

# The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Recently Bob Webber and Phil Kenyon issued a clarion call to the evangelical community, which has garnered widespread involvement and support by Christian leaders. It is a summons to growing faithfulness in the midst of huge threats to the gospel at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After briefly setting the stage by affirming the authority of Scripture and noting the myriad of global challenges facing the evangelical church, they say: “Today, as in the ancient era, the Church is confronted by a host of master narratives that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: *who gets to narrate the world?*”<sup>1</sup> Webber believes the three leading contenders are the Muslim story, the liberal capitalist story, and (somewhat surprisingly) the Marxist story. Over against these three contenders Webber and Kenyon say: “In a world of competing stories, we call Evangelicals to recover the truth of God's word as *the* story of the world, and to make *it* the centerpiece of Evangelical life.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the first section of ‘The Call’ is entitled ‘On the Primacy of Biblical Narrative.’ Getting this straight, they believe, is the first order of business.

I agree, and this evening I want to address the issue of the urgency of reading the Bible as one story today. First, I will briefly unfold the confession that the Bible tells the true story of the world. Second, I will address the issue of why it is so important to grasp this truth. Finally, I will offer a brief answer to the postmodern charge that all grand stories are necessarily oppressive.

## *The Bible Tells One Story*

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Webber and Phil Kenyon, *A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future* (2006), ‘Introduction’, third paragraph. The Call can be found at the following website: [http://www.ancientfutureworship.com/afw\\_wkshps.html](http://www.ancientfutureworship.com/afw_wkshps.html) or [www.biblicalthology.ca](http://www.biblicalthology.ca) under ‘Articles.’

<sup>2</sup> Section 1 ‘On the Primacy of Biblical Narrative’

All of human life is shaped by some story. Alasdair MacIntyre offers an amusing story to show how particular events receive their meaning in the context of a story.<sup>3</sup> He imagines himself at a bus stop when a young man standing next to him says: ‘The Latin name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus.*’ One understands the meaning of the sentence. But what on earth is he doing in uttering it in the first place. This particular action can only be understood if it is placed in a broader framework of meaning, a story that renders the saying comprehensible. Three stories could make this particular incident meaningful. The young man has mistaken the man standing next to him for another person he saw yesterday in the library who asked ‘Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common duck?’ Or he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who is helping him deal with his painful shyness. The psychotherapist urges him to talk to strangers. The young man asks, ‘What shall I say?’ The psychotherapist says, ‘Oh, anything at all.’ Or again he is Soviet spy who has arranged to meet his contact at this bus stop. The code that will reveal his identity is the statement about the Latin name of the duck. The meaning of the encounter at the bus-stop *depends on which story shapes it*: in fact, each story will give the event a different meaning.

It is like that with our lives: ‘The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part?’ says Lesslie Newbigin.<sup>4</sup> What Newbigin is referring to here is not a linguistically constructed narrative world that we fabricate to give meaning to our lives, but an interpretation of cosmic history that gives meaning to human life. N. T. Wright says that ‘a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about *the way the world actually is.*’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984), 210.

<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 15.

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*. (London: SPCK, 1992), 40. Italics added.

The Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption against the backdrop of creation and humanity's fall into sin.<sup>6</sup> But I want to say more: the story it tells claims universal validity. Chris Wright puts it this way:

That the Old Testament tells a story needs no defense. My point is much greater however. The Old Testament tells its story as *the* story or, rather, as part of that ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. In other words, in reading these texts we are invited to embrace a metanarrative, a grand narrative. And on this overarching story is based a worldview that, like all worldviews and metanarratives, claims to explain the way things are, how they have come to be so, and what they will ultimately be. . . . It is a story that . . . [is] a *rendering of reality*—an account of the universe we inhabit and of the new creation we are destined for. We live in a storied universe.<sup>7</sup>

Or as another Wright (N.T. this time) (w)rightly notes, the divine drama told in Scripture 'offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'<sup>8</sup>

Thus when we speak of the biblical story as a narrative we are making a *normative* claim: it is public truth. It is a claim that this is the way God created the world; the story of the Bible tells

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<sup>6</sup> One could argue for the narrative unity of Scripture on three bases: 1) Formation of the canon which presupposes the narrative unity of a collection of books; 2) The tradition of the church of reading Scripture as one story; 3) Warrant from Scripture itself. Of course, the last is most important. An excellent summary of that Scriptural authorization can be found in Richard Bauckham's article, 'Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story', in Ellen F. David and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, 40-47.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 54-55.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, N.T., *The New Testament and the People of God*, 41-42.

