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Re-Hearing the Gospel: Toward New Practices for Evangelism and Discipleship

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

RE-HEARING THE GOSPEL:

Toward New Practices for Evangelism and Discipleship

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

TODD HUNTER

PORTLAND, OREGON

August 28, 2006

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DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

TODD HUNTER

DATE: OCTOBER 17, 2006

TITLE:

**RE-HEARING THE GOSPEL:
TOWARD NEW PRACTICES FOR
EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLESHIP**

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Todd Hunter
Eagle, ID
August 28, 2006

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ABSTRACT

The ministry problem addressed in this dissertation is: approaches to evangelism and discipleship are not working well because the works and words of Jesus have been reduced to “going to heaven when you die,” instead of “living a Kingdom life now for the sake of the world.” Chapter 1 discusses the problem of a disenstoryed, to coin an apt term for this context, bullet-point theology and uses *The Alpha Course*, as a step in the right direction. Alpha, while not explicitly “storied” in its approach, is far more holistic than an average tract on the Gospel. In Chapter 2, I present a biblical basis for the gift of a changed life, rooted in a Covenantal–Kingdom soteriology. Chapter 3 sets forth a review of N. T. Wright’s works. I suggest they inform evangelism through an understanding of the biblical story. Chapter 4 reviews the works of Dallas Willard and his take on what it means to be a Christian. Chapter 5 shares the insights of Gordon Smith and asks the question: Does a better conversion experience lead to better discipleship? The Conclusion provides a look at a way forward from the truncated, bullet-point version of the Gospel to a re-hearing of the Gospel in its storied form, leading to fresh vision of Christian Spirituality. The project is supported by five appendices that provide fuller descriptions of the concepts discussed in the main chapters.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Problem

The problem addressed in this dissertation is: The Gospel according to Jesus has for all practical purposes been lost. It is buried under an avalanche of late twentieth century reductionisms. Something went drastically wrong when, for the sake of ease of communication in the task of evangelism, absurdly abridged renderings of the Gospel were wedded to the American marketing machine. By its very nature, marketing demands slogans, sound bites, and brevity that fit nicely on a bumper sticker or a banner. Marketing and media have no patience for nuance and no tolerance for complexity or the whole story. This reductionism, required for marketing-driven versions of the Gospel, has produced a loss of Story in favor of a bullet-point theology. This has yielded a Christian climate in which follower-ship of Jesus into a Spirit-empowered engagement with the world seems impossible. At best it is viewed as something only really serious Christians might do.

Under the burden of promotional brevity, Jesus is usually reduced to one thing he did: his death on the cross. Thus, his life, works, and teaching are not widely known or followed. His announcement, embodiment, and demonstration of the Gospel of the Kingdom seem archaic, and severely out of place in modern-day life. Perhaps most importantly, the vast implications of the resurrection do not sit easily or freely in the contemporary mind. This misunderstanding of the Gospel has distorted the practice of

evangelism and has made discipleship a practical impossibility in most Christian churches.

I acknowledge that some people pursue discipleship after being converted through hearing a miniaturized explanation of the Gospel. However, I claim that the Gospel *about* Jesus—life, teaching, works, death, burial and resurrection—has lost its full and compelling meaning and its ability to be the organizing power in a believer’s life. For the Gospel to reclaim its power, it must be placed in its proper context—the Gospel *according to* Jesus which is the Gospel of the Kingdom.

I want to show that a recapturing of the Gospel of the Kingdom—the Gospel Jesus announced—is the only Story capable of being the foundation or organizing force which would lead naturally and routinely to discipleship. As Tom Wright says, “We who call ourselves Christians must be totally committed to telling the story of Jesus both as the climax of Israel’s story and as the foundation of our own.”¹ Evangelists need to help seekers see a vision of Christian spirituality that moves them from “...the common reduction of salvation to a kind of heavenly fire insurance with very low premium: Jesus paid the price for my sins, so if I accept the free offer, I will go to heaven.”² Exactly in line with my thinking, Rienstra goes on to say, “The problem with this view is not that it isn’t true, but that it’s too anemic: it can leave the impression that salvation is only about life after death and that the world is a place where we simply wait for that great hallelujah

¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 125.

² Debra Rienstra, *So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 63.

day and remind others to do the same.”³ But, such a view does not in any way take seriously the Gospel according to Jesus—the Gospel of the kingdom. Rienstra continues:

...Jesus consistently explained that “the kingdom of God is near” or even “within you” ...salvation encompasses the past and the present too. The hallelujah day impinges on the world, so why wait? We can be gathered up into it even now.⁴

In the following chapters, I will interact with three proposals which are suggested as remedies to the above problem: those of Gordon Smith, Dean at Regent College, who suggests a more holistic form of conversion. Secondly, I’ll work with the fresh and compelling ideas of theologian N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham, who, regarding salvation, demonstrates the power of the whole biblical story. Finally, I’ll consult the popular writings of Dallas Willard, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, who sets forth a compelling idea of what it means to be a Christian. The thrust of my interaction with these fine scholars is not that they are wrong. All three successfully avoid the trap of reductionism. I seek to make a contribution to the practice of evangelism and discipleship by making them accessible to average seekers.

In this chapter, I will discuss how we have arrived where we are culturally. We will look at the accompanying theological landscape and provide an illustration of Gospel reductionism.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The Rise Of Theological Reductionism and Its Effects on the Task of Evangelism

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Which came first, the wrong story which marketing practices merely made memorable? Or did the powerful codifying and mental engraining of marketing theological tidbits teach us a wrong story? What did God have in mind even before the creation of space and time? One can be sure that it was not merely “sin management,”⁵ as Dallas Willard puts it in his unforgettable and often quoted phrase. He goes on to say that “...the Christian message is thought to be essentially concerned only with how to deal with sin: with wrongdoing and wrong-being and its effects. “Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is now presented as the heart of the Christian message, or it is included only marginally.”⁶ By sin management, Willard means to call attention to a preoccupation in evangelism and apologetics with forgiveness of sin, avoiding hell and achieving heaven. This truncated story starts the plot line in the wrong place. It therefore fails to communicate the greater purpose in divine forgiveness. It fails to articulate forgiveness in the wider purpose of God.

A truncated story, like the one described above, has been told at least since the Reformation. The popular rendering is perhaps a misunderstanding of the Reformation period. Nevertheless, the story, told in my circles in my lifetime regarding the Reformation, is a story dominated by deliverance from preoccupations with sin, heaven, hell, purgatory, indulgences, religious politics, and the building of ecclesiastical edifices.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

When people think of Luther, they often tend to think about gaining heaven while avoiding purgatory and hell. This may not be fair to Luther, but it is the reality we must deal with today in the task of evangelism and discipleship. Though Calvin's *Institutes*⁷ show otherwise, most people do not associate the Reformation with seeking to be the obedient, cooperative people of God on earth—now, in one's actual life. This misguided view has been carried almost uncritically for several centuries into contemporary forms of evangelism. I do not mean to say that Luther and Calvin cared nothing about post-conversion realities. I mean to say that their more nuanced views do not often make it into contemporary, popular conversations and writings—especially explanations of the Gospel.

There is, however, a new move in Luther studies, led by a Finnish scholar, Tuomo Mannermaa, which is trying to rectify the popular and scholarly misunderstandings of Luther. A review of the book says:

Mannermaa expounds the book's thesis as follows: "According to Luther, Christ (in both his person and his work) is present in faith and is through this presence identical with the righteousness of faith. The idea of a divine life in Christ who is really present in faith lies at the very center of the theology of the Reformer." The forensic element in Luther's doctrine of justification is thus viewed by the Finns as a function of his central emphasis on the believer's *actual participation in the divine life* through union with Christ.⁸

⁷ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 522. Calvin says "A real conversion of our life unto God, proceeds from sincere and serious fear of God; and consists in the mortification of the flesh and the old man, and the quickening of the Spirit." 513 After conversion, he says, there are "...hidden defilements must be wiped away, and an altar erected to God in the very heart. There are, moreover, certain external exercises which we employ in private as remedies to humble us and tame our flesh...."

⁸ "Union With Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther" *First Things* [document online]; available from <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9912/reviews/dorman.html>; Internet, accessed August 20, 2006.

This is a nice move for the sake of evangelism. Current seminarians will be given a more holistic view of the Gospel; one they can carry over into the work of evangelism and discipleship. The ontological concepts of Mannermaa open Gospel proclamations to an emphasis on “life,” life in Christ as the covenant people of God. Dorman, reviewing Mannermaa’s work, writes, “The new Finnish perspective on Luther offers a refreshing corrective not only to the post–Enlightenment dualism of German Lutheran scholarship, but also to neo–evangelical Protestantism’s tendency to define justification solely in forensic terms.”⁹

Wright helps us understand the intense, argumentative context of medieval religion, which was Luther’s conversation partner—protagonist. Wright notes:

Martin Luther rightly reacted against the medieval translation of *metanoie* as *paenitentiam agere* (“do repentance”) and insisted that the word referred originally to the “repentance” that takes place deep with the human heart, not in the outward actions prescribed as a quasi-punishment. He could not know that his reading would be used, in turn, to support an individualistic and pietistic reading of Jesus’ command to repent, which does no justice at all to the meaning of the word in the first century. Jesus was summoning his hearers to give up their whole way of life, their national and social agendas, and to trust him for a different agenda, a different set of goals. This of course included a change of heart, but went far beyond it.¹⁰

If Wright lets Luther off the hook and puts this misunderstanding at the feet of his later interpreters, we can let Calvin off the hook, as well. A brief survey of his writings

⁹ Ibid., Dorman also says, “This in turn means, in the words of the book’s editors, that for Luther ‘righteousness as an attribute of God in Christ cannot be separated from his divine being. The righteousness of God that is ours by faith is therefore a real participation in the life of God.’ To ascribe such views to the German Reformer flies in the face of the German Protestant tradition, which has ‘notoriously read Luther under the spell of neo–Kantian presuppositions’ that ignore ‘all ontology found in Luther and instead define faith as ‘purely an act of the will with no ontological implications’ [such as the believer’s actual participation in the divine nature].”

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 27.

demonstrate that he had a holistic view of the Gospel and the story in which it was embedded. Calvin writes:

...the sum of the Gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins...surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the error of his past life into the right way and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance.¹¹

Calvin didn't think being a Christian was about going to heaven when one dies. He had a much more comprehensive vision: "...we are God's: let us therefore live for Him and die for Him. We are God's: let His wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward Him as our only lawful goal."¹²

Wright summarizes the soteriology of the Reformers:

The Reformers had very thorough answers to the question "why did Jesus die?" They did not have nearly such good answers to the question "why did Jesus live?" Their successors to this day have not often done any better. But the question will not go away. If the only available answer is "to give some shrewd moral teaching, to live an exemplary life, and to prepare for sacrificial death," we may be forgiven for thinking it a little lame. It also seems...quite untrue to Jesus' own understanding of his vocation and work.¹³

How Did We Get Here?

Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke say a theological method rooted in modern philosophical assumptions gave rise to a search for discreet, stand alone statements of truthful propositions. They write, "According to this model, the theologian, assisted by the canons of logic, applies the scientific method to the deposit of revelation found in scripture in an ongoing quest to compile the one, complete, timeless body of right doctrines, *formulated as a series of statements or theological assertions, each of which is*

¹¹ John Calvin, Elsie Anne McKee, Emilie Griffin, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 49

¹² Ibid., 116.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 14.

true in its own right.”¹⁴ This led in turn to what they call “fragmentation,”¹⁵ or what I call reductions that fit well with a marketing style of communication in the task of evangelism. Grenz describes twentieth-century evangelicals as having:

...devoted much energy to the task of demonstrating the credibility of the Christian faith to a culture that glorifies reason and deifies science. Evangelical presentations of the gospel have often been accompanied by a rational apologetic that appeals to proofs for the existence of God, the trustworthiness of the Bible, and the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. Evangelical systematic theologies have generally focused on the propositional content of the faith, seeking to provide a logical presentation of Christian doctrine.¹⁶

This may seem benign at first glance, but upon reflection it can cause a loss of overall story. Grenz and Franke quote Miroslav Volf in a way that solidifies my premise, “Method is message” [in that] all major methodological decisions have implications for the whole of the theological edifice.”¹⁷ If Volf is right, bumper sticker, slogan and sound-bite evangelism based on theological snippets will never yield followers of Jesus.

What can carry the burden of passing on biblical truth such that it regularly produces followers of Jesus? The thesis put forward here is: story— recounting the story of God as the ancient Jews did at Passover and other annual feasts. We desperately need to see that the facts concerning sin, cross, blood, heaven and hell discreetly laid out in most tracks and sermons have been torn from a story; a narrative that gives them their meaning and power. Returning bits of theological data to their embedded place in a story is not a loss; it is gain. In a story, these facts are set in a context that makes them shine like a diamond

¹⁴ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 37. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 161.

¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

against black velvet. If the black velvet represents the pre-creation intention of God through to *telos*, then we have a new basis for explaining our faith in terms that go beyond heaven when you die. Grenz and Franke say bringing *telos* into view “speaks of a God who is bringing creation to its divinely intended goal.”¹⁸ They go on to say that “the development of a *telos*-directed narrative is among the most significant theological contributions of the biblical communities;”¹⁹ that it produced in Israel “a historical consciousness that took on a futurist cast, gained an eternal focus and finally came to be seen as universal in scope.”²⁰ What evangelist, pastor, or director of catechism would not give both their arms for a convert with such a view! It can happen: all it takes is the telling of the main plot lines of our story—from ultimate intention to *telos*.

A Better Way

Thankfully, throughout the last few centuries there have been exceptions to this pattern. For instance in 1963, a then well-known Bible teacher named DeVern Fromke, published by a little known publisher, wrote the book, *The Ultimate Intention*. It is a powerful and straightforward explanation of the purposes of God for humanity. Reading it, one might say that Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life* is forty plus years late to Fromke’s party!

Fromke demonstrates that the story of God does not start with the fall, nor does it begin with correcting the fallout from original sin. The Judeo-Christian narrative does not

¹⁸ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 253.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

start with creation—even the formation of humankind. It starts within the eternal being of God; within God’s pre-creation determination to have a body of people, through his son Jesus. The intentionality of the Father-through-the-Son relationship is crucial to developing a theology and practice of evangelism that connects meaningfully to a life of discipleship to Jesus. In this view of soteriology, Jesus is not tied to humanity’s need—forgiveness of sin, but he is rather tied to God’s ultimate desire—to have a people. This corporate body is to express the very life of God on earth; to be his cooperative friends.²¹ The fall can then be viewed—even with all its devastating consequences—as a speed bump on the way to God’s *telos* as stated in the biblical texts that describe God’s covenantal expectations for humanity in his image.²²

Fromke relates a beautiful, little story that powerfully demonstrates that while sin and forgiveness are important to the Christian story, the story itself cannot be reduced to them:

One morning I went to the back door to call our three-year old son. I planned for him to go with me to town on an errand. As I opened the back door to call, I saw him—but what a predicament he was in. The little fellow had been playing in the garden and had fallen in the mud. So as I called him it was now with a two-fold purpose: there was the overshadowing purpose—taking him to town with me; but there was also the incidental need of “washing up” which must be incorporated into the purpose. I must first minister some “grace” so that my purpose could be fulfilled.²³

That story helps one see that soteriology exists in a context, a story, or to switch metaphors, on a map. Understanding sin and redemption in a “disenstoried form” is at

²¹ DeVern F. Fromke, *The Ultimate Intention* (Cloverdale, IN: Sure Foundation, 1963).

²² See, for instance, the emphasis on working humans working with God in the creation accounts; the covenantal expectations for Abraham, Moses, and the reason for the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. See also texts such as Psalm 8; Ephesians 1.11, 12; 2.8-10; Revelation 22.5.

²³ Fromke, *The Ultimate Intention*, 38.

the heart of the churches' contemporary challenge with both evangelism and discipleship. Fortunately, the reverse—seeing the fall and redemption as only a part of the overall divine narrative—has the power to become the controlling, overarching, or organizing center of an articulation of the Gospel that leads more routinely to a life of follower-ship of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of God's ultimate purpose—redeemed humanity as his ambassadors on the earth.

The three main eras of intellectual history—pre-modern, modern, and postmodern—all had inherent within them opportunities and threats with reference to a right understanding of the Gospel. None in my view is particularly a “Christian worldview.” God is not stumped by any epistemology and he has always given rise to faithful spokespeople who were simultaneously true to him while connecting meaningfully to their times and culture. While we must converse with postmodern culture, we cannot simply capitulate to it; for instance, to its insistence that there is no “center.”²⁴ Christians believe that there is a unifying center to reality: God and his story, plan and will. Delight in story gives an opportunity in the postmodern era for the Gospel to be recovered. Grenz says that postmodern people see truth as “historical, relational, personal, community based and participatory.”²⁵ This can only be good news when the goal is follower-ship rather than merely going to heaven based on loose, uncritical, cognitive assent to a set of facts outlining one theory of the atonement.

²⁴ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 164.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

A Subversive View

Most evangelistic preaching and writing in my lifetime have been centered on the ability of the shed blood of Jesus on the cross to affect forgiveness of sins. However, one must ask, “is that all God gets out of the cross?” Is the often seen bumper sticker true, “Christians aren’t perfect, JUST forgiven”? Dallas Willard, commenting on the sticker says:

...Christians certainly are forgiven. And it needs to be said that forgiveness does not depend on being perfect. But is that what the slogan communicates? Unfortunately, it is not. What the slogan really communicates is that forgiveness alone is what Christianity is all about, what is genuinely essential to it. It says that you can have a faith in Christ that brings forgiveness, while in every other respect your life is no different from that of others who have no faith at all. This view so pleasingly presented on bumpers and trinkets has deep historical roots. It is by now worked out in many sober tomes of theology, lived out by multitudes of those who sincerely self-identify as Christians.²⁶

Is that really our message: only forgiveness is at stake in humankind’s relationship with God? What if in the cross there is something much more for God and us? What if we do not come *to* the forgiveness of sins through faith in the atoning work of Christ, but come *through* forgiveness of sins to a life that is “in Christ?”²⁷ One then would be coming to a life animated and energized by the narrative and orientation of Jesus who said, “I only do what I see my Father doing” (John 5.19), or “I only say what I hear the Father saying.” Fromke explains that God wants our new life in Christ to be more than a

²⁶ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 36.

²⁷ “In Christ” is a key descriptor for Paul; it may be for him the equivalent of what “born again” was in the twentieth century. Just as a sample, Paul speaks of being “alive in Christ...[and] baptized into Christ...[and to being] alive to God in Christ...[and having] eternal life in Christ Jesus;” Romans 6.1, 3, 11, 23; he further declares: “...there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ” Romans 8.1; he testifies that “...Andronicus and Junias were in Christ before I was...;” Romans 16.7; he speaks of his “way of life in Christ;” 1 Corinthians 4.17; Paul exhorts: “...just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him....”

crisis experience or a “position”²⁸ [of imputed righteousness]. Christian life is a new life, eternal life; a life derived from and lived in the Kingdom of God for the sake of others.

Here are two subversive questions that provocatively bring this discussion to a close:

1. What if the function of heaven in the divine story is not “goal” but “destination”? I contend that the goal of God for humanity is spiritual transformation into Christlikeness, not attaining heaven. Heaven is simply the destination of the friends of God. It is the “place”—the realm of God’s perfectly achieved will—in which they find themselves now (partially), later in death, and most fully in the renewed cosmos.
2. Perhaps we should change our most potent, close-the-deal, evangelistic question from “if you died tonight, do you know where you would go?” to “if you knew you were going to live tomorrow, the next day and for a long, long time...who would you follow? Around what narrative would you organize the various parts of your life? What kind of person would you be? How would you determine that answer?”

If our evangelistic apologetics followed the thoughts above—Christlikeness for the sake of being God’s sent people²⁹ into the world—discipleship would be the natural follow-on to a “decision to ask Jesus into my heart.” I agree with Stanley Grenz, “...our goal in proclaiming the gospel should not merely be to bring others to affirm a list of correct propositions. Rather, we should employ theological propositions such as ‘sin’ and ‘grace’ in order that others might encounter God in Christ and then join us on the grand journey of understanding the meaning of that encounter for all of life.”³⁰ Grenz further states that “the Christian gospel is concerned not only with the reformation of our

²⁸ Fromke, *The Ultimate Intention*, 78.

²⁹ See the books *Missional Church* and *Storm Front* for very helpful discussions on the biblical basis for being the sent people of God. Both will also help a reader take a few steps toward making that concept practical in the church.

³⁰ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 171.

intellectual commitments but also with the transformation of our character and the renewal of our entire lives as believers.”³¹

Some religious thinkers worry that any focus on character transformation, spiritual formation, or personal piety, will result in navel gazing, narcissistic introspection.

Willard effectively counters that notion:

...those who think that the cultivation of inner Christ-likeness through personal discipleship to Jesus amounts to a “privatization” of our faith in him (“quietism” and “pietism” are words often used in that connection) simply do not understand how the spiritual life in Christ works. You *cannot* privatize the fire of God that burns through the life of a disciple of Jesus. This was Jesus’ point in saying that “a city built on a hill cannot be hid.”³²

Such a view, rooted in a God-story adequate to shape and center a human life, provides, in my judgment, the greatest possibility for holistic, full-bodied spirituality.

The Alpha Course: A Step in the Right Direction

The Alpha Course (hereafter “Alpha”) goes way beyond the kind of tract-style, bumper-sticker evangelistic approaches discussed above. As an evangelistic tool, it is to be commended for its breadth. No seeker could finish the course thinking: “all there is to Christianity is getting my sins forgiven so that I can go to heaven when I die.” While Alpha is wonderfully simple and straight forward, and while it covers topics such as the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God, prayer, Bible reading, and many other basics of the Christian faith, it still does so as popularized, simple—in the best sense of that term—systematic theology, not as explicitly as a story to be embodied.

³¹ Ibid., 173.

³² Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 228. The *italic* emphasis in this citation is the author’s.

As one who leads Alpha USA, I am a friendly and loyal critic. There are some inherent problems that systematic theology poses in the task of evangelism. While, in my opinion, Alpha is the most holistic approach to evangelization available to local churches, it is not done in a storied form. However, Alpha is a step forward because one of the main ideals of Alpha is to connect evangelism with discipleship, or “growth,” so that the two—often separated or the latter taken to be optional—are seen and experienced as a seamless whole.

Alpha, while exploring the usual, evangelistic topics of sin, the cross, and the resurrection, also introduces seekers to life in the Kingdom and the Spirit — in a way that leads more naturally, compared to sin management approaches, to discipleship to Jesus and love for neighbor. Alpha revolves around a meal and short talk. It is communal, relational, and full of dialog, and is a great tool for reaching postmodern and post-Christian people despite its systematic approach. The course fosters a deeper understanding of Jesus through prayer, reflection, and caring relationships with others. As “a practical introduction to the Christian faith,”³³ it emphasizes basic Christian doctrines, including the Trinity, Jesus as Son of God, Christ’s life and death, scripture, spiritual warfare, the Holy Spirit, healing, and more.

Alpha provides, in my judgment, a vastly superior approach to evangelism than the typical “get them to say the prayer” method. This is especially true when the course is run by leaders who are in tune with God’s ultimate intention to have a people for himself. Such leaders typically have a theological orientation toward creating disciples who are

³³ This is the subtitle of *The Alpha Course* and of Nicky Gumbel’s book, *Questions of Life*.

ambassadors of the Kingdom of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Sandy Millar, co-founder of *The Alpha Course* and past vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton in London, and Nicky Gumbel, co-founder and present vicar of Holy Trinity, are shining examples of such leadership. In their church *The Alpha Course* does not need to carry the whole burden of creating kingdom-oriented, Spirit-empowered disciples. In fact, one might say that rather than *The Alpha Course* creating an atmosphere marked by the Kingdom and the Spirit, *The Alpha Course* at Holy Trinity Brompton was born from a previous commitment to evangelizing seekers into Spirit-enabled life in the Kingdom of God. Running *The Alpha Course* simply poured gas on an already existing fire.

It is sad to say, though, that in the hands of people who start the Christian story with the predicament of sin, who do not see the larger picture, who run the course from a church-ethos of “get them to heaven,” the course can be little better than the bumper-sticker approach. This error can still happen because some churches chose to major on only a few topics: sin, guilt, forgiveness, cross, blood, death, and resurrection. However, and notable for the argument being made here, the course also spends a great deal of effort describing life in the Kingdom by the power of the Spirit. Thus it is possible to use the course well or poorly depending on previous theological lenses. Different starting points yield vastly different kinds of fruit.

Alpha seems primed for effectiveness in contemporary culture. Our culture, it is widely said, is post-secular and spiritually hungry. Recent congregational studies show that 60 percent of people who attend church say that in the past year they have invited

someone to worship with them who currently has no church affiliation.³⁴ Ninety percent of churches encourage their parishioners to invite un-churched people to worship or other church activities.³⁵ Put those three facts together and there is a recipe for success for a local church-based program like Alpha. In addition, based on my observation and statistics provided by George Barna,³⁶ Alpha works well among the 18-35 year-old demographic. This has great potential for local churches that are having a hard time reaching young people.

There are fifteen talks given over ten weeks in *The Alpha Course*. The following is an introduction to the material with a few observations.

