). But fallen from what? What does it mean to be fallen? These questions can only be adequately addressed by going back first to creation and then to the entrance of original sin. There we find that our ability to communicate with and worship God was not just damaged, but destroyed. The fall and subsequent sin nature inherited have led humanity to embrace and love created things above the Creator. This eternally terminal condition is commonly known

as *idolatry*. Idolatry did not burst on the scene in the explicit form of stone and wooden images. Instead it arrived in the form of a deceptively nuanced question. “Did God really say . . . ?” (Gen. 3:1) This subtle but deadly question rings down through the annals of history making idolaters of us all. Thus, the emergence of sin created a massive tension because all of created order was thrown from being “very good” to being very bad. Unfettered worship devolved into brazen idolatry. Depravity spread through the human race like a plague and not one person went untouched by its viral sickness – until Jesus.

The fall in Genesis 3 enacted a devolution of worshipful intimacy between man and his Creator. Our Just God responded by declaring a four-fold curse that had ramifications for the Serpent, woman, man and for Himself. Genesis 3:15 is the basis of the latter. This verse is often referred to as the *proto-evangelium* – or first mention of the gospel. It reads, “I (God) will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” An ensuing conflict begins that would not be resolved until one of Eve’s offspring came to crush the head of Satan.

From that point, Genesis 3-11 illustrates the main thrust of how bad things could get with humans living without God as the conscious focus of their lives. Within that section of the fall narrative we see God grieved that, “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5) The flood is a vivid display of God’s wrath against rebellious humanity. It amazes me that the story of Noah’s ark makes it into all of the children’s books. All of humanity comes under the wrath of Almighty God and is destroyed, except Noah’s family, but we focus on the cute animals making their way to the ark as if it were a day at

the zoo. We have emasculated the message of Scripture to make it more marketable. Interestingly, as soon as Noah and his family get off of the ark, God restates his original command in 9:1,7: “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” with worshippers. One might think that from that point things would begin to improve, but they do not. In fact, just two chapters later we see the human race gathered on the plain of Shinar building a monument to their own self-sufficiency. There, God graciously scatters them to the ends of the earth confounding their languages so that they would be humbled (Genesis 11).²¹

Up to this point, the identity of promised deliverer mentioned in Genesis 3:15 had been shrouded in mystery. A degree of clarification comes in Genesis 12:1-3 when God chose Abraham and promised to bless the nations through his offspring in what is known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Ironically, the Talmud suggests that Abram was likely the son of an idol maker.²² To our knowledge the earth was lacking much authentic worship and yet, “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Beyond that, Paul identifies God’s promise to Abram as carrying the very content of the gospel! “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’” (Gal. 3:8). Christopher Wright adds, “Since it was by human hands that sin and evil have invaded life on Earth, it would be by human means that God would act to regress it. The declaration of blessing on Abraham and the anticipation of the inclusion of all kindred

²¹ But as the story later unfolds it becomes evident that God would create a symphony from the emerging diversity by creating worshippers for Himself from every tongue, tribe, language and nation (Matthew 28:18-20, Revelation 7:9).

²² <<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=361&letter=A>>, last accessed February 13, 2009.

and nations in the blessing of Abraham answer the language of curse and exclusion in Genesis 3.”²³ He continues,

“One of the reasons for the appalling shallowness and vulnerability of much that passes for the growth of the church around the world is that people are coming to some kind of instrumental faith in the God they see as powerful, with some connection to Jesus, but a Jesus as disconnected from his scriptural roots. They have not been challenged at the level of their deeper worldview by coming to know God in and through the story that is launched by Abraham.”²⁴

The remainder of the OT traces the descendants of Abraham through Israel and documents the effects of the fall creating tension both within and surrounding Israel.

Wright posits, “The whole Bible could be portrayed as a very long answer to a very simple question: What can God do about the sin and rebellion of the human race?