us the way the world really is. It is, in the language of postmodernity, a ‘metanarrative’,<sup>9</sup> or in the language of Kant and Hegel ‘universal history.’<sup>10</sup> Thus, the biblical story is not to be understood simply as a local tale about a certain ethnic group or religion. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. In between it offers an interpretation of the meaning of cosmic history. It, therefore, makes a *comprehensive* claim; our stories, our reality—indeed all of human and non-human reality—must find its place in this story.

In his famous *Mimesis* Erich Auerbach makes the striking contrast between Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Old Testament story. Speaking of the biblical story he says:

Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history . . . Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world . . . must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.’<sup>11</sup>

Normally when we read stories like the *Odyssey*, we suspend our disbelief and enter its world for a time. We emerge on the other side, exit the story and its world, and resume

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<sup>9</sup> James K. A. Smith rightly notes that in the strict or technical definition of Lyotard’s use of the term ‘metanarrative’, the Bible is not one. Lyotard, Smith notes, is referring not to a meganarrative, or an overarching tale of the world but grand stories that “claim to be able to legitimate or prove the story’s claim by an appeal to universal reason.” (*Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006, 65). It is not the scope of the narrative that makes it a metanarrative but its appeal to universal reason to legitimate it. Yet the word metanarrative is normally used much more broadly. Bauckham, for example, agrees that the ‘biblical story is not a metanarrative by Lyotard’s definition’ but goes on to broaden the meaning of metanarrative which includes Scripture. He says that ‘I am not the first to extend the meaning, and it seems useful to do so.’ (Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story, 47) In another place he defines metanarrative as ‘a story about the meaning of reality as a whole . . .’ He continues: ‘A metanarrative is an attempt to grasp the meaning and destiny of human history as a whole by telling a single story about it; to encompass, as it were, all the immense diversity of human stories in a single, overall story which integrates them into a single meaning.’ (Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, 4). Scripture certainly falls within this definition.

<sup>10</sup> For disadvantages in the use of this term ‘universal history’ see M. J. Buss, ‘The Meaning of History’, in ed. J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, *Theology as History* (New York: Harper Books, 1967) 135-154.

<sup>11</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), 15.

our daily lives. Hopefully we have learned something or been entertained or enriched in some way by the story, receiving something we can take into our ‘real’ world. It is not that way with the biblical story; we are to remain in its world, find the meaning of our lives there, and fit our lives into its structure of universal history; it claims to *be* the real world. In the words of Gerard Loughlin, the biblical story is ‘omnivorous’: it seeks to overcome our reality.<sup>12</sup> Auerbach found this understanding of the Old Testament to be ‘tyrannical’ because of its insistence that ‘it is the only real world.’ While I’d part company with Auerbach on his charge of tyranny, he does have it right that the Old Testament claims to be the only real world.

And yet it is often the case that Christians do not see the Bible as one story. A Hindu scholar of the world’s religions once said to Newbigin:

I can’t understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore 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.<sup>13</sup>

We have fragmented the Bible into bits—moral bits, systematic-theological bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and homiletical bits. When the Bible is broken up in this way, there is no comprehensive grand narrative to withstand the power of the comprehensive humanist narrative that shapes our culture. The Bible bits are

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<sup>12</sup> Gerard Loughlin *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>13</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *A Walk Through the Bible* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 1999), 4.

accommodated to the more all-embracing cultural story, and it becomes *that* story—i.e. the humanist story—that shapes our lives.

Stressing the narrative character of Scripture is not, of course, to deny the other genres of literature that make up our canon. Newbigin rightly says, ‘the Bible is essentially narrative in form. . . . It contains, indeed, much else: prayer, poetry, legislation, ethical teaching, and so on. But essentially it is a story.’<sup>14</sup> Or as James Barr notes: ‘. . . in my conception all of the Bible counts as ‘story.’ A people’s story is not necessarily purely narrative: materials of many kinds may be slotted into a narrative structure. . . . although not all parts of the Bible are narrative, the narrative character of the story elements provides a better framework into which the non-narrative parts may be fitted than any framework based on the non-narrative parts into which the story elements could be fitted.’<sup>15</sup>