The Alpha Course: A Disenstoriend Presentation

Alpha does a fairly good job of giving a seeker a mental picture for following Jesus, but it is not explicitly attached to a story line. Below is a synopsis of the fifteen talks presented in Alpha along with my friendly critique regarding possible reductionisms. I realize that no evangelistic approach can be exhaustive. Comprehensive theology is a lifetime pursuit. I do not mean to simply compare the length of an evangelistic presentation. I do not mean to say that long is good and brief is bad. Rather, under consideration are two more significant points. First, are the facts of the presentation embedded in the story of God? If not, the presentation is reduced. If embedded in the

³⁴ Cynthia Woolever, Deborah Bruce., *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 76.

³⁵ Cynthia Woolever, Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 54.

³⁶ "Review of Guest Experience on Alpha: Exit Interviews" An unpublished research paper, privately funded by AlphaUSA.

story, they are given vibrant, holistic meaning. Second, I mean to compare the ultimate vision imparted by the presentation. Is it “forgiveness and heaven” or is it the more holistic “cooperative, sent people of God”? Alpha, while not perfect, tends to the latter because of its focus on the kingdom of God and the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Talk One: Christianity: Boring, Untrue, and Irrelevant?

This talk gives a vision for a life derived from God and lived in the Kingdom of God. The first talk in Alpha explores first order questions like, “Where did I come from? Where am I heading? Who am I? What is life all about? What is life’s purpose and meaning?”³⁷ In addition, discussing eternal life, Nicky Gumbel says in the course that “Jesus came to give us eternal life. Eternal life is a *quality* (emphasis added) of life that comes from a living relationship with God and Jesus Christ (John 17.3); that this new life starts now and goes on into eternity.”³⁸ George Eldon Ladd confirms this saying, “eternal life has to do with the whole man...body and soul.”³⁹ It is not just a concept to be grasped by the brain. Believing this, *The Alpha Course* is quite intentionally designed to appeal to the whole person: mind, heart and will.⁴⁰

Alpha’s explanation of the nature of eternal life, if nothing else good in the course existed, would be a huge step forward in contemporary evangelism. Too frequently, the vision people have of eternal life is not as described above. Eternal life, in my experience, is usually thought of as chronological (out “there” sometime after I die), durational (mere

³⁷ Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life* (East Sussex, UK: Kingsway, 1996), 15-16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 69.

⁴⁰ Nicky Gumbel, *Telling Others* (East Sussex, UK: Kingsway, 1994), 27.

continued existence or unending life), or spatial (out beyond the stars somewhere). Many misguided Christians, under the unnecessary fear of legalism, would find the notion that Jesus actually makes a difference in one's life to be abhorrent! Wanting to protect "all of grace," these people are afraid of anything that might be seen in this life. Describing eternal life properly—as a different "kind" of life—"life from above" starts a novice out on the right foot. It gives a vision for becoming a new kind of person; becoming truly human as God intended it. This is all by grace, nothing is earned.

It is possible to pursue a new kind of life without becoming legalistic or Pelagian. Many people proclaiming a reduced view of the Gospel do so because they see salvation as having to do only with going to heaven when one dies. Thus, they have no paradigm for a *life* empowered and animated by grace. This being the case, they often associate trying to live a life in God as legalistic or Pelagian.

Talk Two: Who is Jesus?

Focusing on Jesus' character, teaching, works, and resurrection,⁴¹ this talk introduces how all the above cohere in Jesus' proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom of God. In so doing, the talk gives a seeker a vision for the Kingdom of God—God's present rule and reign, the age to come reaching into this age⁴²—and how it can be the organizing principle for one's life. George Ladd says that "Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God makes one fundamental demand on people: the demand for decision."⁴³ But, as the

⁴¹ Ibid., 27-34.

⁴² Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 78.

⁴³ Ibid., 96.

talk says, this is not merely about a one time choice. It is about a living relationship with the risen Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Talk Three: Why Did Jesus Die?

This talk is mixed in my judgment. I believe it comes close to too narrow of a view of what is going on in salvation. It could, in the hands of an unaware leader, leave a reader or hearer to believe that all that is going on in salvation is that my sins are forgiven. Furthermore, it presents a view of the atonement—penal substitution—that may not be adequate for carrying the load of the rest of the course—which is magnificent in its depth and breadth. To be fair, even in this chapter/talk, the achievement of the cross is said to be “like a beautiful diamond having many facets.”⁴⁴ Following on from there, Gumbel wisely, in terms of strategy, and with wise hermeneutical instincts, describes several of the Biblical metaphors concerning the various victories won on the cross: “the law court (justification), the marketplace (debt), the temple (removal of guilt and the ‘pollution’ of sin), and the home (reconciliation).”⁴⁵ Notably left out is regeneration—the new birth. Regeneration, is discussed in the talks on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Talk Four: How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?

During this talk, every effort is made to help inquirers go beyond their feelings, not to ignore them altogether, but to place them in a wider context. That broader context

⁴⁴ Gumbel, *Telling Others*, 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

includes: the witness of the scriptures, the works of Jesus—especially the cross and resurrection—and, the witness of, and transforming power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

Talk Five: Why and How Should I Read the Bible?

The burden in the first part of this talk is to give an apologetic for the uniqueness and importance of the Bible as a means to Christian growth and to help secular people have confidence that God will speak to them through it if they will read it expectantly. Next, the Bible is set forward as “a manual for life” and “a love letter from God.”⁴⁷ As a manual, the Bible is set forth as authoritative for all matters of life and faith. In addition, seekers are encouraged to see the Bible as a love letter from God; as God’s way of building relationship with and communicating to his people. Finally, inquirers are exhorted to the notion that the Bible comes most alive as it is read with faith, interacted with, and obeyed. While Alpha has a very high view of Scripture, the “manual” approach, while appealing to modern utilitarianism, can lead seekers to see the Bible as propositional, not a story with a beginning and *telos*; a story we are to embody as actors—the Spirit-enabled friends of Jesus.

Talk Six: Why and How Should I Pray?

Prayer, as a means to life in Christ, is introduced in this talk as being “to the Father, through the Son and by the One Spirit.”⁴⁸ Inquirers are encouraged to pray “as a way to develop a relationship with God, to obey Jesus’ model and teaching, to receive the

⁴⁶ Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, Chapter 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁸ Gumbel, *Questions of Life* 88-90.

benefits of ‘answered’ prayer, as God not only changes us through prayer, but he changes situations in response to prayer.”⁴⁹ “Un-confessed sin, poor motivations and the wisdom of God”⁵⁰ are given as reasons for “unanswered” prayer. The various phrases of the Lord’s Prayer are then given as a pattern for prayer.⁵¹ This talk could be strengthened by adding a conversational element to prayer, thus, giving a seeker a vision for how, practically speaking, one can hear God speaking back, guiding a new convert to become an ambassador of God and his Kingdom.

Talk Seven: How Does God Guide Us?

Guidance, as a means to living attuned to God, comes in a context: a relationship with God and his plan for our lives.⁵² This is the main teaching of this talk. Guidance is said to be most clear and compelling when the motivation of our hearts is obedience to God.⁵³ God’s guidance comes through what *The Alpha Course* calls the five “Cs:” “commanding scripture (the revelation of God’s general will), compelling Spirit (hearing the voice of God in prayer), common sense (Christians, in an effort to hear the voice of God, are not to give up thinking for themselves), the counsel of saints (God often speaks through or confirms issues through others), and circumstantial signs.”⁵⁴ This talk could be made better by setting guidance in a covenantal, people-of-God story.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 92-95.

⁵¹ Ibid., 95-100.

⁵² Ibid., 103.

⁵³ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 106-116.

Talk Eight: Who Is the Holy Spirit?

This talk is a basic introduction: it describes the Spirit as a person, one to whom we can relate. It teaches that the Spirit was involved from the beginning, from creation, not just from Pentecost forward. The talk shows that the Holy Spirit has come upon people from the Exodus story, up to the book of Acts, and to today—to enable God’s people to do God’s work. The beginning of a vision for the kind of life that is guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit is put forward saying, “We live in the age of the Spirit.”⁵⁵

In certain church traditions, the three talks on the Holy Spirit are viewed as the most controversial. In contrast, I see them as some of the most commendable parts of the course. Think about it: in most explanations of “what it means to be a Christian,” one is told about an angry God, his Son who “paid the price” for our ticket to heaven, but the third person of the Trinity never shows up—unless the Spirit is mentioned as the one who “draws or leads” people to Christ (John 16.14) or “bears witness to our salvation” (Rom, 8.16).⁵⁶ In an Alpha course, however, the Spirit is presented as central to Christian life. The Spirit is presented as the giver of Christian life, an eternal kind of life, life in the kingdom of God (John 6.63; Romans 8.11; 1 Peter 3.18). This fact alone is enough to commend Alpha for its positive step in the right direction for the task of evangelism.

Talk Nine: What Does the Holy Spirit Do?

This talk gets to the “how” of living life in, and for, the Kingdom of God. As stated above, regeneration comes into view here: the Spirit is held forth as the one who comes

⁵⁵ Gumbel, *Telling Others* 131.

⁵⁶ “...the Holy Spirit seals us unto the day of redemption.” (Eph. 4.30); “...you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit...” (Eph, 1.13).

to a person and causes them to be “born of the Spirit.”⁵⁷ The Spirit is the one who brings us into relationship with the Father as his sons and daughters.⁵⁸ Here the course is especially effective at casting vision for a Christian life. It explains intimacy with God and true experience of God, his will and purposes as normative. This is the “knowledge” (Greek: *epignosko*; experiential knowing; something that goes beyond mere cognition or mental assent) that is in view in John 17.3, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

The course goes on to demonstrate how the Holy Spirit continues to develop in believers what was started, like teaching them how to pray and how to understand God’s word; as well as creating in them a “family likeness” through the fruit of the Spirit; building unity in the church and giving spiritual gifts.

Talk Ten: How Can I Be Filled with the Holy Spirit?

Biblical examples from the book of Acts are cited in this talk as a way to demonstrate that a life lived in and through the Holy Spirit are both normative for a Christian and something to be experienced, not just mentally understood. The Holy Spirit is set forth as the preeminent means for life in God. Gordon Smith, dean and professor of spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, says that the “charismatic” element of conversion is one of the three (along with sacraments and community) most important elements that support and sustain growth in the spiritual life.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Gumbel, *Telling Others* 133.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁵⁹ Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion & Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 194.

In *The Alpha Course*, Acts 10 is cited as a paradigmatic passage. The course draws from the text that the filling of the Holy Spirit is experienced as praise to God and receiving a new language.⁶⁰ Several pages are devoted to explaining the issue of “tongues.” Alpha takes a “Third Wave” or neo-Pentecostal approach to tongues: neither cessationists nor classical Pentecostals are happy with the position Alpha takes. Alpha encourages the use of the gift, but not like traditional Pentecostals, who see tongues as “the sign” of conversion and filling. Alpha sees tongues as “often, in the biblical record, the first gift believers experienced.”⁶¹ It is worth repeating that the emphasis Alpha places on the Holy Spirit as a gift to the church is controversial in some circles. In my view, Alpha’s emphasis on the person and present-day work of the Holy Spirit is a great gift to the church. Much of the evangelicalism I have known during my life is functionally “deistic” concerning the work of the Holy Spirit. In contrast to that remote notion of God, I believe Tom Wright has it right when, writing on the role of the church in the world, he says, “...the only possible way [the church can work in the world] is if it believes that the Spirit of the living God is alive and well and at work....”⁶²

Talk Eleven: How Can I Resist Evil?

Most every new Christian or any Christ-follower, who has made a significant stride forward in their walk with God, knows the push-back or counter-attack that comes from Satan and his minions. This talk gives believers tools by which to engage in this spiritual battle. Tom Wright asserts that knowledge of and use of these tools is crucial so that no

⁶⁰ Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 153-160.

⁶¹ Ibid., 155.

⁶² N. T. Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1992), 144.

one assumes that “the task of the church can be reduced simply to the level of church leaders suggesting and committees planning new programs.”⁶³

Alpha takes the position of a “real and personal Devil”⁶⁴ who has certain tactics.⁶⁵ Alpha views converts as “rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of the Son.”⁶⁶ From this new reality, “we defend ourselves in spiritual battle using the ‘armor of God’ described by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6.11ff.”⁶⁷ Lastly, we participate in counterattack through words (prayer) and works (obedient deeds).⁶⁸

Talk Twelve: Why and How Should We Tell Others?

Key to a genuine understanding of what it means to be a Christian is the knowledge that God has always intended to have “a people” on earth, not just in heaven. This is seen in the creation covenant (Genesis 1.28; 2.15), the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12.1-3), and in New Testament passages such as the Great Commission, Pentecost, and in 2 Corinthians 5.17ff., wherein Paul says that new creations in Christ are Christ’s ambassadors. Talk twelve in *The Alpha Course*, after a brief mention of the Great Commission, assumes this and jumps right into practical tips about evangelism.⁶⁹ In my judgment, some conceptual work needs to be done here to give new believers a strong and clear imagination for what it means to be God’s sent people. The talk could be

⁶³ Ibid., 186.

⁶⁴ Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 166-169.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 160-173.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 173. Colossians 1.13.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 175-177.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 177-179.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 181.

misunderstood to say that sentness is all about evangelism. Certainly being the representatives of God includes evangelism, but it is much broader. To be fair, other parts of the course do bring this breadth out. On the positive side, the talk does give a good balance of ways to evangelize: “presence, persuasion, proclamation, power and prayer.”⁷⁰

Talk Thirteen: Does God Heal Today?

This talk is a good example of what I stated above: the course is very holistic. Here we see Christians being exhorted to believe that God can use them to be his agent of healing in others and that they too can be healed by the power of God. Healing is shown to happen in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the history of the church.⁷¹ Theologically, healing is rooted in the “already and not yet” model of George Eldon Ladd.⁷² The praxis comes from the influence of John Wimber.⁷³

The teaching on healing, in my view, comes out very balanced: yes, God does heal, but not all are healed. There is room left for mystery and no one is blamed for having a lack of faith. In a companion book to *The Alpha Course*, Nicky Gumbel writes that “suffering is never good in itself, but God is able to use it for good...to draw us to Christ...to bring Christian maturity...to make our lives more fruitful...and to bring about his purposes.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid., 186.

⁷¹ Ibid., 200-201, 206.

⁷² Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom* Chapters 2 and 3.

⁷³ Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 199.

⁷⁴ Nicky Gumbel, *Searching Issues* (East Sussex, UK: Kingsway, 1996), 15-19.

Talk Fourteen: What About the Church?

Perhaps no single “spiritual” topic is more misunderstood in the wider culture and among seekers than the nature, meaning, and work of the church. All of us who care about such things have heard hundreds of times—if not more—the words, “I am a spiritual person, but I don’t like or ‘get’ the church; it seems irrelevant, out of touch and perhaps, in worse case scenarios, bad for one’s spiritual health.” This talk seeks to move the discussion away from the usual ways church is thought of: person (“I go to Rick Warren’s church”), place (“I go to the Crystal Cathedral) or event (“I went to mass today”). Instead, the talk, using the most common biblical metaphors, puts forward the church as “the people of God, the family of God, the Body of Christ, a Holy Temple and the Bride of Christ.”⁷⁵

Talk Fifteen: How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of my Life?

Answering the question “What should we do now?”⁷⁶ this talk, the last one of the course, arguing from Romans 12.1-21, draws the seeker’s attention most clearly to the need to decide to follow Jesus. It, more than other talks in the course, describes the necessity to think about what one actually intends to do with her or his life and encourages one to use her or his volition to do so. The talk suggests, “making a break with the past, and making a new start...by presenting ourselves to God and the future he has planned for each one of us.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Gumbel, *Questions of Life* Chapter 14

⁷⁶ Ibid., 233.

⁷⁷ Ibid., Chapter 15.

Alpha, better than any contemporary form of evangelism, seeks to say more than “how to go to heaven when you die.” However, it does so through a disenstoryed set of propositions. What if Alpha took the pieces and placed them back into the overarching story of God? How would that change its effectiveness? Would some postmodern seekers hear it with more open ears?

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have demonstrated the problem of reduced, non-story approaches to evangelism. We have set forward Alpha as a positive step forward and we have suggested “a story to be embodied” as the preferable way to articulate our faith. This thesis is supported in the following ways:

- Seeking to know and communicate stand alone statements of theological truth is a product of the Enlightenment.
- These statements of “truth in its own right” have led to a fragmentation of the ultimate intention of God and have negatively shaped common presentations of the Gospel.
- Story is an ample replacement for the fragmented presentation of the Gospel and it provides a more full approach to understanding “the rescued life” as one lived in the Kingdom for the sake of the world.

We now turn to an overview of soteriology rooted in a Covenantal–Kingdom paradigm. It forms the biblical foundation for my thesis.

CHAPTER 2

THE GIFT OF A CHANGED LIFE: COVENANTAL–KINGDOM SOTERIOLOGY

Introduction

I see in the emerging church a passionate desire to re-discover and articulate a holistic view of the Gospel; one that encompasses salvation, covenant, eternal life, charismata, and the kingdom of God. I also see in the current academic scene a similar move. For instance, my professor remarked to me recently, “We have to keep the following motifs clearly related—it’s not just covenant, or community, or Kingdom, or charismata. They are inseparable. We are in the mess we are in theologically because we have not kept them all together.”¹ Tom Wright, discussing the need to re-tell our story, writes, “Stories create worlds. Tell the story differently and you change the world.”² We need to tell our story—especially the soteriological aspects—in a much more holistic manner.

We need to tell a story that naturally, instinctively, intuitively, and routinely results in a different kind of life in the hearer. Such a state of things is consistent with the aims of God in Christ. Secondly, it has vast tactical value in the contemporary practice of

¹ Larry Shelton, margin notes from a prior essay written during the Doctor of Ministry program at George Fox University. See also the writings of N. T. Wright, Roger Olsen, Brian McLaren, and Len Sweet.

² N. T. Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 36.

evangelism. Today's seekers tend to wonder about truth in the category of "is it real and working for you?" versus notional, conceptual, or rational ways of knowing.

Seekers today would respond well to hearing the "God-who-gives-life" story of the Gospel. Shelton, having experienced new life from a heart transplant, communicates this well, "As new life flowed into my body through the pulsing power of my new heart, I more and more felt like celebrating the anniversaries of my transplant event. One month, then one year, then two years passed, then ten. My health returned, and in the joy of remembrance as each fifth day of October approached, I was again impressed with a desire to mark the anniversary with an expression of gratitude to the organ donor and to God."³ Larry's story gives one an imagination for a life of gratitude and joyous obedience for the sake of others in God's name—out of love for the life God has given. Shelton, exposing the covenantal heart of God, goes on to say that "it was love that motivated a family to donate the heart of their fourteen-year-old son to this author, thus literally giving me the gift of life."⁴ Similarly, God wants to give people the gift of life, not just a ticket to heaven.

In contrast to an emphasis on new life, for many years theological tidbits have been torn from the story-of-life they were embedded in, thus losing their full explicative and imaginative value. Speaking specifically of soteriological issues, Donald Bloesch agrees, "Where Protestant orthodoxy made an advance over the Reformation is its contention that the life of Christ as a whole (emphasis added) atones for our sin and not simply his death

³ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission*. (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

on the cross.”⁵ Christ’s whole life gives our whole life renewed vitality and meaning. Through grace-enabled participation in Christ’s life—which includes death and resurrection—we become humanity as God intended.

In this chapter, I will show that the biblical material supports my thesis that if the church is to improve in the task of evangelism and discipleship, it must first re-think the meaning and nature of salvation itself. To do that, we must revisit the entire biblical story. The task of this chapter is to identify the Gospel themes of the Story of God. I will make most use of the Gospels and Pauline texts. With the task of evangelism and discipleship always in view, I aim to work with these texts in a fresh way with the overarching ideas of “covenant”⁶ and kingdom acting as the points of coherence.

A Covenantal–Kingdom Story

Covenant may be the best way to think about God’s relation to all creation. “God used the concept of covenant to enter into a life-giving relationship with humanity.”⁷ “Life,” as I’ve been arguing must take front stage in the task of evangelism and discipleship. This has been the intent of God from creation and will be to the fulfillment of his purposes. Shelton says, “The covenant relationship represents a religion of the heart and the family that affected a person’s entire being. In the security of the covenant laws and promises, Israel flourished as a people in community with God. Shelton quotes

⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 152.

⁶ I am using the term “covenant” in the generic sense of interpersonal committed relationship with accountability, not the sense of a particular covenant like Mosaic, David, New England covenant. Shelton’s “Divine commitment and human obligation” is a brief definition I have in mind.

⁷ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 37.

Brueggemann saying, “This ‘being with’ is not merely ethical, cognitive, or intellectual, as a thin, Protestant theology of the word might have it, but it is holistic and involves the full engagement of the whole person in the gathered community.”⁸ Life is in view—the whole person in their actual everyday life. Supporting this notion, Shelton quotes Brueggemann as saying, “There is no knowledge of God that can focus on the things of heaven to the disregard of the affairs of earth.”⁹

To re-think soteriology and the evangelistic practices that flow from it, one needs to relate the Covenant to the Kingdom, “Kingdom” or “the Kingdom of God” can be understood as the rule and reign of God that establishes and maintains the covenant. In addition, the Kingdom can be viewed as the latest and fullest expression of the covenant. Covenant is personal, relational, and communal. Sin and its associated consequences are best seen related to the covenant. Len Sweet says, “Sin is a relational concept. It is a violation of and damage done in our relationship with God, others and ourselves.”¹⁰

The theme of covenant relationship may also be the proper way to harmonize Jesus’ theme of the Kingdom, Paul’s focus on soteriology rooted in the cross, John’s focus on eternal life, Peter’s insistence on discipleship to Jesus the Messiah, and the sending of the Spirit to create the new covenant people—in short, are the primary New Testament motifs. Sweet again is helpful, “Ultimate reality can be experienced only in relationships. Hence the Hebrew concept of ‘covenant.’ Hence the Christian concept of

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰ Leonard I. Sweet, *Out of the Question...Into the Mystery: Getting Lost in the GodLife Relationship*. 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2004), 144.

‘salvation.’ Relationship is one of the things that distinguishes Judaism and its radical Christian revision from other religions: God calls us into a relationship.”¹¹

I not only see a desire on the part of Christian leaders, to re-think soteriology, I see a need in society. For the sake of both evangelism and discipleship, there may be no more important question to answer in this day than, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” We especially need to help seekers go beyond mental images of “church attendance” and “heaven when one dies.”

In this chapter, I will put forth the idea that a well-rounded and covenantal view of the Gospel can be derived from harmonizing two New Testament texts: Mark 1.14, 15 wherein Jesus announces the Gospel of the Kingdom and 1 Corinthians 15.1-7 in which Paul articulates the things that are “of first importance” in the Christian story.

Proper comprehension of these two passages must rely on the Story of God in which they emerge. They can not be extracted from their literary context, for sure, but neither can they be extracted from their context in terms of the covenantal Story of God. With that in mind, I am making use of an outline of the biblical story by N. T. Wright. Wright provides a useful foundation for biblical exegesis when he says, “...the Jewish story [is] about the covenant god, the world, and Israel.”¹² Wright suggests that the Story of God could be understood like a Five-Act play. The biblical actors self-consciously acted within this story. I hope to improve the state of evangelism and discipleship by placing both the tasks and the actors within the plot line of this story. I hope to articulate a vision

¹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹² N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1st North American ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 39.

wherein present-day Christians act on the basis of being immersed in the themes, movements, and aims of the first four acts.

Wright's outline is as follows:

- Act 1: Creation
- Act 2: Fall
- Act 3: Israel
- Act 4: Jesus: the Climax of the Covenantal Story
- Act 5: The Renewed People of God
 - Scene 1: The Books of the New Testament
 - Scene 2: The Church Age

In Wright's scheme of things, the final scene only has some scribbles about how it will actually end. The current scene, Act 5, Scene 2 is where the Story is presently being acted out by "speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency" with the Story that has gone before.¹³ Wright's paradigm is an important theological grid from which to think through the practices of evangelism and discipleship. God's purpose is not just to save human beings, but to renew the whole world. "This is the unfinished story in which readers of scripture are invited to become actors in their own right."¹⁴ This is the wonderful, adventurous, fun-but-serving-others life of discipleship God intends for us—a far cry from waiting to go to heaven when you die. Ephesians 1 in *The Message* clarifies this, "I pray...that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians." This story, climaxing in

¹³ Ibid., 140.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 29-30.

Jesus, not only gave the church its soteriology, it provided “the true story of the world and the foundation and energizing force for the church’s mission.”¹⁵

The early Christians read the Old Testament as “story.” They understood it as an ongoing story which prescribed their role and place in that story as God’s New Covenant People. Wright says, “...the New Testament understands itself as the new covenant charter, the book that forms the basis for the new telling of the story through which Christians are formed, reformed and transformed so as to be God’s people for the world.”¹⁶

The Reformers affirmed the missional, covenant-friends-of-God story. For instance, Calvin speaking of “the benefits of the Holy Supper,” says one “benefit consists in our having a vehement incitement to holy living and, above all, to observe charity and brotherly love among us.”¹⁷ He says further that “we are ...commanded, if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbors’ lives, faithfully to employ it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in danger, to lend a helping hand.”¹⁸

Thus, the first three Acts of the Story demonstrate God’s covenant with humankind and with Israel especially, to be his people for the sake of the world (Gen. 12.1ff.). While there are many covenants mentioned in these three acts of the Story, the one controlling covenant seems to be the Mosaic Covenant where God in grace provides Israel a way of being his people under his rule. We must remember “the Mosaic Covenant was not about

¹⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶ Ibid, 59.

¹⁷ John Calvin, Elsie Anne McKee, Emilie Griffin, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 60.

¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

establishing a relationship with God; it was made with those who were already in relationship with God.”¹⁹

There are two principal questions before us in this chapter: First, how might the motif of Wright shed fresh exegetical light on the texts below? Second, how does any new exegetical insight inform the tasks of evangelism and discipleship? We turn now to two paradigmatic New Testament texts; one from Jesus (Mark 1.14-15) and one from Paul (1 Corinthians 15.1-9).

The Gospel According to Jesus and Paul

Many, thoughtful, contemporary seekers with whom I converse have a hard time reconciling in any meaningful way the teachings of Jesus and Paul. Many of them genuinely hold Jesus in their minds as a Jewish sage who spoke about the Kingdom of God. Paul, on the contrary, is somehow linked to the Gentile world in their minds. Furthermore, whereas the Kingdom seemed to be on the mind of Jesus, justification by faith seems to be the preoccupation of Paul. Wright, in his important work, *What Saint Paul Really Said*,²⁰ clearly demonstrates that this common view of Paul is mistaken. Paul was a thoroughly Jewish thinker. His theological worldview comes from the tri-grid of monotheism, creation, and covenant. In my opinion, Paul and Jesus agree with regards to the Gospel. Jesus announced, demonstrated, and embodied the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Paul preached the same Gospel and acted from within that understanding. What makes Paul *sound* different in places is that he is working in a different context and has a

¹⁹ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 40.

²⁰ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

different purpose. He is not the original—“the Man” with “the Message” as Jesus was. Paul, as a faithful and educated Jew, has resolute faith in the Jewish notion of YWYH as the One God who is creator of the world and maker of covenant with Israel. He knows that Jesus arises precisely within that context. Paul’s role, it seems to me, is to understand Jesus, the later sending of the Spirit, and the inclusion of the Gentiles within that Story. He, in my view, is not telling a different story. His work is self-consciously within the Covenantal–Kingdom story.

I believe it is wrong and harmful to practices of evangelism and discipleship to think that Paul told a story about going to heaven when you die while Jesus told a story about the inbreaking of the Kingdom. Whatever Paul may have said about sin, grace, forgiveness, the cross, and the resurrection, is to be understood within the overall Covenantal–Kingdom plan of God. Crucial to the practice of ministry is this: the Covenantal–Kingdom story is the only adequate basis for a life of discipleship to Jesus. We now have plenty of “proof” from both common knowledge and many studies from sociologists of religion to show that the reductionism approach to the Gospel is not making disciples. Rather, he is thinking through the implications of Jesus for the Gentile world through the lenses of the covenant story—given its climax in Jesus.

I intend to demonstrate that a sole emphasis on the words of Jesus leads to one way of conceiving Christian spirituality. Further, I will show how the normal reading of Paul—without considering Jesus—gets translated into another way of being Christian. This being the case, for the sake of evangelism, we need a synergistic hearing of Paul. Paul is a follower of Jesus—not Jesus’ re-interpreter. A “Kingdom-Jesus versus a Forensics-Paul” dualism is spoiling discipleship to Jesus.

My key line of inquiry is this: what might Christian evangelism and discipleship look like if we understood Paul in light of Jesus? What if Paul is not saying something different, but working out the implications of what Jesus said and did? This way we are not forced into an unnecessary dualism, but rather discover a powerful whole.

As I unpack these two passages, I will seek to set out clearly the Gospel *of* Jesus and the Gospel *about* Jesus. I will show how the Gospel *about* Jesus—death for our sins and resurrection—ties itself to the Gospel of Jesus; the Good News of the availability, the nearness of the Kingdom of God through the person and work of Jesus. From there I will paint a picture of Christian evangelism and discipleship rooted in the Covenantal–Kingdom paradigm.

In the view I propose, salvation is expected to lead converts to be followers of Jesus and to be faithful, covenant partners with God as his sent people. In such a life, we experience eternal life for what it is: a different kind of life *now* and forever. This leads to the experiential knowledge that one is Spirit-filled, Spirit-animated, and Spirit-energized. Spirit-filled Christians, acting as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, receive gifts and fruit, with power and authority from the Holy Spirit for the sake of serving the least, the last, and the lost. Finally, to tie together all God’s plan from creation to *telos*, we must keep in mind that followers of Jesus are being shaped into the kind of people who will rule and reign with God in the renewed cosmos as well (Revelation 22.5).

The Gospel *About* Jesus (1 Corinthians 15.1-9)

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the essential basis that ties them together—the Gospel Paul had preached to them. In this passage, Paul essentially argues

that his and the Corinthians' whole relationship and the on-going conversation they are having about various doctrines and practices of the church have no real meaning or foundation unless the Gospel Paul preached is true—most crucially the resurrection of Jesus.²¹

It is my hypothesis that whatever Paul meant by his *Gospel*, in this passage, he was not re-inventing Christianity or saying anything that should be construed as opposite of what Jesus preached. Paul understands Jesus to be in the plot line of the Jewish story as it moves to completion. This is not to say that Jesus is simply one more actor in the story. Clearly, he is the central figure in all of human history. As Wright says, Paul sees Jesus as the “climax of the covenant.”²²

The primary reason I believe Paul was not confused about, or contrary to Jesus and the message of the Kingdom, is that Paul, too, preached and demonstrated the rule and reign of God throughout his missionary career. This is clearly seen by a reading of Acts. He also explained the Kingdom in his letters: he spoke of inheriting the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 6.9, 10; 15.50; Galatians 5.21); he described the results of its present in-breaking (Colossians 1.13, 14) and he anticipated the eschatological fullness of the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 15.24); he described its existential reality (Romans 14.17) and explained that it existed in power, not in words (1 Corinthians 4.20); and finally, that no one who is determined to live contrary to it can inherit its eternal blessings (Ephesians 5.5). In short, Paul does not seem ignorant of, nor in opposition to, the Gospel according

²¹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 313.

²² N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 241.

to Jesus. Rather, he seems to be doing practical, ad hoc theology, on-the-run, as he endeavors to be a faithful Jew and a follower of Jesus in the context of a new age. Paul is responding to rather earth-shattering events. Jesus has resurrected and ascended, the Spirit has been poured out—even on the Gentiles, the church is growing and multiplying, controversies are arising, decisions need to be made. This all turned Paul into a missionary-bishop-ad hoc-theologian. The big challenge in this process for Paul was trying to work out the implications of all Jesus said and did while being faithful to a Jewish framework.²³

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul uses six key phases to summarize *the Gospel about Jesus*:

Christ Died

Though Paul had adopted Jesus' message of the Kingdom, he knew that Jesus' death was also central to the manner in which God had been faithful to the covenant, and in so doing had made reconciliation to himself possible with both the Jews and Gentiles. There are many metaphors for this in the New Testament, among them: "sacrifice, ransom, redemption, reconciliation, justification, adoption, and regeneration."²⁴

Jesus offered his life as a gift to God; in so doing, in the place of all humanity, he offered to God that which would produce restored God-life to all who are "in Christ" through faith; for all those who want to be right with God who want to have a relationship with him, and who want to be his sent people for the sake of others.

²³ In my opinion, N. T. Wright's writings are the most helpful on this point. Wright brilliantly "gets into Paul's head and helps readers see a faithful monotheist dealing with the Trinity, a passionate "covenanter" trying to understand the implications of the Gentiles being "in."

²⁴ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant* 1, 107.

For Our Sins

This is to say that Christ died for the covenantal unrighteousness of the Jews first, but also for the sins implicit in the covenant with all humanity (See Romans chapters 1-8). Wright says, "...in the cross of Jesus, the Messiah, the curse of exile itself reached its height, and was dealt with once and for all, so that blessing of covenant renewal might flow out the other side."²⁵ Shelton says, "The common element in various atonement metaphors is the concern to release the sinner from the alienating consequences of sin and restore the penitent to fellowship with God through forgiveness."²⁶

According to the Scriptures

This is a way of saying that Jesus was the promised and long awaited Messiah of Israel's story, that in his death he fulfilled the biblical promises, notably the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah. Importantly, the Old Testament scriptures have at the heart of them the covenant relationship with God and his people.²⁷ "The image of covenant or agreement is the primary way in which the Bible portrays the relationship between God and his people and (to a lesser extent) to the human race in general," says one scholarly dictionary.²⁸ J. I. Packer adds, "The covenant framework embraces the entire economy of

²⁵ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 141.

²⁶ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 107. "When interpreting these metaphors, they must all be understood against the background of the covenant with its personal and relational implications. The promises of the covenant require fulfillment of its obligations and conditions—its 'divine expectations.'"

²⁷ Ibid., Chapter 4.

²⁸ Leland Ryken and others, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 176.

God's grace."²⁹ Paul's phrase "according to the Scriptures" is probably also used to say, in effect, that the Corinthian doubt about resurrection is no match against the story of the Hebrew Bible.³⁰ When Paul says Christ died for our sins *according to the scriptures*, he has in mind the scriptural story of the Jews. As Wright says, "...he does not mean that he and his friends can find one or two prooftexts to back up their claim, but rather that these events have come as the climax to the long and winding narrative of Israel's scriptures."³¹ On the contrary "according to the scriptures" means something like "according to our story in the Old Testament."

He Was Buried

This fact is important to Paul because it makes the events around the crucifixion concrete, material or "real."³² It roots the events of Jesus death in observable history and shows that the crucifixion "worked:" Jesus actually died and was buried. In some sense, Jesus' burial is more connected to the resurrection than his death. Without the veracity of Jesus' burial, the next phrase has no meaning.

He Was Raised on the Third Day

Wright points out that the verb "raised" is a perfect in Greek. This tense articulates the ongoing result of an event. What he intends for the Corinthians to hear is that Jesus is presently—not just in the past—the risen Messiah and Lord.³³ If the Corinthians were

²⁹ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 89.

³⁰ Wright, *Resurrection*, 320.

³¹ Wright, *Last Word*, 48.

³² Wright, *Resurrection*, 321.

³³ Ibid.

beginning to waver on this point, then Paul was understandably very concerned. The resurrection is the vindication of all Jesus' teaching, works and life. It was the ultimate proof of God's work in him and it provided the hope of the re-embodied church in the new heavens and the new earth.

He Appeared to Many

For Paul it was not enough to merely assert that Jesus was raised from the dead, he verified the fact through witnesses.³⁴ Jesus first appeared to the disciples and then to wider groups of people. In all, he appeared to more than 500. Paul says that "some of these witnesses are still alive." This in effect "proves" his case, with the intention of bringing drifting Corinthians back into the fold.

The Gospel According To Jesus (Mark 1.14-15)

Jesus' Gospel announces the presence of the Kingdom of God. Searching dozens of theological and biblical dictionaries in my library confirmed my hypothesis: announcing, demonstrating, and embodying the Gospel of the Kingdom is central to everything Jesus said and did.³⁵ An article in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* makes it clear, "The Kingdom is the whole of God's redeeming activity in Christ in the world."³⁶ The object of this divine rule is soteriological. It is aimed at the redemption of humanity and their

³⁴ Ibid., 322-323.

³⁵ For instance see the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, *New Dictionary of Theology*, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, *The New Bible Dictionary*, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, and *The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*.

³⁶ J. D. Douglas, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 855.

deliverance from evil in order that they become God's renewed, covenant people.³⁷ John MacArthur puts it this way, "When Jesus proclaimed his kingdom, he *was* (emphasis his) preaching salvation."³⁸

Though there is no straightforward definition of the Kingdom in the Gospels, one can deduce one, from Jesus' teachings and his actions. His work on behalf of the sick and the demonized, his power over nature and the material world—like storms and bread and fish, demonstrates that the Kingdom is the realm in which what God wants done is done. It is the perfect expression and extension of God's reign, his rule or will fulfilled, first, in the covenant community and, then, extending to the whole world. Every devout Jew, though perhaps surprised that it came in the person of Jesus, would have known what Jesus was saying in his announcement of the Kingdom. He was announcing the realization of Israel's hope, the fulfillment of the covenant promises God had made to their forefathers.³⁹

Interestingly though, Jewish believers would have simultaneously heard in Jesus' words and works a subversive twist to the biblical story. For instance, entrance to the Kingdom was not based on the covenant with Abraham or confined to Jewish participation. God seemed to be working outside the usual cult and the temple, Jesus

³⁷ Everett Falconer Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids,: Baker Book House, 1960), 310.

³⁸ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says "Follow Me"?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House, 1988), 89.

³⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, The Master Reference Collection (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 368.

acted in apparently “non-Torah” ways.⁴⁰ Thus, there arose in the first days of the church a phenomena of mixed, but growing understanding among pious Jews about “what God was up to in Jesus.” This, in my view, best explains the apparent tension between Paul and Jesus. It seems to me, rather than opposition existing between Paul and Jesus, Paul was trying to understand how Jesus’ death and his calling “to give his life a ransom for many” correlated with Jesus words and works concerning the Kingdom and how those correlated with the covenant of God with Israel.⁴¹ What else would any thinking and sincere first century Jewish believer do?

In contrast to the synoptic writers, John’s Gospel does not focus on the phrase “the Kingdom of God.” While he does use it in the narrative about Nicodemus, John’s rough synonym for the Kingdom is *eternal life*. This is not surprising as John may well have heard Jesus link eternal life with the Kingdom of God in his explanation to the disciples concerning the reaction of the rich ruler. The rich ruler came asking about eternal life. Jesus conversed with him in terms of the Kingdom of God. George Ladd says John wanted to emphasize the Jewish hope of “eternal life;” that the age to come had come now in Jesus, by the Spirit. Jesus, too, says that the Kingdom is a present reality with a future fulfillment. Jesus and John tell the same story in different ways.⁴²

In Acts, we see the resurrected Christ still talking about the Kingdom (Acts 1.3). The Kingdom is a recurrent theme in Acts, and up to the last sentence of the book (Acts 28.31), Paul preached the Kingdom.

⁴⁰ Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 420.

⁴¹ Ibid., 423.

⁴² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1974), 237.

The apostle Peter described eternal life—life in the kingdom—thusly, “Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we’ve been given a brand-new life and have every thing to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now!”⁴³ When Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, to lose our life in order to find it (Matthew 16.24-25), he is showing us how to give up an inferior life outside the Kingdom for a superior, covenant-faithful life in it. Moreover, connecting the role of the Holy Spirit to Christian life, Jesus also promises to give us the animating power, the energy, gifts and fruit to live such a life. This is the whole package implied in the good news concerning the utter grace of a new kind of life in the Kingdom of God.

Shelton prepares us well to hear the words of Jesus against what is commonly a backdrop consisting solely of Pauline ideas. “Theological treatments of atonement often omit the insights of the Gospels in favor of Pauline constructs. While the Gospels do show awareness of the lostness of sinners, the overwhelming message is not the announcement of the wrath of God but the good news of the kingdom.”⁴⁴

In six simple ideas, we hear the Gospel according to Jesus:

The Good News

“Good news” is an announcement; “it designates Jesus’ message of the appearance of God’s kingdom...”⁴⁵ The proclamation of the Kingdom is “the central content of the

⁴³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 2002), First Peter, Chapter 1.

⁴⁴ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 92.

⁴⁵ C.C. Broyels, “Gospel (Good News),” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992): 282-286.

Christian revelation.”⁴⁶ Christology and the preaching of the kingdom are the center pieces of the Good News.⁴⁷ The meaning is not the kingdom will soon come. It comes into effect simultaneously with the dramatic and dynamic announcement; the long-expected last-time is actualized in Jesus’ proclamation.⁴⁸ God’s kingdom being on the scene was indeed an announcement to be joyfully embraced.

“Above all, the Gospels tell a story.”⁴⁹ It is a story in which God and his covenantal plan is being vindicated—as are the Messiah and the people of God. The Good News meant that the poor would be helped, the sick healed, the demonized freed, the groaning of all creation would be heard and attended to. Wright shows how this may have worked in the minds of the Gospel writers:

The earliest apostolic preaching was neither a standard Jewish message with Jesus added on at the end, nor a free-standing announcement of a new religion cut off from its Jewish roots, but rather the story of Jesus understood as the fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant narrative, and thus as the *euangelion*, the good news or ‘gospel’—the creative force which called the church into being and shaped its mission and life.”⁵⁰

Of God

The Gospel is not, of first importance, all about us. It is *of* God. The genitive case in the Greek is seen by most scholars as a *subjective* genitive.⁵¹ This suggests that it first

⁴⁶ F. L. Cross, Ed., “Gospel,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1989): 583.

⁴⁷ R. P. Martin, “Gospel,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979): 529.

⁴⁸ Gerhard Friedrich, “*euangelizomai*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964): 716.

⁴⁹ Leland Ryken, Ed., “Gospel,” *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1998): 346.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Last Word*, 47.

⁵¹ See, for instance, *The Journal of Biblical Interpretation*, April 1993, 143.

concerns God—his plan, his will and his agenda for creation; that it belongs to God, and emanates from him. God is its initiator and executer.⁵² It is about his ever-unfailing plan for man. It is not another consumer item to acquire, securing us a blissful happy-ever-after eternity. It *is* about the present reality, through the person of Christ, of the Kingdom—the rule and reign—of God. It is an expression of the covenant faithfulness of God.

Our story does not start with us and our need. It does not start with our sin, mistakes and imperfections and then looks forward to heaven. It starts with the perfect intention of God to have a people for himself. Our story looks backward first. It moves from Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to Moses, to David, to the prophets, to John the Baptist, to Jesus, to the renewed people of God, to the *telos* of the new heaven and the new earth.

The Time Has Come

I take this phrase to mean something like “all the events and people related to the ground work have taken their place and done their jobs...now....” This phrase both grounds the announcement in redemptive history and speaks of its *kairos* element. The Greek *kairos* underlines the fact that Jesus’ announcement was the pivotal moment in human history. The Kingdom was invading human reality through Jesus in an entirely new way. The phrase ties God’s story together: past, current in-breaking, and the ultimate fulfillment that in-breaking assures.

⁵² Ibid.

The Kingdom of God Is Near

Ray Anderson, noted theologian at Fuller Seminary, helps us get to the holism inherent in the Gospel according to Jesus. Writing to help the emerging church think through the Gospel, he says, “The Gospel of the Kingdom of God, as announced by John, and pronounced through the ministry of Jesus, restored the workplace of human life under the reign of God’s Kingdom; [it made our workday lives] authentically human and deeply spiritual as a secular movement. From the perspective of the Kingdom of God, there is only one workplace. It is where humans live as material and spiritual beings.”⁵³

Anderson nails the Gospel to real life. He says, “Jesus called [us] to work out [our] salvation for the sake of the Kingdom of God in our own workplace. His gospel was a gospel of the Kingdom of God, not the church...he did not come to build a kingdom here on earth, but to empower others to Kingdom-living. While the church tends to differentiate itself from the world by its religious nature, the Kingdom of God penetrates and transforms the world by its secular nature.”⁵⁴ Stan Grenz helps the church see itself in that context, “Stated theologically, the church is a covenant people...[however] this covenanting people are not an end in themselves. Rather, the church as a people-in-covenant is related to God’s larger intention.”⁵⁵ Tom Wright makes it memorable by saying, “Everything we discover about what Jesus did and said within the Judaism of his

⁵³ Ray S. Anderson, *An Emerging Theology for the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 97-98.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁵⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 605, 614.

day must be thought through in terms of what it would look like for the church to do and be this for the world.”⁵⁶

The centrality of the Gospel of the Kingdom as announced by Jesus and explained by the foregoing scholars, has not been the most common way contemporary people speak of essential Christianity. People are more prone to speak of one thing Jesus did—his death. That this message has been “lost” can be seen in these responses from contemporary thinkers and a practitioner:

- John Wimber: “I find my neglect of the Kingdom remarkable because it is so clearly at the heart of Jesus’ teaching.”⁵⁷
- Dallas Willard, in *The Divine Conspiracy*, quotes Professor Peter Wagner as saying “he could not remember ever hearing a clear sermon on the Kingdom of God.”⁵⁸
- Leonard Sweet: “The Gospel is more than our salvation from sin. The good news is our incorporation into the life of God.”⁵⁹
- Brian McLaren: “...we limited Jesus to saving us from hell, which explains why we have had comparatively little interest in his saving us from greed, gossip, prejudice, violence, isolation, carelessness about the poor or the planet, hurry, hatred, envy, anger or pride.”⁶⁰
- Doug Pagitt: Speaking of Mark 1.15—“When I recently ‘noticed’ this passage, it became destabilizing for me. I had always understood the “Good News” as summed up in the life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and promised return of Jesus. After reading the almost innocuously short passage, however, I started wondering. What was the ‘Good News’ Jesus was referring to all those years before his death, burial and resurrection? Could it be that the ‘Good News’

⁵⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 53.

⁵⁷ John Wimber, *Kingdom Come*. (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1988), 12.

⁵⁸ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*.

⁵⁹ Sweet, *Out of the Question -- into the Mystery*, 14.

⁶⁰ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2006), 86.

Jesus talked about was less a call to believe in the things that happened to him or would happen to and through him than an invitation into Kingdom life?”⁶¹

Repent

“Repent” and “believe” are the two imperatives attached to Jesus’ announcement. Perhaps Jesus had in mind covenantal faithfulness, the things that people need to do in the new covenant to meet the expectation of God, the covenant maker. First, he says repent. Repent translates the Greek word *metanoia*. It means something like “think again” or “have a second thought” or “examine your whole way of doing life in light of what Jesus is saying.” He wants us to review our sense of vocation, and determine if we are living in God’s Story as his faithful partners.

Repentance is not merely a soteriological issue. It includes re-thinking in terms of one’s religious profession, but it also includes a change of heart or determination in the whole of one’s life. This second change is crucial to being an obedient follower of Jesus. John Wimber put it this way, “For God to reign through us, he must first reign in us.”⁶² Jim Henderson, commenting on Peter’s struggle to understand his call to Cornelius, says that “two conversions”⁶³ are required in the process of repentance. My view takes it even further. I believe that repentance is an attitude and a lifestyle of humility and self-examination. This is not to be done in a morbid, self-depreciating way, but rather as a lifelong journey of personal change through Jesus and the Spirit.

⁶¹ Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 32.

⁶² Wimber, *Kingdom Come*. 39.

⁶³ Jim Henderson, A.K.A. “Lost:” *Discovering Ways to Connect with the People Jesus Misses Most*. 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2005), 121.

In summary, Jesus' notion of repentance had a much bigger picture in mind than simply achieving heaven—though his picture did include heaven. Wright gives us a grasp of the bigger picture, “Jesus’ clash with the Pharisees came about not because he was an antinomian or because he believed in justification by faith while they believed in justification by works, but because his kingdom agenda for Israel demanded that Israel leave off [repent of] her frantic and paranoid self-defense...and embrace instead the vocation to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth.”⁶⁴

Believe the Good News

“Believe” translates a word that has little to do with “faith” in the normal sense of the word. It has little to do with mental assent or cognition. It has more to do with placing one’s confidence in Jesus; to act and live as if we actually trust his announcement is true (cf. Matthew 7.24-27). Believing rightly—not merely in terms of content but in terms of actual trust in Jesus—leads a Christ-follower to be humanity in the “image of God.”

It means something like “to trust in, rely on, and cling to” the announcement of Jesus.⁶⁵ Jesus was calling his hearers—and us—to trust that God was doing something new, yet in continuity with his covenant relationship with Israel. This meant God’s people would soon have to re-understand the covenant, monotheism, the role and place of the Gentiles.

In contrast, when one only thinks of believing, in the sense of mental assent, in what Jesus says, our actual real life never comes into view. In worst case scenarios, it becomes

⁶⁴ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 58.

⁶⁵ From *The Amplified Bible*.

a message that supposedly leads from mental assent to heaven, but with no thought about one's now-life. It can become a story about death. Doing a little English exegesis on the sentence that Christians' often used to explain the Gospel, makes this clear, "...say this prayer *so that when you die* you can go to heaven." Here is a better view, "The atonement, of course, involves much more than divine forgiveness. It entails liberation [in this life, too]..."⁶⁶ Life—which includes for believers a different experience of death—is what is at the heart of covenant. "This [covenant] relationship of love is not just a legal declaration of acquittal from the fatal consequences of sin, but the *actual restoration* of the sinner to the life-giving relationship of covenant love." (Emphasis his)⁶⁷

Shelton helps us see the dynamic, non-legalistic interaction between God and humanity when he says, "While the divine side of the covenant includes writing the Law on people's hearts and minds and forgiving their sins, the human side entails faith and obedience in response to God's covenant blessings. The kind of obedience God desires is the kind Christ showed when he obeyed to the point of death."⁶⁸ While the Gospel certainly impacts any important human issues related to death and the after life, it first produces a new way of living, a new way of being God's people for the sake of others.

Even if one wants to make the Gospel all about forgiveness of sins, we need to locate both the act of forgiveness and its effects on Christ-followers on a map or in a story—which gets us back to the Gospel of the Kingdom.