Genesis 12 through to Revelation 22 is God’s answer to the question posed by the bleak narratives of Genesis 3 through 11.”²⁵ The identity of the Messiah who would embody God’s answer to that question becomes the grand mystery that dots the landscape of the OT. Hints are given throughout. The Law was given to Moses as a tutor to direct people to the identity of the Messiah (Gal. 3:24). It is this mystery that feeds the tension right up to the point of climax. When would this Messiah come? Who is He?

From the time of the fall God displayed both kindness and judgment on humanity. There was mercy for Adam and Eve, and there was wrath for the animal whose skin provided their covering. There was mercy for Noah and his family, and there was wrath for the remainder of the earth’s inhabitants. There was mercy for true Israel and there was wrath for idolatrous nations. Why is it important to communicate that God’s response to sin entails both wrath and mercy. John Piper says that God is always

²³ Wright, 212.

²⁴ Ibid., 219.

²⁵ Ibid., 195.

speaking two languages at once: both wrath and mercy.²⁶ In wrath, there is always mercy. And in mercy, there is always wrath. These two languages became audible at the fall and culminated at the cross of Christ. The identity of the Messiah was none other than the Son of God clothed in flesh. So that which was spoken by God in Genesis 3:15 became visible at the incarnation of Christ. The offspring of woman had finally arrived to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). There at the cross the wrath of God was poured out upon Jesus because of our sins.²⁷ God had reserved the gravest consequence of sin for Himself. And for those who put their faith in his finished atoning work, there is mercy. That is the gospel and it makes more sense in light of the depth of depravity brought on humanity as a result of the fall.

Redemption: What Hope Is There?

Schnabel reminds us that, “Biblical narratives are paradigms that provide us with models for our own faithful and authentic response to God’s revelation.”²⁸ Within the biblical narrative it is no surprise then that the climax occurs at the cross of our Lord. “Climax” is the high point or crescendo of the entire story. It is at this turning point where the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist comes to a head. This is the most exciting point in the story – the point which gives meaning to all the previous other pages in the story.

As mentioned in the creation account, God created humans in His image that they might fill the earth with worshippers. However, when the fall of humanity occurred in

²⁶ John Piper, “The Wrath of God Against Ungodliness and Unrighteousness,” August 30, 1998. <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1998/1048_The_Wrath_of_God_Against_Ungodliness_and_Unrighteousness/>

²⁷ This is what is meant by the term “propitiation.” God’s wrath was satisfied as Christ bore the full brunt of punishment for our sins.

²⁸ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*, (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 394.

the Garden of Eden, it seemed as if the evil antagonist had won by convincing the man and woman to doubt God. But in Genesis 3:15 we saw that God was not taken by surprise and had a plan to overturn the works of the devil.²⁹ The serpent was warned that one of the woman's seed would come and crush his head. Even in the wake of this promise, it seemed as if the earth was destined to be filled with idolaters, rather than worshippers as God had intended. Instead of humans getting better, their sin nature only innovated and became more pervasive (Rom. 1:22-31). Then we were introduced to Abraham with whom God made an eternal covenant, promising that through his lineage that the nations would be blessed. And from that point the nation of Israel emerged and provided a microcosm of fallen humanity through which we have the benefit of watching the perseverance of God's redemptive nature. Then at just the right time (Rom. 5:6) God sent his only Son into the world to accomplish his redemptive purposes. Wright reminds us that ". . . it is hardly going too far to say that salvation defines this God's identity."³⁰ The evangelistic intent of the incarnation is summarized by Wright, "The name . . . Jesus means Yahweh is salvation. Through the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth, God was bringing in the promised new era of salvation for Israel and for the world, because through Jesus God would deal with sin."³¹

Jesus obeyed the Father and laid down his own life as an atoning sacrifice for fallen humanity on a hill called Golgotha. There at the cross we see the grandest and purest display of worship that there has ever been – or ever will be. God's plan at the

²⁹ It should always be communicated that Satan is himself a created being, albeit one that has rebelled against God's authority. Many people are confused about good and evil and take a dualistic approach in explaining the presence of evil in the world. There is not a good God and a bad god. There is but one God existing in Three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not clear how much time passed between creation in Genesis 1 and the fall in Genesis 3, but we can be assured it was time enough for the angel Lucifer to garner pride in his heart and initiate a disastrous rebellion against a Sovereign God.