Also speaking of the Bible as one story is not to say that it is like a single volume with a tight-woven story-line with no loose ends, like a conventional plot in a novel, or a modern work of history. Chris Wright notes that the Bible is ‘not just a single narrative, like a river with only one channel. It is rather a complex mixture of all kinds of smaller narratives, many of them rather self-contained, with all kinds of other material embedded within them. But there is clearly a direction, a flow . . .’<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham adds that ‘. . . the Bible does *not* have a carefully plotted single story-line, like, for example a conventional novel. It is a sprawling collection of narratives along with much non-narrative material that stands in a variety of relationships to the narratives. . . .’ He points to the fact that there are divergent ways of telling the story, a plurality of angles on the same subject matter, the profusion and sheer untidiness of narrative materials, and more. All of this means that ‘any sort of *finality* in summarizing the biblical story is inconceivable.’<sup>17</sup> Yet the Bible does tell an overarching story.

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<sup>14</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, revised edition, 1995), 81.

<sup>15</sup> James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 356. It should be noted that I would speak of ‘story’ differently than Barr. While he uses the notion of story to side-step questions of historical referentiality, I would argue that historicity is essential to the biblical story.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 92-93.

While finality in telling the story is inconceivable it is important to tell the story. Bauckham says, ‘summaries of the biblical story are more or less essential.’<sup>18</sup> N. T. Wright agrees: An essential part of our theological and missional task today is to ‘tell this story as clearly as possible, and to allow it to subvert other ways of telling the story of the world . . .’<sup>19</sup> An important part of our task today, then, is to tell the story, get hold of this story, so we can find our place and live faithfully in it.

### *Why Is This So Important?*

I am convinced along with Webber and Kenyon that the recovery of the Bible as one story is of primary importance, even urgent, if the evangelical church is to be faithful in today’s world. Let me suggest three reasons for this. The first is that since this is what the Bible is by its very nature, we can only understand its authority if we receive it as an all-embracing story. Evangelicals rightly understand that the Bible carries divine authority and that it must shape our lives. The problem is that there are many models of biblical authority functioning in the evangelical community, some of which diminish scriptural authority, and others which actually undermine it. N.T. Wright’s work on this has been instructive.<sup>20</sup> In his well-known essay *How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?* he notes that evangelicals have often found the authority of the Bible in timeless truth and principles, or as a witness to primary events, or in its timeless function. Wright comments:

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<sup>18</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 132. He says a few pages later that retelling the story of the Bible is a necessary part of the task of God’s people, 142: ‘. . . the retelling of the story of the previous acts, as part of the required improvisation, is a necessary part of the task all through.’ I will pick up the theme of improvisation below. Also Wright’s notion of subversion of other ways of telling the story of the world will be expanded in the next section.

<sup>20</sup> N. T. Wright, ‘How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?’, *Vox Evangelica* (1991), 21, 7-32. *The Old Testament and the People of God*, 139-143; *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005).

The problem with all such solutions as to how to use the Bible is that they belittle the Bible and exalt something else. Basically they imply—and this is what I mean when I say they offer too low a view of Scripture—that God, after all, has given us the wrong sort of book and it is our job to turn it in to the right sort of book . . .<sup>21</sup>

The book that God *has* given us is, as Eugene Peterson puts it, *A*an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative@ or “a vast, over-reaching, all-encompassing story—a meta-story.”<sup>22</sup> How can this kind of story function authoritatively? Wright answers by offering us an analogy. He imagines that the script of a *A*lost@ Shakespeare play is somehow discovered. Although the play originally had five acts,<sup>23</sup> only a little more than four have been found—the first four acts and the first scene of act five. The rest is missing. The play is given to Shakespearian actors who are asked to work out the rest of act five for themselves. They immerse themselves in the culture and language of Shakespeare and in the partial script that has been recovered. They then improvise the unscripted part of the fifth act, allowing their performance to be shaped by the trajectory, the *thrust*, of Shakespeare=s story as they have come to understand it. In this way they bring the play toward the conclusion that its author has indicated.