⁶⁶ Henderson, A.K.A. "Lost," 157.

⁶⁷ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 86.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 95-96.

The Effects of Separating Jesus and Paul

If Jesus and Paul are separated, there will clearly be competing, not complementary approaches to Christian spirituality. If one mistakenly thinks that all Paul cares about is forgiveness of sins through justification by faith, so that people can go to heaven when they die, this will usually stunt Christians' spiritual growth. They will routinely stop growing at the point of confession of sins and miss the part that delivers us into a new kind of life; eternal life—life derived from and lived in the Kingdom of God.

If, on the other hand, one only hears Jesus and hears him in such a way that one only sees continuity with Abrahamic Judaism, they, too, will be stunted, missing out on resurrection life through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. If one does not see the New Covenant that Paul and the first followers of Jesus wrestled to help us see, then one will not likely move on to life in the Spirit as an ambassador of the Kingdom of God. Missing the purpose of Jesus' words and works—the implications that Paul so diligently and passionately thought through and worked and prayed for—is to miss something really crucial. It is to miss the ultimate covenant purposes of God to have a special people of his own on the earth; a people filled with, energized by, and animated through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Excursus on the Holy Spirit

I need to add a comment here on the vital role of the charismata in a holistic, Christian spirituality. Sadly, I must say, I see a deconstructive reaction both in contemporary writings and in the alternative, emerging church landscape concerning the work of the Holy Spirit. Having spent a great deal of time around classical Pentecostals,

Charismatics and Third-Wavers, I can see why. But even with a serious consideration of errant practices regarding the work of the Spirit, one should ask if we are throwing out too much baby with the bath water.

The contemporary church must come to grips with issues of power and authority: who has it, how it is shared, how it is exercised with integrity, ethics, and holiness. “Jesus is the head of the church” could be marked “True” on any theological pop-quiz. The same is true for “The Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of Christ in the church.” However, to move from theological lip service to action, the contemporary church may need to repent for ignoring and, thus, grieving the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can be grieved as easily by being ignored as by bizarre behaviors. It is crucial that we invite the Spirit into our communities of faith and that we prayerfully listen with the intent of developing a conversational relationship with God similar to the relationships we see in Scripture. Last, we need to take appropriate risks, in faith, knowing that like a child learning to walk or speak, God will be with us to train and encourage us. Experiential religion is the Biblical norm and the only kind of religion that will fly in a contemporary culture marked by post-modernity.

A Harmony of Jesus and Paul

Jesus and Paul can sound very much alike if one has the interpretive grid of Covenantal–Kingdom. First, to correct the notion that Jesus didn’t talk about grace—that it was Paul’s topic, listen to how much Jesus sounds like Paul in these tender, grace-filled, and covenantal words from Matthew chapter 11 in *The Message*:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I

won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Next, let's allow Paul to give us an example of how he put together his theology on the basis of the Gospel according to Jesus. Within the larger context of instructing Titus to set up sound leadership for the church on Crete, Paul tells him that he is to "speak out on the things that make for solid doctrine." Let's see if we can hear Jesus' kingdom ideas in Paul's words regarding the doctrine of salvation. They come from Titus chapter two in

The Message:

God's readiness to give and forgive is now public. Salvation's available for everyone! We're being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life, and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life. This new life is starting right now, and is whetting our appetites for the glorious day when our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, appears. He offered himself as a sacrifice to free us from a dark, rebellious life into this good and pure life, making us a people he can be proud of, energetic in goodness.

It wasn't long ago that we ourselves were stupid and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulders, hating and hating back. But when God, our kind and loving Savior God, stepped in, he saved us from all that. He gave us a good bath, and we came out of it new people, washed inside and out by the Holy Spirit. Our Savior Jesus poured out new life so generously. God's gift has restored our relationship with him and given us back our lives. And there's more life to come—an eternity of life! You can count on this.

Commenting on the text, I first observe an implicit definition of salvation, a description of what it means at its core to be a Christian: *We're being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life, and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life.* Paul does not say "we are being shown how to go to heaven when we die."

Additionally, I note that this new life—eternal life—starts now; it is not something that awaits us when we die. Next, I note that Paul is quick to say that there is more to come.

But, the "more to come when Jesus appears," does not set aside the earlier proclamation

of a new kind of life *now*. This new life delivers us from “life derived from our glands and the chips on our shoulders.” It gives us life derived from the Kingdom—the rule and reign of God. Salvation (Greek: *sozo*) implies deliverance and healing—in this life, not just deliverance from hell in the life to come. Last, covenant reconciliation is in view when Paul writes, “God’s gift has restored our relationship with him and given us back our lives.” This reconciliation matters a great deal in this life—but, as Paul says, there is still more of this life to come. The challenge for our day is that salvation has been primarily sold as that which has to do solely with the life to come. We can tell a different salvation story; one that includes this life. That story will have deep resonance with today’s seekers.

Life—Kingdom life—pops out all over the place in this passage.⁶⁹ Not merely avoiding death or hell; but living life in Christ. When it comes to an imagination for Christian spirituality, the difference in emphasis seems huge to me. *Life* gives me an imagination for living now, in the Kingdom, not just after death. It gives me hope for “a good and free life” now. It shows me the possibility of being “a people God can be proud of” now; “clean inside and out,” now.

Think also of the implications of that passage for how we explain “the Gospel” to seekers. It goes way beyond forgiveness of sins to a whole new life. One author puts it well, “Spirituality in Paul can best be summarized as an expression of affirmation to God, a grateful ‘Yes’ from the heart of a believer which, in the power of the Spirit, is manifested in acts and in attitude. The glory and the possibility of this ‘Yes’ are grounded

⁶⁹ See Appendix I for passages from *The Message* which suggest that Kingdom Life is a running theme in the New Testament portion of the Story.

in God's 'Yes' to the believer in Jesus Christ...."⁷⁰ Ray Anderson helpfully adds to this picture, "Kingdom-living in the present time, according to Paul, begins with our reception of the Holy Spirit as the down payment of our inheritance."⁷¹

Wright helps one to think further about the implications of how one explains the Gospel. "God's covenant purpose was to choose a people in and through whom the world would be healed. That purpose, reaching its climax in the Messiah, is now to be worked out through his people."⁷² Christian spirituality that "works" will bring together Paul and Jesus. This will align it with God's will to recreate humanity and through them, the whole cosmos.

In the book of Acts, we see the early maturation of apostolic thinking. There are two passages in Acts, one near the end and the other right at the end, that demonstrate the harmony Paul achieved concerning the life and teachings of Jesus. First, Paul, saying good-bye to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.24, 25, clearly makes synonymous⁷³ "the Gospel of grace" and "the Gospel of the Kingdom." The passage demonstrates that he had made them into a seamless whole. The same is seen in Acts 28.31, "Boldly and without hindrance [Paul] preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."

⁷⁰ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 906.

⁷¹ Anderson, *An Emerging Theology for the Emerging Church*, 94.

⁷² Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 256.

⁷³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1269.

When the teachings of Paul and Jesus have been kept together, communities of faith have had the basis to mature as God's covenantal co-workers. Where they have not been kept so, all manner of error and ineffectiveness have crept in. Thankfully, in both contemporary theology and modern-day culture, there is a present hunger to tell and hear the holistic story of God and his people.

Space and decisions regarding scope do not allow me to comment on the many other passages that support my argument. However, Larry Shelton provides an overview of these texts and topics in his book, *Cross and Covenant*.⁷⁴ See also Appendix 1 for a list of supporting texts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have demonstrated the biblical and theological basis for my thesis. Through looking at two model passages and a survey of biblical thought,⁷⁵ I have set forth the thrust of my argument. Namely, if one wants to see better results in evangelism and discipleship or spiritual formation, one needs to step back and re-think soteriology. Not merely the "how" or mechanisms of the atonement, but the "why?" questions as well. I believe the why questions are best answered by taking still another step back to re-consider the wider biblical story. Re-thinking evangelistic discipleship practices using the widest possible context will bear good fruit.

This thesis is supported in the following ways:

- Using the Covenantal–Kingdom story of the Bible, soteriology, and its attendant, systematic categories, can be better understood and communicated for today's society. For instance, *election* is best understood in a Covenantal–Kingdom story

⁷⁴ Shelton. *Cross and Covenant*, Chapter 7.

⁷⁵ See Appendix 1 for more.

versus a story about heaven and hell. Where has the idea of *regeneration* gone? It is too often buried under the onslaught of “avoid hell” preaching. There is little notion in the average tract or evangelistic presentation about becoming a new person now, in this life.

- Moving on to other soteriological categories, *faith* needs to be seen as more than an intellectual assent to a few bullet points that simply outline the penal substitution view of the atonement. I say that not to deny that substitution is involved in the atonement, but to say that whatever substitution is there, and whatever it means, it means more than simply “people getting right enough with an angry God to go to heaven when they die.” *Repentance* needs to move from being an outpouring of emotion at the point of conversion to a lifestyle wherein one consistently re-orientates their life to the plan and purpose of God as they receive more and more light in which to walk.
- *Conversion* should be understood as the first step in a race, not the finish line at the end of a race. Far too many converts have been left with the idea that once they accept our apologetics and “believe” that they are “in,” game over. In reality, they have only taken the first step in a life of follower-ship. Unfortunately, in worst case scenarios, this can seem like “bait and switch.” They thought getting “in” was the deal only later to be told about Christian life. *Justification*, as discussed in the chapter surveying N. T. Wright, needs to be re-worked as well. It is not “the whole deal” and, if Wright is correct, it is as much a statement about God’s covenantal faithfulness as it is a statement about what that faithfulness imparts to us. Having said that, I don’t mean to imply that we lose or fail to communicate the Good News that God has made things right with both Jews and non-Jews through Christ.
- Lastly, we need a new imagination for *sanctification* and *glorification*. They need to be more than theories regarding “the subjective side” of salvation. They need to become a personally experienced part of the story. Regarding sanctification, converts need to trust God as much for their “set apartness” as they—apparently—trust him for heaven. Moreover, they need to experience being set apart for God. Such experience has the powerful potential to become the key apologetic in postmodern culture. Regarding glorification, would-be evangelists have a great opportunity today to recapture the two-stage resurrection put forth by Wright, that upon “death” believers are “alive,” but that at the consummation of all things, we will receive a new body through which we can live with God and serve him in the renewed cosmos.

We now turn to a survey of the works of N. T. Wright. Wright informs the practices of evangelism and discipleship through connecting all the dots in the story of God. From pre-creation to divine *telos*, Wright explains the covenant will of God to re-shape humanity and heal his creation.

CHAPTER 3

TOM WRIGHT:

INFORMING EVANGELISM THROUGH THE BIBLICAL STORY

Introduction

Thus far, I have analyzed the damage done to the Gospel when it is abridged to a story about going to heaven upon death. Next, I analyzed *The Alpha Course*, suggesting it as a holistic step forward. In the previous chapter, I set forward a biblical view of soteriology rooted in a Covenantal–Kingdom paradigm. In this chapter, we will look at the works of N. T. Wright and demonstrate that Story is the preferred way of evangelism for a Postmodern world.

Wright has had one aim during his distinguished, academic and ecclesiastical career, “to describe what Christianity is all about.”¹ After a careful reading of thirteen of Wright’s books, I believe his explanation of the Gospel is the best retelling of the biblical story. Wright faithfully embeds concepts such as salvation, conversion, eternal life, resurrection, heaven and hell in the biblical story of God: from creation, to covenant, to divine *telos*. He shows readers how the Old Testament connects to the New Testament, and how the New Testament connects to the age to come. This is a great gift to the tasks

¹ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), ix.

of evangelism and discipleship, because as Wright says, “Stories create worlds. Tell the story differently, and you change the world.”²

The Power Of God’s Story

Postmodern seekers love a good story. Furthermore, they find them compelling and, in some sense, authoritative. In my experience, today’s seekers are very willing to argue with and reject concepts and theories. But, they are normally very open to one’s story—whether that story is the story of a person or a national or ethnic narrative. This is good news for contemporary evangelists who have a high value of Scripture, especially if they can come to value the *form* the Scriptures come to us in—story.

Many seekers will be happily surprised to find out that, in Wright’s words “...the Bible itself, as a whole and in most of its parts, is not the sort of thing that many people envisage today...it is not, for a start, a list of rules...[or] a compendium of various doctrines...in most of its constituent parts, and all of it when put together...can best be described as *story*.”³

Highlighting “story” is not merely a comment on literary theory, hermeneutics, or the evangelistic opportunities implicit in the postmodern openness to story. Story has a powerful pragmatic disciple-making force, too. “The [biblical] story was told in order to generate once more the sense of Israel as the people called by YHWH for his purposes in

² Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary*, 36.

³ N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 25-26.

the world.” (TLW, 40.) Thus, the writers of the New Testament wrote, in part, “to explain how Jesus was bringing the story of scripture to its climax.”⁴

I believe that a major evangelistic task in our day is to help seekers understand the Bible in a different way. We need to assist them to break through the intuitive cynicism attached to the Bible. Wright gives us the way to do so:

...the Bible’s “authority” works in an altogether different way from the “authority” of, say, the rules of a golf club. The Bible does indeed contain lists of rules (the Ten Commandments, for instance, in Exodus 20), but as it stands, as a whole, it doesn’t consist of a list of dos and don’ts. It’s a story, a grand, epic narrative that runs from the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve look after the animals, to the city which is the Bride of the Lamb, out of which the water of life flows to refresh the world...the authority of the Bible is the authority of a love story in which we are invited to take part. It is, in that sense, more like the “authority” of a dance in which we are invited to join; or of a novel in which, though the scene is set, the plot well-developed, and the ending planned and in sight, there is still some way to go, and we are invited to become living, participating, intelligent, and decision-making characters within the story as it moves toward its destination...living within the “authority of scripture,” then, means living in the world of the story which scripture tells.⁵

Finding out that Christianity is embedded in a story that has Jewish roots and an eschatological horizon is important because this story informs both what God wants to do *in* us and *through* us. Wright adds, “what the Christian believes about Jesus generates a narrative within which one is called to live... [and] living within that story generates a call to a particular vocation within the world...[thus] the Bible is the book through which God sustains and directs those who seek to obey that vocation as intelligent, thinking, image-bearing human beings.”⁶

⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 186.

⁶ Ibid., 190.

Thinking in the category of story is not, however, a panacea. Even the truncated versions of the Gospel are telling an implicit story. What we want is to discover the biblical story and to live our way into it by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit. Wright says there are three classic misunderstandings about the meaning of Christianity; of what it is all about.⁷ The first mistake is to think that Jesus came to simply give a moral example, as if human kind's most pressing need was to see what a life oriented to God looks like—and as if we could follow it, if even that were the primary purpose of Jesus. The second error is to think that Jesus came to accomplish a new route to heaven for people when they die. Wright is quick to point out that this “isn't to deny that our present beliefs and actions have lasting consequences. Rather, it is to deny both that Jesus made [getting to heaven when you die] the focus of his work and that this is the ‘point’ of Christianity.”⁸ The final fault Wright points out is the idea that Jesus came to give fresh teaching about God, as if the chief need of mankind was more or better information about God.

In distinction to the three mistakes noted above, Wright says, “Christianity is about something that *happened*. Something that happened *to Jesus of Nazareth*. Something that happened *through* Jesus of Nazareth.”⁹ Further, Wright asserts that if the aims of Jesus are considered with reference to human need, then Jesus came “to find lost people, to rescue those stuck in quicksand, and to give new life to the dying.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 91-92.

⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁹ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰ Ibid., 92.

In contrast to Wright's clear thinking, misunderstanding the biblical story by simplistic paradigms is not new and has the effect—at least—of losing discipleship to Jesus as the controlling vocation of Christians. The passionate Enlightenment pursuit of discreet categories of truth produced a loss of story. With his historian's hat on, N. T. Wright says:

The Enlightenment notoriously insisted on splitting apart history and faith, facts and values, religion and politics, nature and supernature, in a way whose consequences are written into the history of the last two hundred years...so that we are left with the great difficulty of even conceiving of a world in which they belong to one another as part of a single whole.¹¹

On the contrary, the biblical story makes meaning of all life. Wright also suggests:

We say that the present world is the real one, and that it's in bad shape but expecting to be repaired. We tell...the story of a good creator longing to put the world back into the good order for which it was designed. We tell the story...of a God who completes what he has begun, a God who comes to the rescue of those who seem lost and enslaved in the world the way it now is.¹²

Wright retells the story by describing God's intention for humanity:

God's choice of Israel to be his agents to rescue, reclaim, and remake creation, the fulfillment of that covenant in Jesus, and the role of Jesus' followers in this life and the life to come. He says, "...the scriptures were indeed to be read as a narrative reaching its climax. They never were a mere collection of arbitrary or atomized proof-texts."¹³

Demonstrating the importance of story and the context we find ourselves in, Wright says:

Our future beyond death is enormously important, but the nature of the Christian hope is such that it plays back in to the present life. We're called, here and now, to be instruments of God's new creation, the world-put-to-rights movement which

¹¹ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 21.

¹² Wright, *Simply Christian*, 46.

¹³ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 161.

has already been launched in Jesus and of which Jesus' followers are supposed to be not only beneficiaries but also agents.¹⁴

Further, "...the way we are called to live in the present will vary not just according to what we conceive to be the final destination, but also according to the whole way we understand God and the world."¹⁵

Many of the loudest and most strident proponents of a truncated view of the Gospel do so by quoting Paul's various letters—especially Romans and Galatians—in their favor. Many of these teachers and evangelists seem to think that all Paul had on his mind was defeating, through the doctrine of "justification by faith," the supposed proto-Pelagianism in the Pharisees of Jesus' time. This, however, in my view is an anachronistic reading back into Paul the concerns of the later world. Paul, says Wright:

...like a great many Jews of his day, read the Bible not least as a story in search of an ending; and he conceived of his own task as being to bring that ending about. The story ran like this. Israel had been called to be the covenant people of the creator God, to be the light that would lighten the dark world, the people through whom God would undo the sin of Adam and its effects. But Israel had become sinful...the promises had not been fulfilled....¹⁶

Wright goes on to say that the view of Saul/Paul, which many of us grew up with, is errant. Saul did not believe that the point of life was to go to heaven when you die, and that the way to do that was to strictly keep a moral code. Saul was *not* a proto-Pelagian trying to pull himself up by the strength of his own moral boot straps so that he could gain "salvation" and "eternal life," understood as the post-mortem bliss of heaven. Wright correctly reminds us that such a view is both anachronistic (Pelagianism was not

¹⁴ Wright, *Simply Christian*, xi.

¹⁵ Ibid., 220.

¹⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 30.

known in Paul's day) and not a category in which the Jews of Paul's day thought. Rather, Saul wanted God to redeem Israel. He thought in covenantal terms and believed that the purpose of the covenant was that the Creator would address and save the entire world.¹⁷

Paul's Story Becomes The Story Of The Church

Today, many seekers and de-churched people are questioning the sensibility and purpose of religion. Most of these people are looking for something that makes sense of life. They are desperate to find some sort of genuine spirituality and meaning in life. Unfortunately, most of these people are not finding what they are looking for in Christian churches or the popular explanations of Christianity emanating from radio and television airwaves. These seekers tend to reject the hell and damnation messages often heard from evangelists. To them, that message seems too arbitrary and disconnected from life. On the other hand, though they feel more sympathy with it, they also find the social gospel to be too remote. They see the appropriate focus on others in it, but they fail to see how it addresses their own inner angst, their need for forgiveness and spiritual growth.

Wright gives us a way forward:

I want to suggest a way in which we can conceive of the task of the church, doing justice to both sides of the current divide between evangelism and social action. What is our gospel? Jesus urged his contemporaries to "repent and believe the gospel." Most church going people today would reckon they knew what he meant: tell God you are sorry for your private sins, and entrust yourself, for your eternal salvation, to the mercy of God as revealed in Jesus. But would [Jesus'] contemporaries have understood that as the force of his summons? I think not. I suggest...that right from the start the summons of the Christian gospel was not purely a spiritual message about an eternal salvation, anymore than it was an appeal only for pragmatic social reformation. The summons is a call to abandon idols and follow the living God. This involves both the invitation to discover, in

¹⁷ Ibid., 30-31.

Jesus, the true rescue from sin and death...and the summons to follow Jesus instead in a new way of life....¹⁸

In recent years, the work of the Missiologists associated with the Gospel in Our Culture Network¹⁹ have, in my view, inadvertently made a huge contribution to evangelism. If evangelists of our day would read, understand, and articulate the story these scholars tell, they would find great help to describe the Gospel to seekers. They would discover what the seamless, whole seekers are looking for regarding the inner and outer aspects of their lives. The missional calling of Christians as the sent people of God fits modern seeker's hunger for meaning and connectedness in community. "Without human society, [people] don't know who they are anymore. It seems that we humans were designed to find our purpose and meaning not simply in ourselves and our own inner lives, but in one another and in the shared meaning and purposes of family, a street, a workplace, a community and town and nation."²⁰

Story is crucial to postmodern evangelism because it gives meaning to life. Modern materialism or consumerism is not capable of giving such meaning. Secondly, once a seeker sees their invitation into the story of God, they see the need for salvation, to be rescued from their intrinsic selfishness, to be saved from their sins, to be delivered from the power of sin and to be empowered by the Spirit to live a new life. Such a view comports well with the ancient explanations of Christianity. "In the early stories, the

¹⁸ Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 193-194.

¹⁹ See Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998); James V. Bronson, Inagrace T. Diettercih, Barry A. Harvey and Charles C. West, *Storm Front* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003); and Darrell L. Guder, *The Continual Conversion of the Church*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

²⁰ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 31.

point was that the Creator loved the world, and wanted to look after it in the best possible way. To that end, he placed within this world a looking-after creature, a creature who would demonstrate to the creation who he, the Creator, really was and who would set to work developing the creation and making it flourish and fulfill its purpose.”²¹

Reconsidering the Story By Connecting Heaven and Earth

One key postmodern critique of modernity regards modernity’s tendency to categorize everything, to make things discrete, to disconnect facts, data, and various elements of reality. This, of course, has happened regarding spirit and matter, and heaven and hell versus earth. The latter two dualisms are large stumbling blocks for current seekers who are influenced by postmodern and quantum physics’ notions of the essential connectedness of reality. The question of many seekers is “whether God’s space and our space intersect; and if so, how, when and where.”²²

Heaven is [often] thought to mean “the place where God’s people will be with him, in blissful happiness, after they die.”²³ Wright helps us conceptualize heaven better, “...if we are to think of God ‘living’ anywhere, that place is known as ‘heaven.’ [Having said that], two misunderstandings need clearing up at once. [The] ancient biblical writers did not suppose that, had they been able to travel in space, they would have come sooner or later to the place where God lived.”²⁴ Rather, heaven means “God’s dwelling place”...God’s place *as opposed* to our space (emphasis his), not God’s space *within* our

²¹ Ibid., 37.

²² Ibid., 59.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 58.

space-time universe. Earth [on the other hand]...refers to our space, our dimension of reality, as opposed to God's"²⁵

Postmodern seekers, especially those who have dabbled in new age religion, may have tended to see the relationship between heaven and earth in pantheistic ways, wherein the two collapse into one; the divine is seen as a force that permeates all creation. Modern seekers with a more scientific worldview have tended to keep God's space and our space as discreet, mutually exclusive realities. The gods stick to their own space, so to speak, and humans are then basically alone in the world. This, of course, describes the distant Deism of the eighteenth century. There is, however, a third option: the classic view of Judaism and Christianity. "Heaven and earth are not coterminous, in this option. Nor are they separated by a great gulf. Instead, they overlap and interlock...so that God makes his presence known, seen, and heard within the sphere of earth."²⁶ Wright then asks a vital follow-on question that I think can make all the difference in calling postmodern seekers to faith, "What happens when the God of Option Three decides to deal with evil? The answer, much to the surprise of many in today's world, has to do with God's calling of Abraham."²⁷

God's Covenantal Story Creates the Church and Defines Its Role

Re-thinking soteriology through placing it in the larger story of God has implications beyond those which we have been considering in the practices of evangelism and

²⁵ Ibid., 59.

²⁶ Ibid., 60-64.

²⁷ Ibid., 66.

discipleship. There are important ecclesiastical implications as well. Wright argues that “...we must discover what the shape and the inner life of the church ought to be only when we look first at the church’s mission, and that we discover the church’s mission only when we look at God’s purpose for the entire world....”²⁸

In some very important ways, Genesis 12 is the turning point of God’s story. From the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12 to the role of the church in the renewed cosmos (see, for instance, Revelation 22.5), the story of God is a covenantal story. Most importantly, the covenants—both Old and New—create a people who are co-laborers with God and co-heirs of the renewed cosmos. Though one could think of a “covenant” with Adam and Eve as the terms of co-laboring with God, strictly speaking the covenanting of God starts with Abraham. “*Through* Abraham and his family (emphasis his), God will bless the whole world...the vision was of a new world, a rescued world, a world blessed by the Creator once more, a world of justice where God and his people would live in harmony, where human relationships would flourish, where beauty would triumph over ugliness.”²⁹ Though God’s relationship with Israel had its ups and downs, while Israel was inconsistent in its obedience, as a people they always “believed themselves called by the one true God...to be his special people for the sake of the world—the people who spoke of his rescue operation for the whole cosmos and thought of themselves as the agents of that plan.”³⁰

²⁸ Wright, *Last Word*, 114-115.