³⁰ Wright, 118.

³¹ Ibid.

cross was not merely to erase sin and defeat the devil. His plan had not deviated one bit from his original command back in Genesis 1:28. Jesus' act of ultimate worship served as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, but it also serves as the means by which Christ's righteousness is imputed to us by faith.

The redemptive work of Christ on the cross is first and foremost an act of unfettered and perfect worship. It stands at the climax of all history as just that. And we are invited into the benefits of the cross, not by means of following Christ's example alone, but first by means of going back to the Garden per se and making that choice for ourselves. Will we trust God at his word and live as worshippers by putting our faith in Christ, allowing him to destroy our idols? Or will we question God once more and be deceived in our idolatry by worshipping something other than the Creator?

Many well-meaning Christians have an anthropocentric understanding of the gospel that stems from our idolatrous sin nature. We look to God only for what He can give us – things like forgiveness, fulfillment, happiness, healing, and heaven. The problem is that we fail to see that those things are significant only in relation to how they bring us back to the God who made us for Himself. We talk to people about being saved, but fail to communicate that salvation is not only from sin, but the wrath of God upon sin. We talk about going to heaven, but fail to communicate that the concept has more to do with a Person than with a place. John Piper has written extensively addressing these common errors in our understanding of the gospel. The title of Piper's book provides his simple, but not simplistic, understanding of the message that is our hope: *God is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself*.³² Elsewhere he elaborates

³² John Piper, *God is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005).

that the gospel is the message that, “Christ, the Son of God, died in our place – became our substitute – to pay the price for all our sins, and to accomplish perfect righteousness, and to endure and remove all of God’s wrath, and rise from the dead triumphant over death for our eternal life and joy in his presence – and all of this offered freely through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. That’s the good news.”³³ So the gospel is not *only* the tenets that Christ died, was buried, and raised on the third day. Christ’s finished work on the cross is the crown jewel of the gospel making all other aspects imaginable. Through the gospel, we are saved *from God’s wrath* and we are saved *for God’s presence*. Salvation is God’s work from beginning to end, and therefore, God Himself *is* the gospel. The cross of Christ was not only necessitated by the fall of humanity, it is against the backdrop of a fallen world that the cross makes any sense at all.

In writing to the Romans, Paul stated, “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, *to which the Law and the Prophets testify*. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Rom. 3:21-22). Paul reaches back into salvation history and declares that this is the same gospel that was testified to by both the Law and the Prophets. Paul was making reference to Act Two. So, in Christ’s righteousness, we are once again enabled to worship the Father as we were created to do. What’s more, we are enabled to participate in the *Missio Dei* through the spread of the gospel so that worship might spread to the ends of the earth.

Restoration: What Does The Future Hold?

Denouement is the point of closure at the end of a narrative where the conflict is resolved. The term comes from the French meaning “to untie a knot,” connoting that the

³³ John Piper, *Finally Alive*, (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 169.

tension that once existed has now been straightened out. With regard to the biblical grand narrative, the Revelation is God's *denouement* statement that His promises have been kept and His mission has been fulfilled.³⁴ Kallenberg notes, "the plotline of this single story races underneath the reader's feet and off into a future whose final end is the reconciliation of creation with Creator under the reign of King Jesus."³⁵ It is there in the last few chapters of the Bible that all of creation is restored and God's people at last fill the earth with Christ-honoring worship.

Ephesians 2:15-17 explains that what was lost in the Garden – fellowship with God and the ability to worship authentically – was regained through the reconciliation mediated in the body of Jesus on the cross. Something priceless was made accessible there at the cross. And on the new earth described in Revelation 21 and 22, we see the Tree of Life present once more. Only this time all of the inhabitants of the new earth are those who have been completely restored to God and are able to eat freely:

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.