Something like this may help us to understand how biblical authority can shape our own lives now. The biblical drama of redemption unfolds in five acts: (1) creation, (2) the fall into sin, (3) Israel=s story, (4) the story of Jesus Christ, and (5) the story of the church, leading to the consummation of God=s plan of redemption—an act not yet complete. We also know the Author of the story; in fact, the Divine ‘Playwright’ has given the gift of his own Spirit to the ‘actors.’<sup>24</sup> Now, given the trajectory of the story as it has been told to this point, and especially knowing

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, *How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Living Into God=s Story*. This can be accessed at [www.biblicalthology.ca](http://www.biblicalthology.ca) under ‘Articles.’

<sup>23</sup> In our book *The Drama of Scripture* we have adapted Wright’s model of five acts to six by adding the consummation as act six.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 143.



that we have been entrusted to perform the continuation of act four and five—the mission of Jesus and the early church—how are we to live our lives today? How can we play our part so as to allow the story to move forward toward the conclusion which God has already written for it? Wright speaks here of *Aimprovisation*,<sup>25</sup> as actors seek to work out in the fifth act of their play the meaning of the first four acts:

The *Authority* of the first four acts would not consist—could not consist!—in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, containing its own impetus and forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in an appropriate manner. It would require of the actors a free and responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could be appropriately be drawn together and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with *both innovation and consistency*.<sup>25</sup>

Innovation and consistency: this captures what it means to live in act five. *Consistency* means that our lives will be shaped by the substance and trajectory of the story of Israel, Jesus, and the early church. We pore over and immerse ourselves in those earlier acts to understand them well so we may live in consistency with its essential narrative impetus. Yet with *innovation*: faithfulness means living creatively and imaginatively in a new redemptive-historical era and in new cultural and historical situations into which God leads us.

The first reason it is important, therefore, to read the Bible as one story is that this is the way the Bible's authority is known. If God's word is to shape our lives we must receive it and hear it as it really is—one story. Loss of narrative unity greatly truncates the Bible's power and erodes its authority.

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<sup>25</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 140. Italics mine.

There is a second reason it is important to read the Bible as one story: it enables us to understand our identity as God's people as we see our role in the story. The Bible renders our identity as a missional identity, our role to participate in God's redemptive mission. Chris Wright, in a book to be released in a couple of weeks, offers a biblical hermeneutics that 'sees the mission of God (and the participation in it of God's people) as a framework in which we can read the whole Bible. Mission' he says 'is a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture.'<sup>26</sup>

The Bible tells the story of God's mission to restore the entire fallen creation and the whole rebellious life of humankind to again live under His gracious rule. Israel is taken up into God's missional purpose. Against the backdrop of creation and human rebellion, God chooses Israel to bring redemptive blessing and reveal Himself to the nations. In other words, we see from the beginning when God chooses Abraham, God does not reject the nations but chooses Abraham precisely for the sake of the nations (Gen. 12.1-3). The culminating clause in Abraham's call is 'that all nations on earth may be blessed.'<sup>27</sup> When God meets Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19.3-6) he summons them, in the words of John Durham, to be 'a display-people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people.'<sup>28</sup> To use the later language of Isaiah, Israel is to be a light to the nations. William Dumbrell captures the significance of this call for the rest of Old Testament history: AThe history of Israel from this point on is in reality merely a commentary upon the degree of fidelity with which Israel adhered to this Sinai-given vocation.@<sup>29</sup> The remainder of the Old Testament narrates how faithful Israel is to this call. When Israel fails, Jesus takes upon himself Israel's missionary vocation to bring salvation to all nations. He gathers and restores Israel to their missional calling in the world. To this newly

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<sup>26</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> See William Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant* (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1984), 55-72; Bauckham, Richard, *Bible and Mission*, 28-36; Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 185-207.

<sup>28</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987, 263. See further Dumbrell, William, *Creation and Covenant* (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1984), 80-90; Bauckham, Richard, *Bible and Mission*, 36-41; Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 27-57, 208-240.

<sup>29</sup> Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 80.

gathered group he says: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (John 20.21). This nucleus of renewed Israel is to continue the mission of Jesus to the ends of the earth gathering all nations into God’s covenantal blessing. This time between the times is characterized by the mission of the church to the ends of the earth. In fact, to miss this is to misunderstand biblical eschatology fundamentally. Newbigin comments:

The meaning of this “overlap of the ages” in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is—so to say—held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.<sup>30</sup>

Chris Wright summarizes the biblical narrative in this way: ‘. . . *the whole Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of God’s whole creation.*’<sup>31</sup> Thus the mission of the people of God is ‘*our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.*’<sup>32</sup> Our identity as God’s people comes from that missional role in the biblical story.