²⁹ Ibid., 74.

³⁰ Ibid., 69.

As the story unfolds, however, the “called” are lost and needy and need to be “found.” Not just in literal captivity, but found and freed from the power of sin, confusion, and unbelief that keeps them from fulfilling covenantal expectations. Wright comments:

What happens when the lifeboat which sets off to rescue the wrecked ship is itself trapped between the rocks and the waves, itself in need of rescue? What happens when the people through whom God wants to mount his rescue operation, the people through whom he intends to set the world to rights, themselves need rescuing, and themselves need putting to rights? What happens when Israel becomes a part of the problem, not just the bearer of the solution?³¹

Israel upon receiving deliverance was to “...express your gratitude, your loyalty, and your determination to live by the covenant because of which God rescued you in the first place.”³²

Jesus, of course, arises within this plot line. He will be for Israel all the things they could not be for themselves. “It is fundamental to the Christian worldview in its truest form that what happened in Jesus of Nazareth was the very climax of the long story of Israel.”³³ In Jesus, God will not only keep his side of the covenant, but will do for Israel what they could not do for themselves. Wright says, “It is within the story of these people that we can make sense of the story of Jesus of Nazareth [who is] the center and focal point of the Christian faith.”³⁴

Sincere Jews of Jesus’ day were deeply divided regarding what it meant to be a faithful Jew. The three popular options available to them were, in some measure, not

³¹ Ibid., 75.

³² Ibid., 82.

³³ Ibid., 71.

³⁴ Ibid., 69.

faithful to Israel's call to be salt, light and God's rescuing agent in the world.³⁵ One fashionable option was the quietists or pietists of Jesus' day. These were the people who essentially retreated from society to pursue their own inner spirituality. Though one can easily commend their pursuit of holiness, salt does no good unless it interacts with food. Their withdrawal from daily life made impossible the interface necessary to effectively be God's representatives.

A second popular choice was the route taken by the Herodians. They theorized that political compromise with powers of the Temple and the local Roman authorities was the practical way to be truly Israel. Their idea was to not rock the boat, and by so doing insure the peaceful future of Israel. Thinking that Israel's continued existence was shaky at best, they thought if they could just hang tight and avoid confrontation with the powers, they would at least still survive until God decided to move one day on their behalf. The problem with this approach, of course, is that they lost all sense of having a prophetic voice to the powers. In God's plan it is not just the poor and marginalized who need deliverance, it is those in power, too. Jesus, and later his first followers, routinely confronted the powers; both seen and unseen rulers.

The last accepted alternative available to first century Jews were the Zealots. Their notion was militaristic. They were something like first-century terrorists. *Say your prayers and sharpen your swords* may have been an appropriate rallying cry for these people. However, as Jesus reminded Peter in the garden when Peter used his sword, one cannot both fight and serve people at the same time. Further, the desire to take things into

³⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Chapter 7.

one's own hand to the point of fighting is to miss not only the plan of God, but the values, ideals, and ethics through which that plan would unfold. First-century Jews are not the only ones who have been unable to agree on what it means to faithfully follow God. Though the issues and options change over time, the church age has experienced its own confusion as the church tried to make sense of its vocation.

In the same way that one might talk about a covenant—in italics—with the first humans, so one could talk about *a covenant* with the church that has its roots in Pentecost and Jesus' sending out his followers. The church exists for and responds to its Jesus-sent mission in the world. Wright adds, "The church is the single, multiethnic family promised by the creator God to Abraham. It was brought into being through Israel's Messiah, Jesus; it was energized by God's Spirit; and it was called to bring the transformative news of God's rescuing justice to the whole creation."³⁶

Speaking further about the nature and purpose of the church, Wright says:

For Paul, "the gospel" creates the church; "justification" defines it. The gospel announcement carries its own power to save people, and to dethrone the idols to which they had been bound. "The gospel" itself is neither a system of thought, nor a set of techniques for making people Christians; it is the personal announcement of the person Jesus. That is why it creates the church, the people who believe that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. "Justification" is then the doctrine which declares that whoever believes that gospel, and wherever and whenever they believe it, those people are truly members of his family...the gospel itself creates the church; justification continually reminds the church that it is the people created by the gospel and the gospel alone, and that it must live on that basis.³⁷

According to the early Christians, the church doesn't exist in order to provide a place where people can pursue their private spiritual agendas and develop their own spiritual potential. Nor does it exist in order to provide a safe haven in which

³⁶ Ibid., 200.

³⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 151.

people can hide from the wicked world and ensure that they themselves arrive safely at an otherworldly destination. Private spiritual growth and ultimate salvation come rather as the byproducts of the main, central, overarching purpose for which God has called and is calling [the church]. This purpose is clearly stated in various places in the New Testament: that through the church God will announce to the wider world that he is indeed its wise, loving, and just creator; that through Jesus he has defeated the powers that corrupt and enslave it; and that by his Spirit he is at work to heal and renew it...the church exists, in other words, for what we sometimes call mission: to announce to the world that Jesus is its Lord. God intends to put the world to rights; he has dramatically launched this project through Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus are called, here and now, in the power of the Spirit, to be agents of the putting-to-rights purpose.³⁸

Though it is clear from the various sending passages in the Gospels,³⁹ and though the theme carries over to Acts⁴⁰ and to Paul,⁴¹ much of the post-reformation church, having misunderstood the teaching of the reformation regarding grace, has been tempted to see the churches' calling as a risk or tendency toward "works." These people would not necessarily argue that the church has nothing to do—at least on a theological and theoretical level. It is at the practical level that they struggle. They have little imagination for doing anything that could not be accused of being "works." This, of course, is all the more powerful restraint on one's imagination when one thinks that the whole purpose of God is to get some people to heaven.

How can one who has the above confusion about grace and works understand the passage wherein the resurrected Jesus said, "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."⁴² To my mind, the only way one could "get" this is to re-think the whole story

³⁸ Ibid., 203-204.

³⁹ See Matthew 10 and 28.16-20; Mark 6.6ff.; Luke 9 and 10, John 20.22.

⁴⁰ See Acts 2 on the effect of Pentecost and Acts 13 for the sending activity of that community of faith.

⁴¹ See Ephesians 2.10, 3.10-11.

⁴² John 20.22.

around the covenantal purposes of God. Wright comments on this passage saying, “and how had the Father sent Jesus? To confront paganism, yes. To denounce the religious, political and social idolatries that enslave human beings, yes. But to do so, primarily by identifying with the weak and powerless. To do so, dramatically by being known as the friend of sinners and outcasts...if we are to take Jesus seriously, [we must see him] as the pattern and model for mission that he bequeaths to the church.”⁴³

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, no one I know re-frames the covenantal story of God better than N. T. Wright. The quote below serves as a great summary and conclusion for this section of the chapter, which has sought to delineate how the covenant purposes of God both create and define the church. Wright claims:

Christianity is all about the belief that the living God, in fulfillment of his promises and as the climax of the story of Israel, has accomplished all this—the finding, the saving, the giving of new life in Jesus. He has done it. With Jesus, God’s rescue operation has been put into effect once and for all. A great door has swung open in the cosmos which can never again be shut. It’s a door to the prison where we’ve been kept chained up. We are offered freedom: freedom to experience God’s rescue for ourselves...we are all invited—summoned actually—to discover, through following Jesus, that this new world is indeed a place of justice, spirituality, relationship and beauty, and that we are not only to enjoy it as such but to work at bringing it to birth on earth as in heaven.⁴⁴

Re-Framing the Story Around the Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is at hand. This announcement was the center of Jesus’ public proclamation and public deeds. It meant—at least—that the planned future of God was presently breaking in to human life through the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus. Jesus thought this message in word and works was the greatest good news anyone could ever

⁴³ Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 106.

⁴⁴ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 92.

hear. Those who heard and believed the message went to great lengths to participate in it. One only needs to call to mind blind men calling to Jesus from the streets, Zacchaeus' climb up a tree, the woman with the hemorrhage fighting her way through the crowd, or the friends who cut a hole in a neighbor's roof, to see that this is true. I surmise that Jesus' telling of the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price was told to help people clarify in their own minds if they were willing to re-order the affairs of their lives to follow him in the manner of the blind man, the courageous woman, and the tenacious friends.

Stepping back a bit, one sees that Jesus' announcement came within a historical context. It came within the confusing alternatives to "true Israel" mentioned above. Thinking through the ideological context into which Jesus came, Wright points the way with several key thoughts.

First, "When [Israel] longed for the kingdom of God, they were not thinking about how to secure themselves a place in heaven after they died...the kingdom of God does not refer to a place, called 'heaven,' where God's people go after death. It refers to the rule of heaven, that is, of God, being brought to bear in the present world."⁴⁵

Second, "God's Kingdom wasn't a state of mind, or a sense of inward peace. It was concrete, historical, real... [it] could only mean one thing: Israel was at last going to be redeemed, rescued from oppression [and] Jesus would be King...the Gentiles would benefit as well...."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 36-37.

⁴⁶ N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 1992), 97.

Third, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God was not a system of how people get saved; it was more like a royal proclamation that God was becoming king in the person of Jesus. It was a covenant-based summons to obedience through faith in the proclamation and the person proclaiming it.⁴⁷

Finally, speaking of Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God, Wright says:

...the early Christians...reordered their symbolic world, their story-telling world, their habitual praxis around it. They acted, in other words, as if the Jewish-style kingdom of God was really present. They organized their life as if they really were the returned-from-exile people, the people of the new covenant...they behaved...as though the new age had already arrived. That was the inner logic of the Gentile mission, that since God had now done for Israel what he was going to do for Israel, the Gentiles would at last share the blessing.⁴⁸

Evangelism and discipleship would be radically changed—in the true “root” sense of the word—if present practitioners could tell the Christian story around the Covenantal–Kingdom paradigm of the Bible. Seekers would have a “new” story to hear; it would sneak up on them because it does not sound like what they hear on radio and television. Beginners in the faith would have something to do besides waiting to go to heaven when they die. The world would have a bright light and salty salt. As mentioned above, postmodern seekers, in my judgment, would naturally be drawn to such people and such communities of faith.

⁴⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 45.

⁴⁸ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 132-133, 136.

Re-Thinking the Story Through the Resurrection

Through his massive and truly comprehensive study of the resurrection of Jesus,⁴⁹ Wright makes one of his most important contributions to a full and compelling, Christian story. He provides wide-ranging proofs for the resurrection, but that is not, in my view, his best contribution. His best input may be that he re-defines the resurrection away from the idea that resurrection means mere immortality or life after death—especially if such a life is viewed as disembodied bliss in heaven. Wright does not see Christians going to heaven when they die if heaven is seen as a place that has no connection to our space-time universe. Wright views this differently in at least several crucial ways. First, heaven is simply the realm of God. Wright sees it as largely synonymous with the kingdom of God. Second, in the biblical story, heaven comes to earth. Third, resurrection is not a code word for, or proof of, life after death. Resurrection is emphatically not a mode of death. It is a mode of life among the living—just like Jesus prior to the ascension. The early followers of Jesus did not celebrate “Jesus is dead in a whole new way!” No, they celebrated “Jesus is alive!” This is the coming fate of all believers: life with a new body in the new heaven and the new earth.

Wright, bringing into view the biblical definition of resurrection, gives evangelists a wonderful new way to tell the Christian story. Through Wright’s work on the biblical text, we can tell a story that not only makes sense of this life, but it also makes sense of the life to come. Wright sees life after death as a two-stage event. Upon bodily death, the Christian is still alive and is immediately in the presence of the Lord. This is “life after

⁴⁹ Wright, *Resurrection* .

death.” But this “life after death” is not the promise of the resurrection. Resurrection means a new, re-embodied, eternal existence as the ambassadors of God in the renewed cosmos. This re-embodied life is the second stage after death and it is the promise of resurrection. This is in stark contrast to notions of a disembodied existence in heaven. And it gives evangelists a more powerful story to tell. Having a sense of purpose in the life to come is far more intuitive to postmodern seekers than some sort of “floating around, doing nothing, disembodied reality—forever!”

On the contrary, Jesus’ resurrection was the first of its kind, his experience is the pattern. What happened to Jesus shaped the worldview and task of the early church. Wright says, “The Gospel writers and Acts all say something like: If Jesus has been raised, that means God’s new world, God’s Kingdom, has indeed arrived; and that means we have a job to do. The world must hear what the God of Israel, the creator God, has achieved through his Messiah.”⁵⁰

Wright sees the resurrection as the most powerful explanation of why Christianity began, and why it took the shape it did. He argues that the early Christians reshaped their whole worldview around the resurrection and made it their central point of reference for what God was up to among them.⁵¹ It is important that the resurrection shapes the Christian story in modern minds as well. Wright summarizes the apostle Paul to set forth succinctly the explicative and imaginative power of the resurrection when he says, “For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the heart of the gospel (not to the exclusion of the cross, of course, but not least as the event which gives the cross its meaning); it is

⁵⁰ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 115.

⁵¹ Wright, *Resurrection*, 8, 27.

the object of faith, the ground of justification, the basis for obedient Christian living, the motivation for unity, and, not least, the challenge to the principalities and powers.”⁵²

Paul’s understanding gives us a “sounds new” story to tell. He helps us see that the ancient hope of the resurrection was not tied to individual salvation and post-enlightenment notions of life after death. The resurrection was tied to “hope built upon the character of the creator and covenant God...that he would finally bring his blessing of justice, prosperity and peace upon the whole earth.”⁵³

God does this, of course, consistently with his initial and ultimate intention for humanity. He brings this new world about in concert with believers. He does so in this life, and in the life to come, through newly-embodied followers of Jesus. To sum all this up succinctly, God’s purposes in creation and covenant cannot be thwarted on his part, even by death. The resurrection defeats the greatest and final effect of the fall—death. It brings from death a new kind of life in a new body that is something like “trans-physical” or “transformed physicality.”⁵⁴ These new bodies will be the vehicle through which God’s people will have their being in the renewed cosmos. These bodies will be perfectly fit for obedient follower-ship of God in the age to come. Christians will “go to heaven when they die,” but as Wright says, there is another important sense of where Christians are going. Christians are “going to make God’s new creation happen in this world, not simply to find [their] own way unscathed through the old creation.”⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 266.

⁵³ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 477.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 183.

Re-Imagining The Story Around The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit

Christians are to live this resurrection life now by living in continuity within the age to come. The apostle Paul encouraged his hearers to “learn to think in terms of the world that is to be...and of the people you will be in it, and then you will see clearly who you are to be in the present time.”⁵⁶ Though this requires intention on our part, such a life is achieved through the animating and energizing power of the Holy Spirit. As Wright says, “...the task of the church can’t be attempted without the Spirit...without God’s Spirit, the church simply can’t be the church.”⁵⁷ He further clarifies, “The Holy Spirit and the task of the church. The two walk together, hand in hand. We can’t talk about them apart...[and] the point of the Spirit is to enable those who follow Jesus to take into all the world the news that he is Lord, that he has won the victory over the forces of evil, that a new world has opened up, and that we are to help make it happen.”⁵⁸ And, finally, “The Spirit is given so that we ordinary mortals can become, in a measure, what Jesus himself was: part of God’s future arriving in the present; a place where heaven and earth meet; the means of God’s kingdom going ahead...the Spirit is given so that the church can share in...the continuing work of Jesus....”⁵⁹

The Holy Spirit has been a hot-button controversy within many elements of the church for the last hundred years or so. This has been especially true within evangelical

⁵⁶ Ibid., 288.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 124.

and dispensational circles. However, in the world, seekers are open to, and, in fact, would expect to encounter God, if they were in relationship with him. For these seekers, simply knowing about God via propositions would never be enough in existential terms and would make no sense in practical theological terms, either. If there is a God, they would reason, and if he wants me to live in his story, then there must be some real way to relate to him, to be guided by him, and to be empowered to work with him. There is a way to see the person and work in continuity to the creation-covenant-new creation story of God. Doing so may help the open-minded, but theologically suspicious Christians, be more open to the work of the Spirit. Wright sees the role of the Holy Spirit as analogous to the Old Testament pillar of cloud and fire. He says, “The Spirit is the strange, personal presence of the living God himself, leading, guiding, warning, rebuking, grieving over our failings and celebrating our small steps toward [our] true inheritance.”⁶⁰

Covenant Theology: The Heart And Soul Of The Story

From a survey of his writing, Wright contributes a number of key thoughts which help present-day evangelists tell a better story. Connectedness to a purpose is a key open door to the heart and mind of today’s seekers. These seekers have significantly rejected the notion of Christianity being only about the forgiveness of sins. They may not think about this with theological precision, but they know from experience that people who have “come forward” or “said the prayer” are often not transformed people. In fact, in many cases, seekers see “the converted” as worse than their non-Christian friends. They see them as mean-spirited, judgmental hypocrites.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 126.

Christianity explained on the basis of “forgiveness alone” does not connect to most postmodern seekers. They intuitively believe there must be more to a religion than mere forgiveness. This is especially true for young seekers who were reared in homes marked by significant hypocrisy. They may have witnessed “dad getting forgiveness for his serial affairs” at the altar of their church. But having seen no change in him as a person, it causes them to think of “the whole Christian deal” as unintelligent, unworkable, and unimportant to one’s actual life.

“Mother Teresa types,” in contrast to the dad above, who are living for the sake of others, are granted almost automatic respect by postmodern skeptics. In my view, this is because Teresa-types go way beyond an alleged event of personal salvation: they are followers of Jesus. Noting this, seekers grant these people routine deference and are open to what they might have to say.

I have spent thirty years involved in evangelism among my peers. My friends and I have tended to be evangelical in our theology. I cannot remember, in all those years, a conversation about how covenant may be a powerful paradigm to explain “what it means to become a Christian.” Wright helps us get such an imagination. Below are several thoughts that are easily applied to evangelism:

1. “[I have] a growing conviction that covenant theology is one of the main clues, usually neglected, for understanding Paul...what [Paul] says about Jesus and about the Law reflects his belief that the covenant purposes of Israel’s God had reached their climactic moment in the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection.”⁶¹
2. Covenant theology is characteristic not only of Jewish thinking in [Paul’s day], but also of Paul’s whole worldview...his preaching, and his writing, are

⁶¹ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, xi.

aimed at one thing: the glorification of God through the effective announcement in all the world that the promises to Abraham have come true in Jesus Christ.⁶²

3. From our earliest evidence, the Christians regarded themselves as a new family, directly descended from the family of Israel, but now transformed.⁶³
4. Paul sees Jesus in covenantal terms, “that Jesus has been installed as the one through whom God is doing what is intended to be done, first through humanity and then through Israel.”⁶⁴
5. Covenant theology—in contrast to personal salvation notions—gives the church a sense of her vocation in the world. Wright says, “The covenant was made in the first place in order that, through Israel, the creator might give to his world the life which it had lost through Adam and the fall.”⁶⁵
6. It’s a central Christian claim that the events concerning Jesus were the means by which, in fulfillment of ancient Israelite prophecy, the creator God, Israel’s God, renewed the covenant with Israel and thereby rescued the world.⁶⁶
7. God’s covenant purpose was to choose a people in and through whom the world would be healed. That purpose, reaching its climax in the Messiah, is now to be worked out through his people.⁶⁷
8. Paul characteristically took passages from Israel’s *story* (emphasis his), passages in which the covenant was inaugurated, enacted, discussed in detail—and argued that the promises all along, historically considered, envisaged the chain of events that were now taking place in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the sending of the Spirit, and the welcoming of Gentiles into the people of God.⁶⁸

“Welcome in!” has huge evangelistic potential in our day. Especially when “in” is defined as participation “in Christ”—as Paul conceives of it—and “in God’s story” as we have been describing. “In” comes through the forgiveness of sins that restores humanity to right standing in the covenant. This happens by the grace of God and is enabled by

⁶² Ibid., 156, 174.

⁶³ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 447.

⁶⁴ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 29.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 242.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 175.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 256.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 265.

faith—that is confidence in God—that the Holy Spirit will empower what God has called humanity to do. The way “in”—the grace and power of God—is the way “onward.”

A Holistic Vision of the Christian Story

N. T. Wright articulates a holistic vision of Christianity:

Despite what many people think, within the Christian family and outside it, the point of Christianity isn't “to go to heaven when you die.” The New Testament picks up from the Old the theme that God intends, in the end, to put the whole creation to rights, earth and heaven were made to overlap with one another, not fitfully, mysteriously, and partially as they do at the moment, but completely, gloriously, and utterly. “The earth shall be filled with glory of God as the waters cover the sea.” That is the promise which resonates throughout the Bible story, from [Genesis] to Isaiah...all the way through Paul's greatest visionary moments and the final chapters of the book of Revelation. The great drama will end, not with “saved souls” being snatched up into heaven, away from the wicked earth and the moral bodies which have dragged them down to sin, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, so that “the dwelling of God is with humans.”⁶⁹

Without the vision imparted by the biblical story, humanity loses any sense of how to live, how to be ethical, why one should be moral, and how to organize and prioritize the different aspects of contemporary human living. Christian living, then, becomes a matter of struggling to obey “a bunch of negative prohibitions,” one might say, derived from an arbitrary code of law, handed down a long time ago by a distant “god” to people “to whom I cannot relate because their world was so different than mine.” “Sin” is then seen in terms of breaking laws conceived in that distant fashion; and “salvation” is the rescue of human beings from the punishment that this deity would otherwise inflict on those who disobey his decrees. “[And] though this has some echoes of Christianity, it isn't in

⁶⁹ Ibid., 217.

fact the Christian way.”⁷⁰ It wasn’t the Jewish way either. Wright says that “for the first-century Jew the Torah wasn’t the arbitrary decree of a distant deity, but the covenant charter which bound Israel to YWYH. It was the pathway along which one might discover what genuine humanness was all about.”⁷¹

When one thinks theologically using the grid of “the ultimate intention of God,” one thinks in terms of humanity, before thinking about Jews, Gentiles or the people who are the church. This is a big step forward for postmodern evangelism. Postmodern seekers tend to think in holisms. This is strongly felt in the sociological ideals of multiculturalism. The postmodern instinct to accept other cultures can be put to good use if we can help them relate to ancient Israel and the early church by virtue of our common humanness in the image of, and for the purpose of God. Wright articulates this well. At bottom, he says, Christianity is “the new way of being human, the Jesus-shaped way of being human, the cross-and-resurrection way of life, and the Spirit-led pathway. It is the way which anticipates, in the present, the full, rich, glad human existence which will one day be ours when God makes all things new.”⁷²

Reflecting on our times, postmodern times, Wright comments:

...most of us who are now adult Christians learned our trade, learned Christianity, learned to preach and live the gospel within the resolutely modernist and industrial world...[and] that modern dream, translated into theology, sustains a sort of Pelagianism: pull yourself up by your moral bootstraps, save yourself by your own efforts. And since that was what Martin Luther attacked with his doctrine of justification by faith, we have preached a message of grace and faith to a world of eager Pelagians... [Further], that looks fine to begin with. If you

⁷⁰ Ibid., 221.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 22

meet a Pelagian coming down the street, give him or her Augustine or Luther. But there are two problems with it. First, it is not actually what Paul himself meant by justification by faith...but second, with the move to postmodernity, most of our contemporaries are not Pelagian.⁷³

If it is true that postmodern seekers favor story over abstract theological propositions, then we Christians have the best news and the grandest story to tell. It is a story that can go beyond simply being heard, it can be embodied. One can participate in God's story. Wright says that we have the privilege of telling,

the controlling story of the creator and the cosmos, the covenant God and his covenant people—[this story] can serve very well as the true and vital answer to post-modernity's attempt to deconstruct truth and reality, to destabilize and decentre the self, and to destroy all meta-narratives.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have concentrated on the works of N. T. Wright demonstrating that Story is a better way of evangelizing than giving fragmented thoughts to fragmented people. We have shown in Wright's works:

1. That the concept of Story is the underpinnings of what is contained in the Bible.
2. That Christianity, embedded in the concept of Story that has Jewish roots and an eschatological horizon, is important because this story informs both what God wants to do *in* us and *through* us.
3. That there is a way in which we can conceive of the task of the church, doing justice to both sides of the current divide between evangelism and social action.
4. That heaven means "God's dwelling place"...God's place *as opposed* to our space (emphasis his), not God's space *within* our space-time universe. Earth [on the other hand]...refers to our space, our dimension of reality, as opposed to God's.⁷⁵

⁷³ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 152-153.

⁷⁴ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 165.

⁷⁵ Wright, *Simply Christian* 59.

5. That Genesis 12 is the turning point of God's story.
6. That the announcement of the Kingdom of God was the center of Jesus' public proclamation and public deeds. It meant—at least—that the planned future of God was presently breaking in to human life through the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus.
7. That resurrection is about life after life after death.
8. That Christians are to live this resurrection life now by living in continuity within the age to come.
9. That Covenant Theology is the heart and soul of God's Story.
10. That Postmodern seekers are drawn to a holistic telling of the Story of God.

We turn next to the works of Dallas Willard as we look at the question: What Does It Mean To Be A Christian? Like Wright, Willard embeds his answer to that question in a theology of the Kingdom of God. Willard, however, takes us further in that he shows “how” to live such a life through appropriating ever increasing amounts of God's grace.