The imagery given here by John displays that eternal life is ever-present as there is not a season where the fruit of the tree of life is not available. And this life is not only made available to the ethnic nation of Israel. The nations that were scattered back in Genesis 11 because of their prideful self-sufficiency (a subtle, but deadly form of idolatry) are gathered, not around a self-made tower, but around the Person of Jesus. Healing is theirs

³⁴ Wright, 356.

³⁵ Kallenberg, 109.

to be had. Also significant is that the curse that God enacted in Genesis 3 at the fall is removed. God Himself once again becomes accessible as He dwells there in the city along with all of the redeemed. That we will be enabled to see His face will be the greatest gospel-bought blessing of heaven. It is a face that we will never tire of seeing. And if there were any doubt, God makes clear that all of humanity belongs to Him by placing His Name upon our foreheads. So even when we look at one another we will be reminded of our great and gracious God. *Imago dei* is fully restored. The original command from Genesis 1:28 to fill the earth with worshippers is accomplished. Yes, something priceless is restored in heaven. Newbigin speaks of the radical evangelistic implications of this eschatological vision for us today:

That is the vision with which the Bible ends, and it is a vision that enables us to see the whole human story and each of our lives within that story as meaningful, and which therefore invites us through Jesus Christ to become responsible actors in history . . . Each of us must be ready to take our share in all the struggles and the anguish of human history and yet with confidence that what is committed to Christ will in the end find its place in his final kingdom.³⁶

Evangelism as Storytelling

Seeing the gospel as story implies that evangelism becomes storytelling. Bartholomew and Goheen remind us, “The Biblical story is about what God is doing in the world, working toward the renewal of the whole creation. God chooses people to join with him and participate in his work . . . today we too are invited to participate in what God is doing. If we are to understand our own calling, we must understand it in relation to those who have heard it before us.”³⁷ Storytelling is an art form and we can learn

³⁶ Newbigin, 84-85.

³⁷ Craig G. Bartholomew, and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 198.

much from the “artists” who have gone before us. Good storytelling requires skill because no one wants to be guilty of ruining a good story. Gabriel Fackre points out, “The task of Christian Storytelling is to keep alive the set of counter-perceptions so the Church may be what it is and see what it is called to see, rather than be made over in the image of the regnant culture.”³⁸ Unfortunately, we have listened to and observed the culture’s attention deficit and have edited how we communicate the gospel. Some crucial parts of the story have been left on the cutting room floor in an attempt to get more people to hear our story. Bad publicity has plagued the church’s evangelistic efforts and the lost, in the Western hemisphere in particular, have dismissed the Story in large part without even hearing it. This analysis is confirmed by the responses we get when asking lost people their understanding of why Jesus died on the cross. We have done such a poor job of communicating the gospel that most people who call themselves “Christian” would struggle to articulate the fundamental tenets of the gospel. So where do we go from here? How can we reeducate the saints and recapture the attention of sinners? We must refine our skills and tell the whole story.

There are no set biblical guidelines given for evangelistic methodology beyond calling for a response. The gospel in grand narrative form is different from other lesser stories in history in many ways, primarily of which is that the gospel demands a response. J.I. Packer asserts, “Since the divine message finds its climax in a plea from the Creator to a rebel world to turn and put faith in Christ, the delivering of it involves the summoning of one’s hearer to conversion.”³⁹ Beyond that, *how* we are to communicate

³⁸ Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 12.

³⁹ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 41.

depends upon a number of factors ranging from the worldview of our audience to the context of the conversation.

There are biblical guidelines for content – we are admonished to proclaim Christ crucified and raised (1 Cor. 1:23). Keep in mind that nearly all of the New Testament books reveal that the authors communicated Christ crucified and raised as an extension and fulfillment of the mission of God from the Old Testament. We must be careful not to assume that people will be able to understand the implications of the cross apart from the larger grand narrative story. In some instances, the New Testament evangelists unfolded each of the acts within the grand narrative in a single message. In other instances they found that their audience already understood the foundational context of creation and fall and were able to go directly to redemption. Even so, the redemptive work of God is best grasped when it is set against the backdrop of the OT stories of creation and fall.