What is clear from this understanding of mission is that mission is much more than evangelism or taking the gospel to other places. Mission is not just one more (even very important) task of God’s people but it is our very identity: we are sent with the good news to embody in our lives, demonstrate with our deeds, and announce with our words God’s end-time salvation. This defines the meaning of our entire lives. This may be captured in two images. The

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<sup>30</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (American edition. New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 153-154.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 51. His emphasis. Cf. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 23. His emphasis.

first is the image of *foretaste*: by the Spirit we have been given a foretaste of the salvation of the kingdom. When the end comes we will enjoy the full banquet of the kingdom. In the meantime the church has been given a taste beforehand. The reason is so that we can witness to that salvation. A second image makes this clear. The people of God are like a *movie preview* or trailer. A movie trailer gives *actual footage* of the movie that is coming in the future *so that people will want to watch it*. The people of God are a kingdom preview. We embody the salvation of the kingdom which is coming in the future so that people will see it and want it. That is what the witness is all about. Our lives, deeds, and words witness to the kingdom's presence and its future consummation. A biblical witness is a witness to God's rule over all of human life. As the contemporary testimony *Our World Belongs to God* eloquently puts it:

The Spirit thrusts God's people into worldwide mission.  
He impels young and old, men and women,  
to go next door and far away  
into science and art, media and marketplace  
with the good news of God's grace. . . . (32)

Following the apostles, the church is sent—  
sent with the gospel of the kingdom . . .  
In a world estranged from God,  
where millions face confusing choices,  
this mission is central to our being . . . (44)

The rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole world.  
To follow this Lord is to serve him everywhere,  
without fitting in,

as light in the darkness, as salt in a spoiling world. (45)<sup>33</sup>

Note the phrase ‘This mission is central to our being.’ Yet the church in the West does not comprehend its missionary identity as it should. And we will not recover our missional identity unless, both in the church and in the academy, we recover Scripture as one story in which we are called to find our true identity.

There is a final reason that reading the Bible as one story is urgent; it is the other side of what has just been said. Understanding our missional identity, our role to embody God’s purpose for the world will mean that we may not ‘be conformed to the world’ to use Paul’s phrase (Romans 12.2). Of course, Paul here refers to human culture as it is shaped by idolatry. Faithfulness to our identity as God’s missional people means we may not be conformed to cultural idolatry. Understanding the Bible as one story will enable us to resist our idolatrous cultural story.

N.T. Wright, Lesslie Newbigin, and Richard Bauckham all make this point, albeit in different ways. Wright speaks of *subversion*: it is necessary to hold fast to the Bible as a grand story to subvert rival stories and visions of the world. I quoted Wright above to this effect: An essential part of our theological and missional task today is to ‘tell this story as clearly as possible, and to allow it to subvert other ways of telling the story of the world . . .’<sup>34</sup> In another article he illustrates what that means by showing how the biblical story subverts various competing narratives or views of the world in our day: paganism and neo-paganism, philosophical idealism, the non-storied world of postmodernity, all pagan and neo-pagan political power-structures, and all rival eschatologies.<sup>35</sup> So the only way to avoid being swept into another story is by challenging and subverting those rival stories by the biblical narrative.

While Wright speaks of subversion, Newbigin employs the notion of a *missionary encounter*. Throughout the decades of the 1980s and 1990s Lesslie Newbigin was tireless in calling the

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<sup>33</sup> This is a contemporary confession of the Christian Reformed Church. It can be accessed on-line at [www.biblicalthology.ca](http://www.biblicalthology.ca) under ‘Articles.’

<sup>34</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> *The Bible for the Postmodern World*, Latimer Fellowship, Orange Memorial Lecture, 1999, 9-12. This paper can be accessed in the ‘Articles’ section at [www.biblicalthology.ca](http://www.biblicalthology.ca)