CHAPTER 4:

THE WORK OF DALLAS WILLARD: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

Introduction

Up to this point, I have said in several different ways that the goal of Christianity is not to go to heaven when you die. In so saying, I emphatically do not mean to deny the existence or importance of heaven. I only deny heaven is the goal. This is especially so when heaven is understood as the distant residence of God—somewhere outside of our space-time universe—that believers go to for an eternity of disembodied bliss when they die. Retelling our story according to the intentionality of God does not remove heaven from the story—or hell for that matter—it simply gives heaven its true role: destination—not goal.

In this chapter, we turn to survey the writings of Dallas Willard. We do so in order to discover and articulate his vision for what it means to be a Christian. In its essence, Christianity can be best understood with reference to an invitation from God. “We are,” Willard says, “invited to make a pilgrimage—into the heart and life of God,”¹ to join in “God’s cosmic conspiracy is to overcome evil with good.”² This pilgrimage is initiated, inspired and enabled by God. Willard writes, “God was doing what was necessary in

¹ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 11.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

order to arrange for the delivery of his life to us.”³ It is important to note here that in Willard’s telling of the story, God’s purpose was not merely to arrange for the forgiveness of sins. As we cooperate with God and with his plan for us to enter into his life, we become “spiritual.” But, not just any approach to spirituality will do; certainly not many which are represented in current culture. True spirituality goes way beyond “a peaceful, easy feeling” or “harmony with life.” “Spirituality is simply the holistic quality of human life as it was meant to be, at the center of which is our relation to God.”⁴ In addition, this vision of the truly spiritual person is not solely an inner reality. There is a natural, outward orientation as well. Spiritual people, as all others, live in the world and are connected in essential ways to it. Willard, connecting the disciplines to a missional role in the world, says that “the realistic hope for dealing with the world’s problems...is the person and gospel of Jesus Christ, living here and now, in the people who are his by total identification found through the spiritual disciplines.”⁵

Popular Spirituality

Spirituality has been popular in Western culture in recent decades due mostly to various ideas and activities loosely related to the new age, Eastern religion, or custom-designed approaches to religion. But, spiritual transformation rooted in serious followership of Jesus, like Jesus’ first followers in the New Testament, is at a notable low point. One recent author puts it this way, “If all our activity led to fervent discipleship, George

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 77.

⁵ Ibid., 237.

Barna would have nothing to write about.”⁶ Kierkegaard, an older classic, says it like this, “There was a time when one could almost be afraid to call himself a disciple of Christ because it meant so much. Now one can do it with complete ease because it means nothing at all.”⁷ Richard Harries argues that contemporary people actually think that religion is supposed to keep people immature (a misunderstanding of dependence on God) and sees it as a reason many people are unwilling to follow the Christian faith.⁸ However—and this is at the center of the motivation for this dissertation—re-telling the Christian story in a new way turns the tables on the non-discipleship model. Furthermore, such a re-telling has the potential to reach the very people unwilling to follow the faith as it is now explained in popular Christianity.

Criticism of popular Christianity is intuitive and self-evident to anyone working closely around the church and is commonly attested to by sociologists of religion, pollsters, pastors, and religious thinkers. Many prescriptions have been put forward in an effort to reverse this trend. Acknowledging that the church is huge beyond my ability to grasp with any real clarity, and noting that there are lovely exceptions, the trend toward non-discipleship-based actions in the wrong story continues, in my judgment.

⁶ Steve Ayers, *Igniting Passion in Your Church: Becoming Intimate with Christ* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2003), 148.

⁷ Leonard I. Sweet, *Jesus Drives Me Crazy!: Lose Your Mind, Find Your Soul*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 132.

⁸ Richard Harries, *God Outside the Box: Why Spiritual People Object to Christianity* (London: SPCK, 2002), 81.

On a hopeful note, Sweet and McLaren say that “experience is the holy grail of postmodernism.”⁹ That thought is hopeful because postmodern seekers seek hands-on, experiential participation as a way to discover truth.¹⁰ Willard helps us see a menu of Christian elements that are participatory: spiritual disciplines, life in the kingdom, the manifest power of the Spirit, the seeking community, and a conversational relationship with God. If we can tell a story that naturally and instinctively include those elements, we then have some great tools for postmodern evangelism.

Popular motivations for spirituality often need to be applauded, but the approaches to such spirituality need to be re-shaped. Spiritual transformation into Christlikeness, now dead in the water for most church people, and, thus, in popular culture, needs a new basis, a fresh conceptual framework if it is going to win the day as the explanation for what it means to be a Christian. I aim to demonstrate that the “Vision—Intention—Means” paradigm offered by Dallas Willard¹¹ offers a reliable and biblically-based pattern for such a life.

The Reliable Pattern: Introduction

Vision—Intention—Means

The fundamental premise of Willard’s work is that spiritual growth requires a *vision* that will evoke and sustain *intentionality*. *Means* comes to the foreground once one

⁹ Leonard I. Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *“A” Is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 119.

¹⁰ Mike Riddell, Pierson, Mark and Kirkpatrick, Cathy, *The Prodigal Project* (London.: SPCK, 2000). 69.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).

intends to follow Jesus. While Willard is self-consciously an evangelist,¹² he is known by most Christians as a teacher in the area of spiritual formation. This is not just an interesting sidelight. Through “teaching” others what it means to pursue Christlikeness, Willard, in his mind, is practicing “evangelism.” This is so because he believes that the goal of Christianity is to be the cooperative people of God, not merely to be forgiven of our sins. Willard writes, “The great Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine passages, such as 1 Corinthians 13; Colossians 3; 1 Peter 2; 2 Peter 1.1-15; and John 3.1-5, all convey the same message in so many words, one of an inward transformation by discipleship to Jesus. In them the central point of reference is always a divine kind of love, agape, that comes to characterize the core of our personality.”¹³ He believes such transformation happens as Christians cooperate with the means God has given us to repent and follow Jesus into a missional encounter with the world as ambassadors of God’s kingdom.

The Reliable Pattern: Vision

Christian life requires vision. Vision gives life meaning. As a practical matter, finding meaning, or what is “real” is a driving motivation among postmodern seekers. “Meaning is one of the greatest needs of human life, one of our deepest hungers—perhaps it is, in the final analysis, the most basic need in the realm of the human experience.”¹⁴ The first humans were given meaning in two ways: first, with reference to God—their maker; and secondly, to creation—that which the Maker had made. Loyalty to God was their first sense of meaning. Loyalty to creation as its servant was their second. Humanity, made for

¹² I know this from personal conversations with Dallas Willard.

¹³ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 276.

¹⁴ Willard, *Renovation*, 203.

such activity, will always be bored with anything less. Boredom, deadness, and empty routines lead to meaninglessness that is often “medicated” with substance abuses of all kinds.

Far from the meaninglessness that deadens so much of American society, God’s purposes for human history, as set forth in the biblical story, create the kind of *real* meaning contemporary seekers seek. “According to the biblical picture, the function of human history is to bring forth an immense community of people, from ‘every nation and tribe and tongue and people’ (Revelation 14.6), who will be a kingdom of priests under God (Revelation 1.6; 5.10; Exodus 19.6), and who for some period of time in the future will actually govern the earth under him (Revelation 5.10). They will also, beyond that, reign with him in the eternal future of the cosmos, forever and ever (Revelation 22.5).”¹⁵ This vision gives impetuosity to spiritual growth. The story of “going to heaven when you die” can never give such motivation. However, when one sees this vision, one recognizes that “Spiritual formation in Christlikeness during our life here on earth is a constant movement toward this eternal appointment God placed upon each of us in our creation—the ‘kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ (Matthew 25.34; see also Luke 19.17). This movement forward is now carried on through our apprenticeship to Jesus Christ. It is a process of character transformation toward complete trustworthiness before God.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 217-218.

¹⁶ Ibid., 218.

Vision and Evangelism

A compelling vision is necessary to most any human pursuit. Willard says, “...nothing can sustain radical and radiant goodness in the human being other than...the true vision of God....”¹⁷ However, the most popular evangelistic explanations of the Gospel are centered on man, his sin, his need of forgiveness, and the benefit of heaven or the horrors of hell. God, and his vision and intention for mankind, are normally not mentioned in evangelistic exchanges. It sometimes comes later, but by then it seems like optional equipment on a car. Willard suggests that “the greatest danger to the Christian church today is that it pitches its message *too low*.”¹⁸ What if, instead of trying to get people into heaven, we began to aim at getting heaven into people? What if, instead of getting people ready merely to die, we got them ready to live?¹⁹ What if death is simply the last part of a ready-to-please-God life? This not only has implications for spiritual formation, it could re-charge postmodern evangelism as well. Many people are looking for what is real, and they think they find it in practices of Buddhism, Islam, or new age spirituality. What if, in the process of getting heaven into as many people as possible, we made converts who then began “to follow the path of genuine spiritual transformation or full-throttle discipleship to Jesus Christ”?²⁰ We may, then, have discovered the most powerful form of postmodern evangelism: modeling more than talking.

¹⁷ Ibid., 108.

¹⁸ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, xii.

¹⁹ Willard, *Renovation*, 238.

²⁰ Ibid., 239.

One Vision—Two Elements

Willard suggests two elements in a vision for Christian life: one, spiritual transformation and two, its wider story—to serve the purposes of God in one's life. The two are so closely connected that they should be seen as two parts of an essential whole. Describing spiritual growth, Willard says that “spiritual formation in Christ is the process by which one moves and is moved from self-worship to Christ-centered self-denial as a general condition of life in God's present and eternal kingdom... [it is] the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself...Christian spiritual formation is focused entirely on Jesus. Its goal is an obedience or conformity to Christ that arises out of an inner transformation accomplished through purposive interaction with the grace of God in Christ.”²¹

Articulating how one engages missionally with their social setting, Willard says that through Jesus, and the sending of Jesus' trainees, God set in motion a “perpetual world revolution...the objective is eventually to bring all of human life on earth under the direction of his wisdom, goodness, and power, as part of God's eternal plan for the universe... [God's] will is to accomplish this with and, in part with [Jesus'] students.”²²

But we must say more or we have not done enough to re-shape imaginations regarding the essential meaning of Christianity. There is a prior and definitive “vision that underlies the vision of spiritual (trans)formation into Christlikeness...[it is] the

²¹ Ibid., 22, 77.

²² Ibid., 14-15.

vision of life now and forever in the range of God's effective will—that is *partaking* of the divine nature (2 Peter 1.4; 1 John 3.1-2) through a birth 'from above' and *participating* by our actions in what God is doing now in our lifetime on earth."²³ Willard goes on to say that this vision must be revealed to us; that we can't see it on our own; and that God has done just that "through his covenant people on earth, the Jews, with the fullest flowering of the covenant people being Jesus himself."²⁴ Tom Wright's writings,²⁵ which we reviewed in detail in Chapter 3, are most useful in reshaping a theology of salvation and sanctification that is rooted in the wider story of God. Wright envisions the shape of an hour glass in which the whole, broad story of the Jews—hopes and promises, sins and transgressions—comes finally down upon Jesus, who is the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the whole earth through the Jews.²⁶ Writing at Advent time, Wright says that the line from the Christmas carol celebrating the birth of Jesus, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight,"²⁷ reminds him of the turning point in redemptive history.

The Starting Point for Evangelism

Much of the time, however, the practice of evangelism does not start with that overarching story. It usually starts with convincing people they have sinned and fallen short of God's law. Setting aside for a moment that the meaning often ascribed to the words "sin" and "law" are questionable at best, starting the evangelistic task with a vision

²³ Ibid., 87.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ I have found Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* most helpful.

²⁶ Willard, *Renovation*, 87.

²⁷ I am not certain to whom I owe credit for that thought, but I think it is Tom Wright.

for “Christian life” is much preferable. First, it fits the biblical story. God started his relationship with humankind with a call to be his partners working in creation. From that starting point, we can move to the ways in which they and we have missed that mark (sin), and then to the ways God sought to shape his people (the Law). In God’s initial conversations with the first humans, the sole negative prohibition came almost as an aside. It might be paraphrased as “by the way, that one tree in the garden is not good for you; stay away from it. There are lots of bad consequences from eating its fruit.” Second, an evangelistic conversation that begins with the vision of God’s calling on humanity sneaks up on postmodern seekers in a delightful way. They are accustomed to being told how wrong they are. It surprises them to hear of their cosmic potential as the covenant people of God. Once they can see that vision, sin, and forgiveness take on a practical tone that is more easily discussed.

Willard writes that in any pursuit in human life, one “must have some idea of what it would be like...what their lives would then be like...and why this would be a desirable or valuable thing for them,” and, “if the vision is clear and strong, it will very likely pull everything else required along with it; and the [goal will be met], even in difficult and distracting circumstances.”²⁸ That is the evangelistic potential of re-telling our story.

The Vision According to Willard

Here are three key ideas from Willard. Together they articulate his vision for the Christian life.

²⁸ Willard, *Renovation*, 83.

1. On how to live for Christ: "...by following [Jesus] in the overall style of life he chooses for himself, we *can* become like Christ in character and in power and thus realize our highest ideal of well-being and well-doing. That is the heart of the New Testament message."²⁹
2. On how one's thinking about the future shapes the present: "Those who have apprenticed themselves to Jesus learn an undying life with a future as good and as large as God himself...to live strongly and creatively in the kingdom of the heavens, we need to have firmly fixed in our minds what our future is to be like. We want to live fully in the kingdom now, and for that purpose our future must make sense to us. It must be something we can now plan or make decisions in terms of, with clarity and joyful anticipation. In this way our future can be incorporated into our life now and our life now can be incorporated into our future...much distress in good people comes from a failure to realize that [even in old age] their life lies before them. That they are coming to the end of their present life, 'life in the flesh,' is of little significance. What is significant is the kind of person they have become."³⁰
3. On where the story is heading: "A place in God's creative order has been reserved for each one of us from before the beginnings of cosmic existence. His plan for us is to develop, as apprentices of Jesus, to the point where we can take our place in the ongoing creativity of the universe."³¹

These insights contain the potential to revolutionize evangelism for the postmodern period. We desperately need a new vision for the Christian life. Today's Christian leaders are forced to live and minister in a time wherein the faith is more and more marginalized. Hope is found in the possibility of articulating the faith in ways that surprise seekers, that piques their interest. A new vision for Christian spirituality has the power to do that. As Willard writes, "If we cannot break through to a new vision of faith and discipleship, the significance and power of the gospel of the kingdom of God can never come into its own. It will be constantly defeated by the idea that it is somehow not a real part [heaven when you die is the supposed 'real' part] of faith in Jesus Christ."³² Grenz and Franke

²⁹ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, ix.

³⁰ Ibid., 375-376.

³¹ Ibid., 378.

³² Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 309-310.

contribute to thinking beyond “heaven when one dies.” They write, “Taken as a whole, the biblical story is directed toward a *telos*. It speaks of the God who is bringing creation to its divinely intended goal. [Ours is a story that] has a historical consciousness...a futurist cast...an eternal focus, and finally...is universal in scope.”³³ While Christians will go to heaven when they die, no one who accepts Grenz’ and Franke’s view can think that gaining heaven is central to the unfolding story of God.

The vision of life derived from and lived in the kingdom of God as its ambassadors has not been often or accurately cast in my lifetime. I suspect that a re-telling of the Gospel in this manner holds fruitful promise for evangelism and discipleship. Further, Willard says that this is a vision “that must be *given* to humanity by God himself, in a revelation suited to our condition. We cannot see it clearly on our own. And that revelation has been given through his covenant people on earth, the Jews, with the fullest flowering of the covenant people being Jesus himself.”³⁴ Thus, gaining a fresh hearing for Jesus is a key task for the teachers and evangelists of our time. He must be set forth in his fullness, not just as a sacrifice, but as teacher, master, Lord, and friend.

Willard gives us a useful way to articulate such a vision:

...obedience and abundance are inseparable aspects of the same life. Certainly life on “the rock” must be a good way to live. Wouldn’t you like to be one of those intelligent people who knows how to live a rich and unshakable life? One free from loneliness, fear and anxiety and filled with constant peace and joy? Would you like to love your neighbors as you do yourself and be free of anger, envy, lust and covetousness? Would you like to have no need for others to praise you, and would you like to not be paralyzed and humiliated by their dislike and

³³ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 253.

³⁴ Willard, *Renovation*, 312.

condemnation? Would you like to have inspiration and strength to lead a constant life of creative goodness?³⁵

That is a vision that has not often been heard. It is the vision that can gain a fresh hearing for God, for his story, for its climax in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It is a vision and story that guides one to ask, “With reference to *that* story, what do I do now?” Great evangelistic conversations can take place around that question.

From “Getting Saved” to “Living a Life”

The Christian vision goes way beyond “getting saved.” The notion of “salvation” that makes no difference in this life,³⁶ but leads to a supposed eternity of disembodied bliss is ridiculed today in the media as “evangelical Christianity.” A. H. Strong helps us tell a more faithful, comprehensive, and compelling story, “The ship whose machinery is broken may be brought into port and tied to the dock. She then would be ‘safe,’ but not yet sound. Repairs may last a long time. Christ designs to make us both safe and sound. Justification gives the first—safety; sanctification gives the second—soundness.”³⁷ Notwithstanding that other scholars would disagree with his meaning of justification and sanctification, and the discreet categories which Strong gives them, he makes a helpful point: salvation is more than rescue. Rescue has a larger meaning. Rescue has a story from which it emerges. That story adds the concept of being made sound. But, even soundness does not stand alone as the highpoint. Soundness is unto something as well: being the sent people of God to bring about his good will for the sake of others.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Appendix 4.

³⁷ Willard, *Renovation*, 225.

Willard, in my view, describes Strong's bifurcated idea better, "*we in one move find forgiveness for our sins and 'take his yoke upon us and learn of him.'*"³⁸ The idea that these can be separated is, as A. W. Tozer pointed out years ago, simply a modern heresy. It is based upon many levels of misunderstanding and has attained the status of dogma. It is choking the life out of the contemporary Western church."³⁹

Furthermore, it is not Jesus' vision. Willard says:

Jesus looks outward to the cosmos and to the sweep of human history before and after. He tells us we have no need to be anxious, for there is a divine life, the true home of the soul, that we can enter simply by placing our confidence in Him: becoming his friend, and conspiring with him to subvert evil with good. He also shows us how we can be renewed in the depths of our soul, stepping "beyond the goodness of scribes and Pharisees" to become the kinds of persons who are genuinely at home in God's world...an all-encompassing, all-penetrating world of God, interactive at every point with our lives, where we can always be totally at home and safe regardless of what happens in the visible dimension of the universe....⁴⁰

Some Concluding Thoughts On Vision

Postmodern evangelism must give people a compelling reason to pursue transformation as followers of Jesus. We must help them to see life in the Kingdom as a follower of Jesus as the greatest opportunity ever given to humanity. The parables of the treasure buried in the field and the pearl of great price⁴¹ were given by Jesus to help people clarify their attitudes about him and the eternal life he offered. We must help seekers decide, do they, like the pearl merchant and the estate agent, see him and his agenda as valuable and desirable? A bargain so great that one would reasonably arrange

³⁸ Willard's paraphrase of Matthew 11.29.

³⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ I repeat this idea in Chapter 3 to emphasize the point in a different context.

all the affairs of their life to insure that they did not miss it? Where vision is strong and clear, it naturally pulls everything in life into alignment with it.

The prayer of Jesus in the gospels, commonly known as “The Lord’s Prayer,” is the model prayer Jesus gave to his followers upon being asked, “Lord, how should we pray?”

Willard paraphrases as:

Dear Father always near us,
may your name be treasured and loved,
may your rule be completed in us—
may your will be done here on earth
in just the way it is in heaven.
Give us today the things we need today,
and forgive us our sins and impositions on you
as we are forgiving all who in any way offend us.
Please don’t put us through trials,
but deliver us from everything bad.
Because you are the one in charge,
and you have all the power, and the glory too is all yours—forever—
which is just the way we want it!

This, for many reasons, is a powerful prayer. For our purposes here, I highlight two. First, the Lord’s Prayer has the power to impart a basic vision for what it means to be a Christian. It captures the ultimate covenantal purposes of God for humanity. It teaches us to interact with God according to that unspoken—perhaps assumed by Jesus’ hearers—story and its premises. Second, in addition to conveying vision, the prayer, when prayed and lived out, shapes human attitudes, motivation, and actions around the reality of the gospel of “the Kingdom now among us.” Praying the prayer moves us in the direction of intending to live such a life under the rule and reign of God for the sake of others as his ambassadors.

The Reliable Pattern: Intention

When someone has a powerful and unambiguous vision, that vision naturally and instinctively shapes the rest of life; even when achieving the vision is difficult or strenuous. This is easily seen in athletic endeavors—or any kind of important competition for that matter. Its sentiment can be heard in the interviews after an important game: “We left it all on the court” or “We held nothing back in order to win the championship.” Decisively cooperating with this “pulling all things together” intuition is what “intention” is. There are things for us to do in the Christian life. They do not need to be seen as meritorious. These acts are simple cooperation with the grace of God. God’s grace is not defined by forgiveness alone. Every step of Christian life—from the first to the last—is inspired and empowered by grace.

Intending to follow Jesus into God’s life must begin with a clear vision of Jesus himself. The common vision of Jesus is rooted in the truncated Christian story about forgiveness of sins and achieving heaven. When this happens, Jesus becomes a utilitarian source of cleansing blood. In the minds of many people, seekers and Christians alike, the atonement is seen as Jesus’ work on the cross. If, on the other hand, we see Jesus himself as the atonement, a vision far richer emerges. It is a vision capable of sustaining the intention to follow Jesus.

When we speak of intention, we call to mind the act of deciding to follow Jesus. And, “...we should note that *being* a disciple, or apprentice of Jesus is a quite definite and obvious kind of thing, to make a mystery of it is to misunderstand it.”⁴² Intention is not

⁴² Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 281. The emphasis is the author’s.

only definite, it is challenging. Debra Rienstra writes, “Sin is easy, the default; goodness requites a contrary energy...ordinary individuals do not need courses of therapy to become selfish and irresponsible. But for honesty, kindness and faithfulness to flourish, people need good models and hard work.”⁴³

The decision to sing, golf, or practice ministry like someone else is obvious and difficult. So is the decision to follow Jesus. Playing high-school baseball, I made a similar decision in a parallel manner for a comparable purpose. I decided to follow—to play like—my hero Johnny Bench, the all-star catcher of the Cincinnati Reds. I intended to mimic his way of playing; I trusted that if I did it like him, I would be better for it. The biblical terms ‘repent and believe’ carry connotations that get to the heart of intention to mimic or follow another. To *repent* means to change one’s ways of thinking: that is what I did when I decided to change to become like Bench. To *believe* means to place one’s confidence in someone or something. Again, that is precisely what I did: I placed my confidence—regarding the most important thing in my life—baseball—in Bench’s way of playing. Willard says that when a seeker has such an attitude toward God, it will lead inevitably to surrender; surrender leads to abandonment; abandonment to contentment; and finally, contentment leads to intelligent, energetic participation in accomplishing God’s will in our world.⁴⁴

“It is not enough,” Willard says, “to ‘sorta’ believe in a ‘sorta’ God. But with the great God of Jesus squarely in the picture, everything else takes on a different nature and

⁴³ Debra Rienstra, *So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 50.

⁴⁴ Willard, *Renovation*, 150-151.

appears in a different light.”⁴⁵ Thus, if we engage our wills—even in the simple ways I did as an adolescent athlete—we do change: “Single-minded and joyous devotion to God and his will, to what God wants for us—and to service to him and to others because of him—is what the will transformed into Christlikeness looks like.”⁴⁶

Intention—Calling For Decisions

Even if one rejects the practices of revivalism such as altar calls, raised hands, walking the aisle, decision cards, and the like, regarding follower-ship of Jesus, there is still a decision to make. Willard asserts, “In the heart of a disciple there is a desire, and there is a decision or settled intent.”⁴⁷ There is still a line to cross with reference to following Jesus. But the line needs redefining: it is not a finish line. In my lifetime, most evangelism practices could be summed-up by this stereotype: a process of apologetics whereby the evangelist proved that Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic or The Lord. The evangelist gave evidence that demanded a verdict and biblical proofs that called for the hearer to make a decision, to cross the line. Tragically, the line was often seen as the “finish line.” The convert, having said the sinner’s prayer, thus giving mental assent to one outlined theory of the atonement, had now crossed over the line and was going to heaven when he or she died.

Willard helps us see the benefit of seeing the line as a starting line. Commenting on the effect the book *Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians* had upon him, Willard

⁴⁵ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 383.

⁴⁶ Willard, *Renovation*, 141.

⁴⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 7.

writes, “*Seeking*, was clearly, from the lives portrayed, a major part of life in Christ. The ‘doctrinal correctness alone’ view of Christianity was, in practice, one of non-seeking. It was basically one of ‘having arrived,’ not of continuous seeking, and the next essential stop on its path was heaven after death.”⁴⁸ A more proper understanding of Christian life is “constant discipleship to Jesus, with its constant seeking for *more* grace and life; [it is] the only sensible response to confidence in Jesus as the Messiah.”⁴⁹

On the other hand, one can easily see, upon reflection, that an overly simplistic explanation of the Gospel leads to a religion about death. It gives people an imagination of Christianity that does not touch their actual life, only their eventual death. The key explicative words are, “Say this prayer so *that when you die* you can go to heaven.” Upon hearing the standard explanation of “the gospel,” no one I have ever known said, “I came forward and said this prayer so that I could live my actual life in God as the cooperative friend of Jesus, seeking to live a life of constant creative goodness, through the power of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of others.” The standard, late-modern evangelical explanation of the Gospel simply cannot, and does not, produce such an imagination.