Ultimately, the implications of the gospel are paramount because it is by means of receiving the gospel that sinners are transformed into worshippers and find their place within the larger story of God. Bartholomew and Goheen remind us that “The world of the Bible is our world, and its story of redemption is also our story. This story is waiting for an ending – in part because we ourselves have a role to play before it is all concluded.”⁴⁰ What is our role? Simple. Tell the whole story and tell it well. After all, it is the greatest story ever told.

How to Tell the Story

If you have been reading this chapter hoping that I would provide some sort of practical outline for evangelism as storytelling, you may be disappointed. In order to refine our skills in storytelling, we need look no further than the Bible for guidance.

⁴⁰ Bartholomew & Goheen, 196, 197.

Schnabel reminds us, “In mission and evangelism the search for a method that will guarantee success in our attempt to convince listeners of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is misguided.”⁴¹ What I have attempted to do here is show that when we communicate the gospel with the general framework of the grand narrative – creation/fall/redemption/restoration – we have faithfully evangelized. Success is defined by faithful obedience, not outcomes. Even so, in the midst of writing this chapter I have had dozens of opportunities to tell the story and the one response that I have heard most is, “For the first time it makes sense to me why Jesus had to die.”

In this chapter I have alluded the premise that fallen humanity is grappling with four simple, universal questions that are each addressed in the Biblical narrative:

1. Where did we come from? Tell the story of creation.
2. What went wrong? Tell the story of the fall.
3. What hope is there? Tell the story of redemption.
4. What does the future hold? Tell the story of restoration.

Everyone, regardless of worldview, is already attempting to answer these questions in some form. Understanding that, Christians need to approach people with a sense of gospel intentionality.⁴² Piper reminds us, “God’s role in bringing about the new birth is decisive, and our role . . . is essential.”⁴³ So through the art of evangelism as storytelling, we are simply addressing the fundamental questions of life with biblical answers, and trusting that God will act on His word and transform rebellious idolaters into humble worshippers.

There are countless sub-plot stories that can be brought in when we are sharing the gospel in order to emphasize the point. The NT evangelists chose different contextual

⁴¹ Schnabel, 401.

⁴² Chester and Timmis, 63.

⁴³ Piper, *Finally Alive*, 166.

stories depending upon the audience with which they were speaking. There is not a list of particular verses that you have to memorize in order to get started. With the four simple words that form the basis of this book – and the basis of the biblical grand narrative – any believer can retell the greatest story ever told and thereby answer the four questions that virtually everyone is asking. The only non-negotiable when it comes to telling the story is that every aspect must point to the bloody cross of Jesus which stands as the climactic event of the entire mission of God.

Conclusion

The Bible is a story book. Though it is made up of hundreds of lesser stories, there is one over-arching divine story that transcends all 66 books. This divine grand narrative is the story of God on a mission to redeem and restore creation so that authentic worship fills the earth. The story is good news – it is gospel truth. And yet, many fail to receive it as such. In this chapter I have argued that though the gospel contains propositional truth, it is best communicated in the form of the story of God. Fallen, finite humans need context in order to determine meaning. When we understand that we were created to worship God and lost that at the fall, the cross becomes not only the means to forgiveness of sins, but also the basis of restoration of worship. And when we look at the grand narrative through the interpretive lens of the cross of Christ, we see that it is the cross that not only makes sense of the story; it makes our part in the story possible.

As believer priests we have been commissioned by God to be master storytellers. In light of this understanding, evangelism should then focus less on disjointed lists of single scripture verses, and more on the story that makes those verses make sense. This approach treats the whole canon of Scripture as God's sacred gospel story. And this

approach allows the audience to find their place in the story through repentance and faith in Jesus, followed by learning to become a faithful storyteller. Anything less is a reductionist approach and will likely lead to decisions, but not worshippers. Go tell God's amazing story to someone today and be a part of filling the earth with worship.

**The research from this essay led to the author's consultation/contribution to the evangelism resources found at www.viewthestory.com and www.thestorytraining.com.*

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