Western church back to a missionary encounter with its culture. He believed that the Western church was an ‘advanced case of syncretism’<sup>36</sup> or, again, in Paul’s language deeply conformed to the world. Over against syncretism Newbigin summons the Western church to a missionary encounter, which ought to be the normal posture of the church in its culture when it is faithful to the gospel. In contemporary western culture there are ‘two quite different stories’ told as the ‘real story’ of the world – the humanist story and the story that is told in the Bible.<sup>37</sup> A missionary encounter is a clash of stories; it occurs when the church believes the Bible to be the true story of the world, and embodies or ‘indwells’<sup>38</sup> its comprehensive claims as a witness in the face of the dominant cultural narrative. Since both the biblical and the cultural stories make comprehensive and absolute claims, only one can be *the* basic and foundational story for life. Newbigin charges that the western church is ‘an advanced case of syncretism’ because it has allowed the biblical story to be absorbed into the more comprehensive Enlightenment story. An essential ingredient in reversing syncretism is to recover Scripture as a true grand story: ‘I do not believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives – both personal and public.’<sup>39</sup> If the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits (historical-critical, devotional, homiletic, systematic-theological, moral) it can easily be domesticated by the reigning story of culture.

Richard Bauckham makes the same point in yet another way. He argues that the only way the church can keep from being co-opted into the ‘very powerful, late-modern grand narrative of consumerist individualism and free-market globalization’<sup>40</sup> is by countering that narrative with

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<sup>36</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67; *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2; *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Employing Michael Polanyi’s terminology, Newbigin speaks of ‘indwelling’ the Biblical story. For more see *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 33-38.

<sup>39</sup> Newbigin, ‘Response to Word of God?’, John Coventry, SJ, *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter*, 10, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Bauckham, *Reading the Bible as a Coherent Story*, 46.

the biblical one.<sup>41</sup> The story of globalization<sup>42</sup> is tidal wave of homogenization that is sweeping away the diversity of the world; in spite of its rhetoric of freedom it brooks no rivals. Bauckham believes that the story of economic globalization is a dangerous story because it is ‘surely blatantly guilty of impoverishing and vandalizing God’s world’ on at least three fronts: it exacerbates and contributes to poverty; it ravishes the non-human environment; and it destroys traditional cultures.<sup>43</sup> Postmodernity exposes these metanarratives as totalising projects of power and domination, and in place of their universalist pretensions opts for particularity, diversity, and relativism.<sup>44</sup> But really postmodernism offers no cogent or effective resistance to the story of global capitalism precisely because postmodernity has no counter story to withstand it. In fact, it is worse; postmodernism is complicit in the injustices of global capitalism since its relativism is easily assimilated into the economic pragmatism necessary for the kind of individualist consumer culture that feeds economic globalization.<sup>45</sup> As Bishop Peter Selby puts it: ‘Relativism is frankly more profitable.’<sup>46</sup> In this global context Bauckham asks: ‘What do we really need in order to recognize and to resist this new metanarrative of globalization? Surely a story that counters the global dominance of the profit-motive and the culture of consumption with a powerful affirmation of universal values.’<sup>47</sup> For Bauckham the only way forward for the Christian, the only effective resistance is to affirm the metanarrative of Scripture over against economic globalization.

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<sup>41</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 103-110; *Reading the Bible as a Coherent Story*, 46-47.

<sup>42</sup> “Globalization tells a story—and its success has a lot to do with the convincingness of this story—about the irresistible triumph of global capitalism, about the universalizing of the culture it promotes.” (*Bible and Mission*, 6).

<sup>43</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 94-96.

<sup>44</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> ‘It is hard to acquit much postmodern theory of unintentional or intentional collusion with this [global capitalistic] metanarrative. Postmodern relativism offers no cogent resistance to this metanarrative, which is not threatened by diversity so long as its overarching framework of alleged economic reality goes unchallenged.’ (*Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story*, 46).

<sup>46</sup> Peter Selby, *The Silent Word Still Speaks: Globalization and the Interpretation of Scripture*, in C. Reed (ed.) *Development Matters: Christian Perspectives on Globalization* (London: Church House, 2001), 103. Quoted in Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 97.

But this can only happen if the Christian metnarrative does not become a tool of the forces of domination.<sup>48</sup> It may not be domesticated by and absorbed into the bigger global capitalist metanarrative. ‘If it [the church] is to remain faithful to its Lord, it dare not let itself be co-opted by other interests and become the ideology of any of the other forces at work in this world.’<sup>49</sup> This is only possible if the Bible is seen in its canonical unity as telling a grand story that is an alternative to the story of global capitalism.