However, it is possible to conceive of evangelism in a way that more frequently leads to a life of discipleship to Jesus. One such definition of evangelism⁵⁰ does connect the Gospel to everyday life.

Spiritual transformation into Christlikeness requires a conscious, clearheaded, and public commitment to living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. That is to a decision to give our lives to him as his constant students, learning from him how

⁴⁸ Ibid., 217. The *italic* emphasis is the author’s.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ This is a definition conceived of by a task force sponsored by Mission America, led by Alan Andrews, the President of The Navigators. Dallas Willard and I both served, with others, on this task force.

to live all aspects of our lives as he would live them. *Evangelism should be understood as a call to receive the gift of such a life.*"

This definition is a major step forward in the practice of evangelism. It reshapes one's vision of Christianity in such a way that following Jesus is an instinctual next step after the first step of conversion. It suggests that there is much more to Christianity than simply going to heaven when one dies. The fundamental decision in Christianity is to decide to live my actual life as Jesus would live it if he were me.⁵¹

To repeat, a decision is still necessary. The key is "What is a seeker deciding on?" If it is a decision about whether or not to follow Jesus, we must note one important reality: no one drifts into discipleship to Jesus. No one merely stumbles upon it or finds themselves there accidentally. One must choose. But why would someone choose to be a follower of Jesus? What state of mind or motive would lead someone to intend to be an apprentice of Jesus?

Willard answers:

Obviously one would feel great admiration and love [for Jesus], would really believe that Jesus is the most magnificent person who has ever lived. One would be quite sure that to belong to him, to be taken into what he is doing throughout this world so that what he is doing becomes your life, is the greatest opportunity one will ever have... [and] unless we see clearly the superiority of what we receive as his students over every other thing that might be valued, we cannot succeed in our discipleship to [Jesus].⁵²

Unfortunately, the bumper-sticker explanations of the Gospel are very far from this and lack any power to routinely produce discipleship in those who hear it. However, because of the postmodern hunger to discover meaning through story, providing clarity about Jesus, the story in which he arose, and his role in it, is evangelistically effective in the postmodern setting. To enable suspicious or cynical postmodern seekers to become

⁵¹ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 283. The *italic* emphasis is the present authors.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 292.

disciples, “we must change whatever it is in their actual belief system that bars confidence in Jesus as the Master of the Universe.”⁵³ This means we shift from two typical motivations in evangelistic exchanges: trying to produce guilt in seekers and trying to manage or change their behavior. Rather, we engage them in a conversation regarding what they believe about Jesus and why they believe it. Having first sought to understand our conversation partner, we then seek to help them understand Jesus in his historical context and cosmic future.

Deciding Is Not Easy

“It is not easy to really want to be different.”⁵⁴ It normally takes a big crisis in one’s life for one to change. Yet, God has given humankind the ability and responsibility to—within limits—choose their course of life. “Depravity, does not properly, refer to the inability to *act*, but to the unwillingness to act and clearly the inability to *earn*.”⁵⁵

Everyone must be active in the process of their salvation and transformation into Christlikeness. This is an inescapable fact. But the initiative in the process is always God’s, and we would in fact do nothing without his initiative. [But], if we—through well-directed and unrelenting action—effectually receive the grace of God in salvation and transformation, we certainly will be incrementally changed toward inward Christlikeness. [For neither salvation nor transformation] “are wholly passive.”⁵⁶

One could, on the contrary, choose against God so often that one becomes stuck in their choice. “The ultimately lost person is the person who cannot want God. Who cannot want God to be God...the reason they do not find God is that they do

⁵³ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁴ Willard, *Renovation*, 81.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

not want him or, at least, do not want him to be God. Wanting God to be God is very different from wanting God to help me.”⁵⁷

William Law is held in my understanding to be a classic voice on the subject of intentionality in the Christian life. Addressing the swearing or cursing that was rampant in his day, he writes, “Now the reason of common swearing is this: It is because men have not so much as the intention to please God in all their actions. For let a man but have so much piety as to intend to please God in all the actions of his life as the happiest and best thing in the world, and then he will never swear more.”⁵⁸

I place the blame for a lack of such intention—setting aside normal fallenness for a second—on the lack of story or context in our evangelistic explanations of Christianity. If Christianity, as told by contemporary evangelical reductions, is simply about getting to heaven when you die, and has nothing to do with this life, then why would any one intend to grow and change?

Intention As Process

Once a seeker decides to follow Jesus, we want them to be captured by a vision for God’s intention for his people. This will lead to quite a different life. People with that vision gain a powerful sense of intentionality. They learn quickly to “not think of themselves and what they want, and they really care very little, if at all, about getting their own way.” They follow the attitude Paul commends, “Let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not look out for your own personal interests,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁸ William Law and P. G. Stanwood, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life: The Spirit of Love*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 56.

but for the interests of others” (Phil. 2.3-4). Willard writes, “These are easy and good words to them. They are abandoned to God’s will and do not struggle and deliberate as to whether they will do what they know to be wrong. They do not hesitate to do what they know to be right, it is the obvious thing to do.”⁵⁹ This vision is available today. It is more than a dream. It is the kind of thing many people are running to Buddhism and other forms of religion to get. We have the best, most compelling story to tell. Best of all, we can invite people into it. All it takes is a simple act of their will—to decide and intend—to cooperate with God’s call to embody the story and to receive his gracious power to live it.

Jan Hettinga says we have a hard time actually doing this because we are afraid of God, and that in this attitude we are completely wrong about God. God is the completely trustworthy one; we are the ones not deserving of the trust God gives us to carry out his agenda on the earth. Hettinga describes an important irony regarding the level of trust necessary for spiritual formation. We see God perfectly revealed in Jesus, especially on the cross. Hettinga says it is as if God is saying, “This is who you mistrust, this is who you fear? This one who serves on this level? It looks to me like it is humans who have ‘power’ issues that make them do terrible things, not God.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 219.

⁶⁰ Jan David Hettinga, *Follow Me: Experience the Loving Leadership of Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996), 45.

Intention Requires Trust and Confidence

“There is a choice to be made to be a spiritual person, to live a spiritual life. We are required to ‘bet our life’ that the visible world, while real, is not reality itself.”⁶¹ This requires that we trust God’s most potent revelation of himself: Jesus. Jesus lets us see into the invisible world of reality that lies behind the material world. Above, I mentioned that I patterned my baseball style after Johnny Bench. Why would I—and hundreds of other young ball players like me—do that? We did it because we admired him. We thought he had the best information possible on how to be great at his position. We thought he was the best example to imitate. Often, in popular imagination, Jesus does not even rank as high on the “imitate me scale” as athletes, actors, or musicians. He is simply not usually thought of in those terms. If thought of at all, he is thought of as self-sacrificial or a great moral teacher. Some would go further to say that he was a great moral example. But his example is normally thought to be too hard to follow. Willard shows why it is difficult for many seekers to see Jesus for who he is and thus intend to follow him.

If you play a game of word association today, in almost any setting, you will collect some familiar names around words such as smart, knowledgeable, intelligent and so forth. Einstein, Bill Gates and rocket scientists will stand out. But one person who pretty certainly will not come up in the connection is Jesus.

Here is a profoundly significant fact: In our culture, among Christians and non-Christians alike, Jesus Christ is automatically disassociated from brilliance or intellectual capacity. Not one in a thousand will spontaneously think of him in conjunction with words such as well-informed, brilliant, or smart. Far too often he is regarded as hardly conscious. He is looked on as a mere icon, a wraithlike semblance of a man, fit for the role of sacrificial lamb or alienated social critic, perhaps, but little more.

⁶¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 219.

Would you be able to trust your life to such a person? If this is how he seems to you, are you going to be inclined to become his student? Of course not. We all know that action must be based on knowledge, and we grant the right to lead and teach only to those we believe to know what is real and what is best.

For all the vast influence he has exercised on human history, we have to say that Jesus is usually seen as a frankly pathetic individual who lived and still lives on the margins of 'real life.' What lies at the heart of the astonishing disregard of Jesus found in the moment-to-moment existence of multitudes of professing Christians is a simple lack of respect (emphasis his) for him. He is not seriously considered or presented as a person of great ability. What, then, can devotion or worship mean, if simple respect is not included in it? Not much.

It is not possible to trust Jesus...in matters where we do not believe him to be competent. We cannot pray for his help and rely on his collaboration in dealing with real life matters we suspect might defeat his knowledge or abilities..."Jesus is Lord" can mean little in practice for anyone who has to hesitate before saying, "Jesus is smart."

[Jesus] is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history (Rev. 1.5) while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it (John 14.2). He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life.⁶²

Some Concluding Thoughts On Intention

As one casts a vision for being the cooperative friends of God, one needs to be careful to not demean God by "casting him in the role of the cosmic boss, foreman, or autocrat, whose chief joy in relation to humans is ordering them around, taking pleasure in seeing them jump at his command and painstakingly noting down any failures. Instead we are to be God's friends (2 Chron. 20.7; John 15.13-15) and fellow workers (1 Cor. 3.9)."⁶³ Human-Divine friendship resulting in the good of creation has been God's vision since the garden, through the calling of Israel, and up to our day.

⁶² Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 95.

⁶³ Willard, *Hearing God*, 32.

How do Christians help postmodern seekers choose a lifestyle of spiritual transformation into Christlikeness so that their lives embody this vision? There are teaching aspects wherein would-be evangelists tell and explain the story of God. There are apologetic elements that demonstrate why this version of the story is true and more valid than truncated versions or alternative, religious worldviews. There is also a prophetic activity that calls seekers to be the people of God. Finally, there is a traditional, evangelistic approach which announces the good news of life in the Kingdom. Together, these activities tell a winsome story that gives an imagination for following Jesus.

The idea of intentionality provides great opportunities for postmodern evangelism. It makes intuitive sense for many postmodern seekers that if Christianity is legitimate, it must have religious practices. Seekers see obvious, overt, bodily activities in other religions. This is a prime reason many contemporary seekers are drawn to Buddhism. They like the idea of centering prayer and inner growth that affects the quality of one's life. Within the concept of intentionality, we have opportunity to re-claim the importance of an ordered life, to provide structures for change (like golf lessons, music lessons, or learning a foreign language), and for pursuing one's spiritual vocation—being a disciple of Jesus. Learning to be a Christian needs to be recast as something one practices their way into, not something that is primarily cognitive. There is an old saying in golf that instructs spiritual formation, “If you want to hit the golf ball straight, you have to hit it thousands of times, intelligently, with purpose, and, preferably, under the instruction of a master golfer.”

Learning Christianity is similar. However, for a couple key reasons, over many decades, Christians have missed the opportunities associated with learning to be a

Christian beyond mere mental assent to doctrine. First, post-Reformation Christians have been afraid that “practices” could be mistaken for “works.” Second, suggesting that Christians should intend to become something or do something could inadvertently cause people to doubt their salvation by believing that they were not growing enough or doing enough. It is right here that many converts get stuck. They cannot see a way forward or how to get there. Having expressed the power of vision and the necessity to decide to follow a vision of life in Christ, we now turn to the means required to carry out one’s intention.

The Reliable Pattern: Means

When the vision is clear and compelling, when one has firmly decided to follow it, one will certainly begin looking for means of implementation. “Means” in this context are spiritual disciplines and practices of various sorts. These means are necessary because we are already formed to do things wrong; to not cooperate with God’s covenantal expectations. Thus, the disciplines help us both unlearn bad habits and learn new habits. The futurist, Ray Kurzweil, says, “The purposeful destruction of information is the essence of intelligent work.”⁶⁴ Putting it in terms useful to spiritual formation, the purposeful destruction of old habits of heart and practices are the essence of putting something new on—Christ. If we have the vision and we intend or have decided to pursue spiritual formation, we can certainly find and implement the means, for God will help us to do it.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York, NY: Viking, 1999), 79.

⁶⁵ Willard, *Renovation*, 89.

These “means” are the spiritual disciplines used best under spiritual direction and in the conscious grace of God. There is no agreed upon list of such practices. Christians should take great freedom to do what makes sense for them by seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the affirmation of the community of faith, especially people like spiritual directors and close friends, people who know us best and who understand what we are trying to do.

Referring again to my athletic endeavors, when I was just a small child—under twelve for sure—I would regularly go to the local library to borrow books that taught one how to hit a baseball. My favorite was by Ted Williams. Because I had a vision of being a major league hitter, and had decided to become one, I naturally sought out means of all types, not just books on the subject. Perhaps “means” are best thought of as “intelligent, presently-doable ‘helps.’” We all need help to grow as followers of Jesus. Most people can only sustain movement forward in things they understand. If we “just can’t understand something,” we normally quit. We think “this just must not be for me; I just can’t get my head wrapped around it.” Ted Williams helped me conceive of and imagine being a better hitter. God has given the church, through many means, just such help. Means clear the blur and fill-in the blanks. As they do so, they provide hope and confidence. This assurance enables one to move forward in spiritual growth, to pursue more inward change for the sake of serving the purposes of God in the events and people of their lives.

The Principle of Indirect Effort

Willard calls this “training ‘off the spot.’”⁶⁶ By this phrase, Willard means that we must not wait until “the moment is on” when we must do a good thing or don’t do a bad thing and then try to do the right thing. This is a recipe for disaster in the spiritual life. It is akin to trying to walk onto a concert stage and play Mozart without ever practicing.

Most of us cannot now do what we want to and need to do as Christians. We must learn to “train” not merely “try.”⁶⁷ Trying leads to horrible, religious burdens, or should one succeed, to self-righteousness. Training, on the other hand, is natural to any process of growth; running a marathon or apprenticeship to Jesus. Training is not meritorious, nor is it for earning anything; it is simple cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Training is done by faithfully applying appropriately selected disciplines to be used in the normal course of our life. The disciplines are self-authenticating; when we do them we know they “work.” We become different people. Think of couch potatoes—people who can’t come close to running a marathon, but who could get up a walk around the block. If they walked enough, they would soon be able to *run* around the block. Run more and they could, in time, run a mile. Keep it up and the marathon is in sight. I think spiritual growth works the same way. It is how we live lives of preparedness so that, like Jesus, we can live alert lives to the Father and the Spirit and do and say as we are led by them.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁷ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 364-366.

Paying Attention: A Key Means

I use a mental model simultaneously to keep focused on my growth in Christ and on my calling as an ambassador of the Kingdom. It is extraordinarily simple. Anyone could do it. I simply pay attention to God and to the people and events of my daily life. I call this practice “The Golden Triangle of Presence.” As I go through my day, I seek to be truly present to what is going on around me, the people I am with, and to the voice of God. The three points of the triangle are me, the events and people of my life, and God. I seek to hold them together and operate out of them by “paying attention,” simultaneously being aware of all three aspects. God has given us the capacity to do this. I do not find having multi-foci hard at all. It is as if one ear is attuned to God and the other ear attuned to the activities of my life. What is hard is to want to do it and to remember to do it. But once I get that part right, God through the enabling Spirit, makes possible the remainder of the process.

Willard thinks of the guidance I describe as “the still small voice.” He says, “The very phrase ‘the still small voice’ might seem to suggest that what lies at the heart of a relationship with God is something weak and marginal. But that is far from the truth. One who hears God’s voice is operating from the very foundation and framework of all reality, not from the fringe.”⁶⁸ Hearing this voice is difficult because the activities, people, and dealings of life scream at us so loudly. They overwhelm us with their presence, giving us the notion that there is a seeming unreality about the spiritual life. “The visible world daily bludgeons us with its things and events. They pinch and pull and

⁶⁸ Willard, *Hearing God*, 117.

hammer away at our bodies...but instead of shouting and shoving, the *spiritual* (emphasis his) world whispers at us ever so gently.”⁶⁹

Learning habitually to pay attention is a fundamental means. It tunes us in to ourselves, our lives and the presence of God. Being alert to God is essential for our own growth and our missional encounters in the world. Silence and solitude are two of the spiritual disciplines or means most practiced in redemptive history. They enable us to hear the voice of God in any setting. As we practice paying attention in silence and solitude, we learn to hear God’s voice in the hurry and busyness of life. Willard says, “...God comes to us precisely in and through our thoughts, perceptions and experiences...he can approach our conscious life *only* through them, for they are the substance of our lives (emphasis his)...[however], generally speaking, God will not compete for our attention. Occasionally, a Saul gets knocked to the ground and so on, but we should expect that in most cases God will not run over us...[in fact], God’s spiritual invasions into human life seem by their very gentleness almost to invite us to explain them away.”⁷⁰ Because it is so easy to do, many seekers and Christians succeed in explaining God’s overtures to them away. “This hinders [their] progress toward becoming spiritually competent people. [God’s] movements toward us go away meekly, without much protest...[for] he cooperates with the desires and inclinations that make up our character...[thus if] we are ready and set to find ways of explaining away his gentle

⁶⁹ Ibid., 217.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 90, 102, 218.

overtures, he will rarely respond with fire from heaven. More likely he will simply leave us alone....”⁷¹

The whole of our daily existence is the grounds for, and focus of, discipleship. That one’s actual life is the focus of one’s apprenticeship to Jesus is crucial.⁷² The actions associated with discipleship are not things one adds to an already over-busy life. The opposite is true. Paying attention to God in the actual routine of life—the people and events of one’s daily existence is at the heart of discipleship. This injects all of life—job, school, neighbors, family—with meaning. It breaks the harmful religious/non-religious and sacred/secular dualisms that have plagued contemporary Christianity. What to us insiders is a somewhat benign dualism, is to outsiders a major impetus to reject the church. To those outside the church, such a dualism, which leads to acting one way in church and another in the world, looks more like rank hypocrisy. Willard correctly says, “...if we restrict our discipleship to special religious times, the majority of our waking hours will be isolated from the manifest presence of the kingdom in our lives.”⁷³

Misunderstanding the Doctrine of Grace

“The interpretation of grace as having only to do with guilt is utterly false to biblical teaching and renders spiritual life in Christ unintelligible.”⁷⁴ If, in my judgment and experience, there is one misunderstanding that keeps average evangelicals from pursuing spiritual formation, it would be a misunderstanding of the Reformers regarding the

⁷¹ Ibid., 218.

⁷² Ibid., 283.

⁷³ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 287.

⁷⁴ Willard, *Renovation*, 82.

doctrine of grace. The Reformers responded to the manipulations of people scared about their eternal destiny. Some in the church manipulated these people through medieval superstitions. The Reformers rightly and usefully put forward the idea that human kind is saved by grace alone, through faith, not by works. Willard contends that the same grace that saves, gives us the ability to grow in faith and in usefulness regarding God's call on our lives. He states, "Spiritual transformation only happens as each essential dimension of the human being is transformed to Christlikeness under the direction of a regenerate will interacting with constant overtures of grace from God. Such transformation is not the result of mere human effort and cannot be accomplished by putting pressure on the will (heart, spirit) alone."⁷⁵

Trying to force ourselves to do something that is contrary to our inner nature or beyond our present ability will simply not work. We must employ the proper means and work from the inside to the outside—so to speak. Willard says, "[Jesus] knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law, one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the *kind of person* (emphasis his) from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow. The apple tree naturally and easily produces apples because⁷⁶ of its inner nature..." Jesus' lessons (Matt. 23) regarding dishwashing, whitewashed tombs, and fruit trees spell this out. "Actions," Jesus taught, "do not emerge from nothing. They faithfully reveal what is in the heart..."

⁷⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁶ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 142-143.

[Thus] it is the inner life of the soul that we must aim to transform, and then behavior will naturally and easily follow.”⁷⁷

In teaching with Dallas Willard at various conferences, and being taught by him, I have heard him say many times a very crucial insight, “The Reformed doctrine of grace is not opposed to effort, grace is opposed to earning. The former is simple cooperation with the grace of God, the latter is an attitude.” Obviously though, God’s grace alone does not make “saved” people able to do what is right when it needs to be done. Growing in right behavior, like growing in sound doctrine, takes effort. Because grace is opposed to earning, not effort, we must still contribute our exertion to God’s initiation. As Willard writes, “*It is well-directed, decisive, and sustained effort that is the key to the keys of the Kingdom and the life of restful power in ministry and life that those keys open to us.*”⁷⁸

A revival of proper, spiritual formation in our day is dependent on re-shaping the Christian imagination regarding how effort and grace work together in the economy of the kingdom. Those who most want to defend and protect the doctrine of grace would do well to see that someone who grows in God as an ambassador of his Kingdom appropriates more grace in a God-glorifying way than one who merely has his or her sins forgiven.

Intelligently and deliberately discovering the means necessary to grow in Christ is not automatically self-evident to most church-goers. For this to become so, Christian leaders must cast a gripping vision, ask people to decide to follow Jesus as his student, and point

⁷⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁷⁸ Willard, Great Omission, 34. The *italic* emphasis is the author’s.

them to the means for implementing their decision. This is the reliable pattern for change in any human endeavor. More important than its practical reliability is that it fits the rhythms and routines envisioned by the New Testament story. For “the assumption of Jesus’ program for this people on earth was that they would live their lives as his students and co-laborers...the provisions he made for his people during [our] period in which we now live are provisions made for those who are, precisely, apprentices to him in kingdom living.”⁷⁹ While there are plenty of means available today in the form of books, conferences, CDs, radio and television programs, church services of all kinds, it is crucial that we enable would-be followers of Jesus to see that the risen Christ, as our constant teacher within the activities of our actual life, is the primary and most powerful means available today. “God’s exaltation of Jesus vindicated not only him and his cause, but his way (emphasis his); and that way is the way by which his followers too must walk.”⁸⁰

Summary

This dissertation, having examined the short-comings of late-modern, truncated explanations of the Gospel, is moving in the direction of constructing a holistic rendering of the biblical story—God’s story. In this chapter we have endeavored to take another step forward in articulating that story. Dallas Willard’s writing and teaching contribute several key components. First, he, more than any Christian spokesperson in the last several decades, addresses the error of seeing the Gospel as having to do to only—or even mostly—with managing the issue of sin. Second, he articulates, and seeks to explain

⁷⁹ Ibid., 273.

⁸⁰ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 102.

the Gospel in Jesus' terms: the Kingdom of God (Mt. 4.17, Mark 1.15, 16). Third, Willard gives a reliable, simple and reproducible pattern seekers may follow into life in Jesus—life in the Kingdom.

Seekers today wonder “what this whole Christian thing is supposed to mean?” Not hearing an intelligent and coherent life-shaping answer, they often give up on the church, which is seen as the custodian and peddler of a garbled, nonsensical message. Thus, when it comes to communicating the Gospel to seekers, the preeminent message and “vibe” should be, “What is God up to?” “Are the cosmos and its inhabitants heading in some direction?” “If things are heading in some direction, what is my place in it? Rather than being intimidated by these questions because they do not fit the “sin-heaven-hell” paradigm most of us were taught, we should see them as wonderful opportunities to talk about God’s ultimate intention, creation and *telos*. Unless we grapple with seekers’ questions regarding “meaning” through the lens of the Kingdom of God—his eternal and present ruling and reigning—we will neither be thinking straight or with a freshness that might garner us a new hearing with those who are lost.

My idea is that we need something seekers will deem as “real” and upon which they could base their faith and practice. The popular version of the Gospel as only a way to deal with sin so that one could go to heaven when they die is no longer compelling. The language of “born again” has been bankrupted by unchanged people claiming born-again status who are nothing like the friends of God on earth, his salt and light as Isaiah, Jesus, John and Paul envisioned (Isa. 49.6; Mt. 5.13, 14; John 12.36; Phil. 2.15). In the story reduced to forgiveness and heaven, converts are robbed of their wider invitation to be the people of God. While, it is not fair to blame the Reformers for this, at least a popularized

misunderstanding of them is to blame, and has in some measure a genuine connection to their medieval context and aims. Wright, speaking from a broad and deep expertise as a historian and theologian, says, “The reformers...for all their attention to detail...were not concerned to stress the great narrative of God, Israel, Jesus and the world, coming forward into our own day and looking ahead to the eventual renewal of all things.”⁸¹

We are stuck in the twisted, crumbled rubble of the Reformation and Enlightenment emphasis on personal salvation explained through one version of atonement theory. This has left us with something like a religion for death, not for life. After misreading and misunderstanding Luther and Calvin for hundreds of years, “doing” anything to cooperate with God regarding our spiritual transformation or to “work” with him as his agents or ambassadors on the earth is seen by typical evangelicals as “what Catholics do,” or “Pelagian,” or the domain of “liberals,” or legalistic, or overly religious. Willard makes this problem plain: Some people are not only saved by grace, they are “paralyzed by it.”⁸²

This state of things is a sad misunderstanding of the Reformers. Willard, for one, never understood the Reformers to be saying there is nothing for humans to do in conversion or after conversion. Willard, describing his early growth as a disciple and Christian thinker says, “...the writings of Luther and Calvin...meant much to me, especially in filling out a theology that could support the spiritual life as one of discipleship and the quest for holiness and power in Christ, without the least touch of

⁸¹ Wright, *Last Word*, 76.