### *Is the Bible an Oppressive Metanarrative?*

At least two objections have been made against reading the Bible as one story. The first is made by biblical scholars. They point to the tremendous diversity of Scripture which seems to belie any confession of unity.<sup>50</sup> While that legacy remains powerful today, it is the critique of postmodern critics that raise new problems about Scripture as a story: if the Bible is a grand story it is necessarily oppressive, as are all metanarratives. This critique of metanarratives, associated in particular with Jean-François Lyotard and Michael Foucault, has arisen as modern stories of progress began to unravel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the process all grand narratives have come in for scathing critique. All meta-stories tend to be regarded with acute suspicion; all we can tolerate are small, local stories with no pretence to universal truth.

The primary criticism is that all metanarratives are ‘narratives of domination and oppression, dressing up the realities of exploitive power in claims to divine authorization and universal benefit.’<sup>51</sup> The universalization of one’s values is necessarily oppressive because it is a tidal wave of homogenization that sweeps away all local stories and eliminates freedom and diversity.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, they are often violent in enforcing their claims and exploiting others for

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<sup>48</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 112.

<sup>50</sup> ‘In part because of specialization and the narrowing of horizons that it entails, much recent scholarship has tended to exaggerate biblical diversity’ (Bauckham, *Scripture as a Coherent Story*, 43).

<sup>51</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> This image of a tidal wave is from Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (Verso, 2005), 53.



their own benefit. While this critique has been made primarily of modern stories of progress it has been extended to the biblical story as well. Can the Bible withstand such a critique? Can the Bible answer the charge of narrative imperialism in which ‘the church universalizes its own story, foists it on others, subjects others to it, suppresses their own stories and deprives them of the opportunity to write their own stories’?<sup>53</sup>

Sadly it cannot be denied that the biblical story has been misused in this way in our history. We have only to remind ourselves of the lamentable way Constantine reversed the meaning of the cross when he hoisted up a military standard with the Chi-Rho sign and conquered in the name of Christ after, according to legend, seeing a vision of the cross with the words *εν τούτω νίκα* (in this [sign] conquer; or in Latin *in hoc signo vinces*).<sup>54</sup> Or the way the 8<sup>th</sup> century Frankish king Charlemagne ‘converted’ and ‘baptised’ the Saxons at the point of a sword. Or, perhaps the seemingly more innocently way that well-meaning missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century attempted to westernize the cultures to which they were sent. Yet acknowledging this regrettable history leaves open the question of whether or not oppression is intrinsically characteristic of the biblical narrative itself.

The first thing that may be said is that the Bible does not look for an intrahistorical victory. The Muslim story, the progress stories stemming from the Enlightenment, and the current story of economic globalization all seek a victory for their cause within history. Yet the Christian looks to the return of Christ as the final victory. Newbigin has stated this well:

. . . we can point to one feature of our story that is unique. All the other stories look to an end within history. They look to the intrahistorical triumph of their cause. They are therefore inherently imperialistic. The Church has sometimes acted in precisely that imperialistic way, but that is to betray her gospel. What is unique about the Christian story is that its crucial turning point is the event of

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<sup>53</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 89.

<sup>54</sup> Eusebius tells the story. Raphael has captured this scene in his painting ‘The Vision of the Cross.’

Calvary and Easter, when we learn that triumph of God is an event beyond history that gives meaning to all history.<sup>55</sup>

Focussing on the cross takes us to the heart of the issue. The cross reveals to us how God accomplishes his purposes for the world. Jesus' witness to the kingdom of God was one of non-conformity: Jesus lived as a counter-testimony to the idols of Rome and Israel. But when in the clash of stories, his claim was resisted and oppressed, he did not coerce but meekly offered up his life as a witness to the truth. And it was in that suffering witness on the cross that the victory was gained—a victory confirmed by the resurrection that remains largely hidden until the final day.

The cross casts its shadow over the church's mission as it moves toward God's universal triumph when Christ returns. Bauckham puts it well when he says that the cross is not only a critical test of the *content* of the church's witness, but also a critical test of the *form* of the church's witness. Like Jesus the church's witness will be a witness of non-conformity—a refusal to be co-opted into the death-dealing powers of the dominant story. Moreover, it will be a non-coercive and suffering witness as it faces opposition and rejection. The church announces and embodies the final victory of God, a victory that remains hidden until the final day. It is a witness of hope that God will finally reveal that triumph, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Until then the church's witness will take the form of Jesus' witness whose power was manifest in love, weakness and suffering. Bauckham correctly observes:

Indeed, it may be the power of the cross that can most effectively break through the corrosive cynicism of much contemporary western culture, the suspicion that the will to power is the hidden agenda in all human relationships however apparently altruistic.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 204.

<sup>56</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 102.

There is one more thing about that witness that answers the charge of the biblical story as an oppressive metanarrative. The gospel moves from Jerusalem, to Judaea, to Samaria, and on through the Roman Empire to the remotest parts of the earth. As it does it takes on different cultural forms. Far from being a tidal wave that sweeps away diversity and particularity, the gospel enhances the best of cultural diversity, celebrating the splendour and treasures<sup>57</sup> in all local stories. The gospel stands only against the idolatry that befouls local cultural stories, refining and purifying all in them that is commendable. Chris Wright puts it this way:

[The Bible] is the grand narrative that constitutes truth for all. . . . It is a coherent story with a universal claim. But it is also a story that affirms humanity in all its particular cultural variety. This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories.<sup>58</sup>

If the cross stands for suffering witness, and the resurrection for a hidden victory yet coming, it is Pentecost that signifies the cultural diversity of the kingdom of God.

A contrast between the gospel and the Q'ran is enlightening at this point. The gospel is news about an event, a mighty deed of God in history that gives meaning to history. As such it is translatable into every cultural situation. Indeed, the very nature of the truth of the gospel *requires* translation into different cultural contexts.<sup>59</sup> As it is translated, the gospel stands in a dialogical relationship with every culture. It does not offer a replacement culture. It does not simply shout an imperialistic 'no' to culture and offer an alternative pattern. Rather it affirms and embraces the good in all cultural developments. The Q'ran by contrast cannot, indeed may not,

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<sup>57</sup> Revelation 21.24. According to Hendrikus Berkhof these verses indicate that 'the cultural treasures of history' will be brought into the New Jerusalem. *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith* (translated by S. Woudstra; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1986), 520, 539. See also by the same author *Christ the Meaning of History* (translated by L. Buurman; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), 188-192 where he quotes Abraham Kuyper who believes the same thing.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, *God's Mission*, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Sanneh, Lamin, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989)

be translated into different languages and cultural situations. It offers a closed cultural and societal blueprint of shariah law for the faithful *ummah* to reproduce in different times and settings.<sup>60</sup> The grand story of the gospel will foster cultural diversity while the grand story of the Q’ran, like the story of economic globalization, will suppress it.

### *Conclusion*

The question is not whether the whole of our lives will be shaped by some grand story. The only question is which grand story will shape our lives. For the one who has heard Jesus’ call to follow him, the call comes with a summons to enter the story of which he was the climactic moment—the story narrated in the Bible. It is an invitation to find our place in that story.

The issue is urgent: only then can we submit to Scripture’s authority; only then can we understand our missional identity; only then can we resist being absorbed into the dangerous idolatries of our time. The church needs pastors and leaders, and the academy needs scholars and teachers who are in the grip of this story, and discharge their task in a way that calls church members and students to find their place in the true story of the world.

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<sup>60</sup> The Q’ran offered a blueprint for society in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The process by which the Q’ran is made relevant for later times is as follows. If the Q’ran does not speak directly to the issue, the next court of appeal is the sunnah (life-example) of the prophet and early community, then a consensus of the community of how to relate the Q’ran to the present, and finally through reasoning (*ijtihad*) from the Q’ran to the present situation. With the establishment of the four major Sunni schools of interpretation (Hanafi, Malawi, Shafi, Hanabali) in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the ‘gate of *ijtihad*’ was considered to be closed. That is, no new legal systems would be tolerated. The Muslim scholar Mahmoud M. Ayoub laments that this has ‘arrested the development of Islamic law at its most crucial stage. . . . The result has been that Islamic jurisprudence became a thick wall protecting the *shari’ah*, but largely depriving it of an adaptive dynamic moral and spiritual role in Muslim society’ (ed. Willard G. Oxtoboy, *World Religions: Western Traditions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 410). Missiologist Hendrik Kraemer, who spent his missionary career in Indonesia, says ‘The problem of modernizing Islam means therefore to come to terms with this shariah for the shariah is virtually the regulation and sanctioning of a medieval society on the basis of revelation’ (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938, 222).