⁸² Willard, *Great Omission*, 58.

perfectionism or meritorious works...I learned that the follies of *discipleshipless* 'Christianity' could never be derived from Luther or Calvin."⁸³

With Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers, I do not doubt that justification comes solely by faith in the merit of Christ and not through human efforts to please God. In my judgment, the whole of scripture demonstrates that God is always the initiator of covenant relationship. His initiation always suffices and ought to be trusted, in peace and gratitude. Humans, especially followers of Jesus, act out of this gracious reality, not for merit, but motivated by simple loving cooperation with God's plan for his people. The question that begs to be asked of all post-Luther Protestantism is "justified unto what?" Merely forgiveness of sins? But what is the point of forgiveness? What is the overarching story of which forgiveness is a part? Is to go to heaven when one dies—to allegedly enjoy a vague notion of disembodied bliss? Or, is there something more going on?

Perhaps for all Luther's argument for the exegetical and hermeneutical keys of "law and grace," his followers and those who have popularized him have missed the bigger picture of Covenant and Kingdom. Was the law merely, solely given to convict people of sin so that they would then pray "the sinner's prayer?" Or, are law and grace not separate categories, but instead two aspects of the same purpose of God—to have and train a people for himself? In my judgment, law and grace are best understood with reference to Covenant and Kingdom and God's shaping of a people.

The crane that can lift this mess off us is to re-hear the Story of God, which in short is: To see him creating and shaping a people—from Abraham to the renewed cosmos—

⁸³ Ibid., 219. The *italic* emphasis added by present author.

who will rule and reign with him now by the Spirit and for all eternity (Rev. 22.5) as the true, renewed humanity.⁸⁴ It is crucial to repeat here, as one is thinking about understanding God's story for oneself and articulating it for others, that the Gospel, by definition, contains an inherent call to live one's life for the sake of others as God's specially chosen and sent people. Tom Wright, whose writings we looked at in Chapter 3, suggests that a missional focus boils down to the simple concept of "kindness." Many people, Wright says, talk about "love." But love gets confused in our society. Love is often just lust, or "I love cheeseburgers." Commenting on this, Wright acknowledges that "The key word, of course, is 'love'...but I want to draw attention to something else—something often ignored in the clamor for better and clearer rules of Christian behavior: that we should be positively kind to one another."⁸⁵ The Apostle Paul points us in the same direction, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 4.32-5.2).

I believe that Wright's notion of kindness⁸⁶ has crucial missiological and evangelistic implications. "Kindness to others" and seeking justice for others is a real door opener in contemporary evangelism. In contemporary life, "the quest for justice all too easily denigrates into the demand for *my* rights and *our* rights."⁸⁷ On the contrary, "the

⁸⁴ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*. I first heard this phrase "the true humanity" from Tom Wright.

⁸⁵ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 228.

⁸⁶ Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness : A Refreshing New Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus with Others*, 10th anniversary ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 2003). For practical advice on how to be kind in connection to evangelism, this book is great.

⁸⁷ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 228.

command of kindness asks that we spend our time looking not at ourselves and our needs, our rights, our wrongs-that-need-righting, but at everyone else and their needs, pressures, pains, and joys.”⁸⁸ Such an attitude—and the behaviors that would naturally follow from it—put us squarely in line with Jesus. “...we are not to achieve what Jesus achieved...our task is to *implement* his unique *achievement* (emphasis his)...the foundation has been laid...the garden has been planted...the musical score has been written...our task is now to build the house, to tend the garden, to play the score...as Jesus was to Israel, so the church is to be for the world.”⁸⁹

Being the church for the world *is* God’s purpose for his people. This is a completely different vision than going to heaven when one dies. However, my life’s experience in the ministry has been dominated by the notion that the core impetus and most powerful motivation for evangelism were the fact of hell, and the possibility of people going there who didn’t “accept Jesus into their heart.” I do not deny the existence of heaven and hell. I believe Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about when he mentioned them. I do not doubt that they have a role to play in God’s unfolding story. I do, however, pour different meaning into those words in an effort to fit them into the story of God—the Gospel of the Kingdom.

If “meaning” and “real” are the conversational currency of the day, then let’s tell our story. No religion or worldview has a better narrative to tell. And in this sense, we have nothing to fear from a judicious use of the postmodern impetus toward deconstructionism. It may be, in fact, that the postmodern task of evangelism requires

⁸⁸ Ibid., 228-229.

⁸⁹ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 182, 185.

deconstructing the story of “sin-heaven-or-hell.” We may be required to join seekers in that task, to converse with them about it, to listen to their frustrations and questions. Then, having first sought to understand, we can seek to be understood in fresh ways.

N. T. Wright reconstructs the Christian story better than anyone I know. In so doing, he arms would-be evangelists to enter confidently into the conversations suggested above. Imagine telling this story to a frustrated evangelist or an honest, but disheartened, de-churched, somewhat cynical seeker.

When we explore God’s righteousness to its very end, it reveals...the love of God—the creator’s love for the cosmos he has made, and his determination to remake it through the victory of Christ over the powers that deface and distort it. God intends to flood creation with his own love, until the earth is filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. If the gospel reveals the righteousness of God, and if the church is commanded and authorized to announce that gospel, it cannot rest content—for exegetical as well as theological reasons—with anything less than **this complete vision**. And it cannot therefore rest content while injustice, oppression and violence stalk God’s world. After all, Christians are commanded to bring one small piece of creation—their own bodies—into obedience to the healing love of God in Christ. Christians are to live in the present in the light of what God intends us to be in the future. That...is what holiness is all about.⁹⁰

That is a vision for which many seekers today “have ears to hear.”

Conclusion

In this chapter we have concentrated on the works of Dallas Willard articulating his vision for what it means to be a Christian. We have shown in Willard’s works:

1. That spiritual growth requires a *vision* that will evoke and sustain *intentionality*.
2. That vision gives life meaning.
3. That vision is implemented naturally and instinctively shapes the rest of life.

⁹⁰ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 164. Bold emphasis added by present author.

4. That “means” in a context where spiritual disciplines and practices of various sorts are worked out.

Building on the work of Willard, we now will examine the role of a proper conversion as the first step in a life of discipleship. Dr. Gordon Smith contributes a great deal to the practice of evangelism by showing us how to connect evangelism and discipleship as an essential whole. He demonstrates the error of viewing evangelism as one task and discipleship as something separate or unconnected to the conversion process.

CHAPTER 5:

DOES A BETTER CONVERSION EXPERIENCE LEAD TO BETTER DISCIPLESHIP?

Introduction

In this chapter, we will look at the work of Gordon Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversation & Authentic Transformation*,¹ where Smith's thesis is that "the practice of evangelism is undermined by an inconsistent and flawed notion of conversion."² Smith further solidifies my argument for re-thinking the practices of evangelism through re-thinking soteriology. Happily, Smith makes a practical contribution through his work applying social set theory to the process of evangelism and discipleship.

Discipleship, on most accounts, is at low tide in our day; especially covenantal follower-ship of Jesus that is rooted in the biblical story. This chapter tries to understand how we got here. I answer that question with the following suggestion: we are at a low point, not in spite of our best and most common attempts at evangelism, but precisely because of them. My suggestion is that people have simply believed the dominant, populist, but truncated description of the Gospel. It has never been accurate, and it is presently not a compelling way to portray the Gospel. Most seekers instinctively reject

¹ Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversation & Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

² Ibid., 10.

the Gospel when it is told in terms that have solely, or even mostly, to do with the forgiveness of sins so that one can go to heaven when they die. They have seen too many hypocrites in their lives to believe that “born again” Christians have the real thing. They think there is a real thing; they just don’t think the Christians they have known have it. The over-focus on sin starts the conversation in the wrong place and fails to locate sin and forgiveness in their larger story. Poor levels of discipleship automatically follow. Difficulty in reaching contemporary seekers follows as well.

While many seekers are rejecting “the gospel” as they know it, thirst for the spiritual aspect of life is very prominent. Smith quotes Wade Clarke Roof as saying that contrary to the typical narcissistic assumptions about contemporary western peoples, they are actually “searching for direction, purpose and meaning.”³ If book sales are any indication of the mood of a country, then thirty million copies of *The Purpose Driven Life*⁴ that Rick Warren has sold demonstrates a clear hunger for meaning in life that goes beyond the average person’s current life experience. Smith rightly says, “The bottom line is that our language of conversion needs to resonate with the deepest longings of the people among whom we live and work.”⁵

What a tragedy, what a complete heartbreak that our offering to eager seekers has been “forgiveness of sins” as if it were the whole deal. The mental picture created by most contemporary evangelistic preaching is that seekers should come TO forgiveness of

³ Ibid., 48.

⁴ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church : Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub., 1995).

⁵ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 49.

sins. Some may think they come THROUGH forgiveness of sins to heaven when they die. Neither view does the plan of God and the biblical data justice.

I suggest a better view: one comes THROUGH forgiveness of sins TO an eternal kind of life; to what *The Message*⁶ calls “total life change.” That move alone is a huge improvement for a correct imagination regarding conversion. But there is still more: one comes TO eternal life for a purpose—TO BE the people of God; his special sent people; to be ambassadors of his Kingdom in our earthy spheres of influence. Smith suggests, and I agree that John Wesley understood this, that early Methodism may be the best model of living out the holistic Gospel we have in the last two hundred years. Wesley clearly and helpfully saw the essential connection between what happens to a new Christian through a life of contemplative piety when such a life is interlocked with a life of activity as God’s sent people in the world.⁷

Contemporary seekers intuit that, first, there must be more to life. Second, there is a divine presence or divine being in the world. Finally, they were created to be in an authentic, purposeful relationship with God. For the sake of these seekers, this dissertation seeks a more effective, more biblical and compelling way to briefly explain the Gospel without falling into the harmful tendencies associated with abridging the Gospel.

⁶ Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* .

⁷ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 67

Beginning Well

Gordon Smith, Dean at Regent College, Vancouver, teaches spiritual theology. His book *Beginning Well* is a wonderful source from which to analyze the history of evangelicalism with regard to both the theology and the practice of evangelism. Smith analyzes, from a theological point of view, the questions “What is conversion?” and “What is the goal of conversion?” Based on the answers to those questions, he seeks to inform, using an improved notion of conversion, the ministry of the church, especially its ministry of evangelism.

As the subtitle to Smith’s book suggests, his intent is to firmly link conversion to a transformed life. He knows the simplistic, non-story version of the Gospel is not true and does not produce disciples. A survey of his remarks on the topic makes this clear. He writes:

We cannot think effectively and biblically about conversion until we take seriously both the possibility of and the call to transformation.⁸

The purpose of conversion is “nothing less than transformation into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹

The goal of conversion is not merely to expedite a release from the consequences of sin—hell or damnation or punishment...but that we might be a transformed people.¹⁰

...we define justification too narrowly when we speak of it in purely forensic terms—that we gain a good or right standing before God, with no actual or substantial change in our being.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Thus “conversion is not an end, it is a beginning...” though many evangelicals see it as an end—as “all that really matters in our lives” [and] “this subtly turns a blind eye to the very purpose for which God sent his Son and the Spirit.”¹²

Conversion is...the human response to the saving work of God through Christ, [it is] the act of believing in Jesus, choosing to follow Jesus, and being united with Jesus as Lord and Savior.¹³

Smith quotes A. W. Tozer: “Today all is made to depend upon an initial act of believing. At a given moment a ‘decision’ is made for Christ, and after that everything is automatic...In our eagerness to make converts we allow our hearers to absorb the idea that they can deal with their entire responsibility once and for all by an act of believing. This is in some vague way supposed to honor grace and glorify God, whereas actually it is to make Christ the author of a grotesque, unworkable system that has no counterpart in the Scriptures of truth.”¹⁴

Smith sees transformation as all encompassing: dynamic communion with God; social transformation marked by love of others; personal integrity evidenced in the whole of life—speech, finances, sexuality, etc; the growth of wisdom which represents humanity at its fullest potential.¹⁵ He defines the goal of conversion as: that we are enabled to live under the kingdom reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁶

However, while I admire his attempt to broaden the notion of conversion; and while I appreciate his emphasis on transformation, he does not clearly locate transformation in a story. Or, if he indeed has a story in mind, one could rightfully think the story starts, or at least has its most dramatic moment, at the fall. I say this because Smith ties conversion so closely to the problem of the fall and sin.

Smith says:

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

Scripture, from beginning to end, stresses the vital need for conversion, for it is the means to knowing life, eternal life...[conversion] is universal and essential because of sin...guilt and rebellion.¹⁷

Smith sees the need for conversion because of,

the predicament of man as seen in the Christian doctrine of sin...[that] humans have not only violated the law of God, but that they are in bondage to sin...and because of this humans are alienated from God, from ourselves, from others and from the whole created order.¹⁸

He puts in parallel:

Guilt and propitiation; bondage and redemption; and alienation with reconciliation.¹⁹

Placing tremendous stress on sin without defining it by placing it in its context, lessens the marvelous effect of his argument. As Willard notes, "Emphasis upon the wickedness and neediness of the human being, a dominant theme in my upbringing, tends to submerge our awareness of our greatness and our worth to God."²⁰ Shooting for transformation, rather than a simple crisis moment of conversion, is a clear step forward. However, if one goes even further by locating transformation in a story about the ultimate intention of God for humans, or in a covenantal story about a relationship between God and his sent people, then one not only has the proper context for transformation, a convert has a huge motive for pursuing it. Few people pursue transformation in a story abridged to going to heaven because one had a conversion experience.

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

²⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 206.

Social Set Theory: Evangelism As Movement Versus a Crisis Decision

Smith applies social set theory to conversion in community.²¹ In so doing, he gives us a better model than the crisis, decision form of conversion. In social set theory there are, for our purposes, two kinds of sets: bounded-sets and centered-sets. In bounded-sets, the focus is on boundaries. For example, he says, an apple is either an apple or not. All apples are one hundred percent apples. One apple is not more apple than another. Bounded-sets are static; you are in or you are out. In evangelism this translates to who is in and who is out of the boundary; who is saved and who is not saved; who is going to heaven and who is going to hell; one is either one hundred percent saved or not saved at all.

Working with the ideas of Paul Hiebert,²² Smith asks if it is not better to think about conversion through a centered-set model versus a bounded-set model. In center-sets, things are defined by their relationship to the center. The focus is not on the boundary, but the center and how things relate to the center. Smith suggests, and I agree, that thinking of the center of a set, rather than the boundary, makes a big difference in how we approach communicating the Gospel and how we call for a response to it. For our purposes, the center is Jesus and the Gospel of the Kingdom he announced.

In bounded-set models, crossing the line to get “in” is the goal. In practical effect, crossing that line is seen as crossing the finish line. Once one is “in” by making confession of sin and profession of faith, there is nothing left to do—in sports speak “the

²¹ Ibid., 36-39.

²² Paul G. Hiebert, "The Category 'Christian' in the Mission Task," *International Review of Mission* 72 (July 1983).

game is over.” This has had devastating effects on discipleship. If the boundary line “in” is a finish line, why would someone converted in that paradigm ever think that anything else would happen—after all the game is *over*. Willard, helpfully, argues that to understand salvation apart from obedience to Jesus is foreign to the New Testament. In separating salvation and obedience, as if obedience were similar to optional equipment on a car, we create “vampire Christians... [who] in effect say to Jesus, ‘I’d like a little of your blood, please. But I don’t care to be your student or to have your character. In fact, won’t you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I’ll see you in heaven.’”²³

If, on the other hand, conversion is thought of through the lens of a center-set, good things happen for the tasks of evangelism and disciple-making.

Concerning evangelism, center-set thinking allows for variation and movement. In center-set thinking, one does not ask “who is in?” One asks, “What direction is this person moving; toward the center or away from it?” Wright adds a useful idea to center-set thinking through Jesus’ words “go in peace.” He says, “...that is the word of God to those who are starting to bring their thinking about God and the world into the straight line that flows from the revelation of the saving love of God in Christ. It is the word of God to those who are starting to follow Jesus, and want to do so more and more. It is the word of God to those whose glass is half full.”²⁴

In my view, this is a huge step forward away from the decision model that “gets me in.” If movement toward the center is the key, and if Jesus and his proclamation of the

²³ Willard, *Great Omission*, 14.

²⁴ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 80.

Kingdom are center, then a seeker has been given a wonderful gift through center-set thinking. Focusing on the center gives a basis from which seekers can orient all the various aspects of their lives, and they can do so for the remainder of their lives, not merely during the process of conversion.

There are two main reasons, in my view, why “transformed-and-embedded-in-God’s-Story” kinds of lives have not been routinely pursued by Christians. First, modern imaginations have been dominated by the idea that “getting in,” getting past the boundary was the whole deal; that the sum total and clear goal of Christianity was to get into heaven while avoiding hell when one died. Second, the post-reformation mindset has held as one of its deepest fears—adding anything to the work of Christ. This notion has led to a fear of doing anything that could be accused of being meritorious.

Evangelicals may not easily embrace center-set thinking. To some, especially the most conservative, it may sound like sloppy compromise. As Smith says, this is because “The language of revivalism has left many assuming that the word *conversion* necessarily refers to one event, one moment.”²⁵ Smith also says, “Evangelicals have been inclined to see a conversion as a powerful sign of God’s grace when it is dramatic and punctiliar. For some reason, a conversion is viewed as less miraculous when it extends across many months or years.”²⁶ Sadly, I agree with Smith. It is sad because evangelicals—the people and churches that tend to care the most about evangelism—are increasingly out of touch with contemporary seekers. They have difficulty celebrating that seekers are moving toward the bull’s eye at the center of the set. This makes it hard for them to then join

²⁵ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 31.

²⁶ Ibid., 220.

seekers on their journey of faith—on the seeker’s terms and in conversion with them. Smith helps us get this right when he says, “Evangelism is essentially encouraging others to respond to the work of the Spirit in their lives.”²⁷ I would add that this happens best under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he shows us teachable moments in seekers’ lives; times when they are moving toward the center and would cherish a genuinely competent, non-judgmental, humble and loving guide.

Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is interesting to wonder, in hindsight, if the church was missionally sound in meeting post-enlightenment, rationalistic society with systematic, bullet-point prooftexts (in the sense of scientific “proofs”) or if it was a negative capitulation to culture. The missiological notion of contextualization is a huge challenge for evangelists and missionaries in every age. Thus, to be fair to evangelicals, a conversational “journey to Jesus” approach will, I’m quite sure, in hindsight, be shown to have its weaknesses, too.

However, if the maxim is at all true that one catches fish on their terms, not ours, then we must meet people where they are. We must incarnate ourselves in seekers’ real journeys. Perhaps no approach to evangelism in the fallen world is completely free of error. We, it seems, lack the ability of Christ to incarnate ourselves without spot or wrinkle. We get dirty in the task of evangelism and inadvertently spread dirt to others in the process as well. God in his mercy redeems our imperfect attempts and cleans both the evangelist and the evangelized along the way. If this were not true, if we could not trust

²⁷ Ibid., 230.

that simple thought, none of us could find the confidence to reach out to others on their journey to faith.

Center-set based evangelism has at least one other crucial benefit: it allows people who grew up in Christian or religious homes a way to think about their journey of faith. Based on my experience as a pastor and evangelist, Smith rightly says that many people raised in religious homes cannot relate to the notions of conversion preached from pulpits and sung in religious songs.²⁸ I've always found it ironic that Ruth Graham, wife of Billy Graham, could never say the exact moment when she was "saved." It was not "a moment-in-time" experience for her. She couldn't point to an instance when she "went forward" or "said the prayer." Raised by sincere and pious missionary parents, she has said that she has never known an era in her life when she was not conscious of loving God and being loved by him.

Ruth Graham is a symbol of many contemporary Americans who cannot relate to ever feeling "out;" they feel as though they have always been connected somehow to God. Yet, unlike Ruth Graham, for some of these people there is no evidence in their lives of a connection to God. There is no profound love for God, no worship, no obedience, no holiness. Center-set evangelism helps us to affirm these people's past, locate their present life and lead them closer to the center—closer to following Jesus. "If someone were to ask, 'How do I become a Christian?' the Synoptic answer would be 'Become a disciple or follower of Jesus.'"²⁹ "Following" implies movement; center-set thinking focuses on movement rather than "in-ness" or "out-ness." This focus allows

²⁸ Ibid., 99.

²⁹ Ibid., 108.

evangelists to affirm a seeker's present place on the path of faith and to simultaneously call them further on.

Center-set thinking is a huge gift to the task of contemporary evangelism because it lessens the possibility of seekers thinking that evangelists only care about judging them and making them feel guilty so that the evangelist can then convince the seeker that he or she is "out." When the Centurion said to Jesus, "Lord I believe, but help my unbelief," Jesus did not say, "Sorry you are 'out.'" Rather, Jesus healed the man's daughter as asked, thereby affirming the basic heartfelt posture or Godward trajectory of the man's faith. Smith describes the biblical appropriateness of such thinking, "Conversion, then, is not creating something new out of nothing; it is rather enabling a life that is misdirected and confused to find purpose, direction and meaning."³⁰

In this paradigm, those who witness can do so in a relaxed manner for two reasons. First, Christians are simply a midwife to this process; we are neither the mom—that would be God; nor are we the child to be born—that would be others. Second, however, midwives are important and play a crucial, but serving role. That is the key: seekers experiencing us as assisting them on their journey—rather than judging whether they are in or out—will be far more open to ongoing dialog.

I do not mean to suggest that there is never a time for straightforward statements about the claims of our faith, nor that there are never times to say things that might be construed as judgmental. It is a matter of nuance. Picture a continuum that moves from judgmental, condescending preaching designed to convince people they were "out," so

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

that we could help them “in,” on one end of a continuum. Then, picture on the other end of the spectrum something like “coaching” conversations with people who are showing movement toward the center.

This frees us in the task of evangelism in a way that present society badly needs and will greatly appreciate: Christians move from being keepers of the boundary—telling people who is in and who is out—to serving as a witness to the reign of Christ³¹; to act as signs pointing the way to the center; as we ourselves move ever closer to the center. If it is true that a picture is worth a thousand words, then a life lived in pursuit of the center must be worth a million words. This is especially true when such a life is salted with appropriate, Spirit-empowered and timely, Spirit-led explanations to seekers regarding Christian life and faith.

Community, Service And The Holy Spirit

Smith adds additional value to a critique of simplistic renderings of the Gospel through his discussions of the role of the community of faith in conversion, the assumption of a life of service for the converted, and the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in both the process of conversion and as the animating factor in a convert’s life. Even mentioning such topics in a discussion of conversion is a happy step forward.

³¹ The work of the Gospel in our Culture Network amplifies Smith’s idea in meaningful ways. Two books produced by the GOCN are particularly helpful: Guder, *Missional Church*, and James V. Brownson, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey, and Charles C. West, *Stormfront: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2003).

Community

Smith asserts that coming to faith is tied closely to learning a new language and that learning a new language is by definition rooted in a particular community. “Thus,” he continues, “the way a person learns the faith is not through rational presentation so much as through conversation around life lived.”³² My notion is that in today’s world most people respond better to conversations that have their genesis in the seekers’ real needs or agenda as they are moving toward the center—Jesus. They do not respond as well if they think our goal is to judge whether they are in or out. This is especially true if, based on a few prooftexts, they think we are trying to prove our assessment is right. Seekers respond much better to living life with Christians and having discussions on their terms during teachable moments.

In arguing for the important and dynamic role the community of faith plays in conversion,³³ Smith helps us think better about the Gospel and evangelism in two ways. First, seeing conversion as necessarily situated in community helps tie conversion to the larger, covenantal story of God. It works against the idea of merely individuals going to heaven when they die. Second, a convert, seeing this essential connection to a present and more importantly, to a historic people, now has a model to emulate and a pattern to mimic. Such a convert can look to their new friends in the faith and to thousands of years of precedence in order to think through how they ought to live a Christian life.

³² Smith, *Beginning Well*, 40.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33-39.

Service

Smith lays the foundation for a life of service early in the book. Describing the various elements he sees in transformation, he says that “transformation has a social dimension...that brings the capacity to live in mutual love and submission with others; [it] demonstrates at the very least genuine hospitality toward others...”³⁴ Smith goes on to say that much of his self-understanding of conversion comes from considering the life and teachings of John Wesley.³⁵ Wesley, of course, is well-known for his insistence that Christian life was lived with one eye on God, the other on our fellowman.

Jesus provides the clearest and most powerful pattern for what it means to be a Christian: it is a life marked by what Wesley and others have often called “inner” or “contemplative” work joined to outer or public work in the world. The New Testament often shows there was a rhythm to Jesus’ life. He is seen alone praying, then out in public preaching the Gospel; alone on the mountain and then publicly healing the sick and driving out demons.

The private/public routine of Jesus’ life serves to bring together two aspects of conversion: sanctification or spiritual growth plus a missional engagement with the world. If Jesus, as the second Adam, is the model for what it means to be human; if he is the perfect example of God’s purpose for Israel; and if he is the first of a kind regarding Christians, then his life, if we had no other evidence, rebukes the notion that Christianity is merely all about going to heaven when one dies. If it is true that many postmodern

³⁴ Ibid., 26.

³⁵ Ibid., 53.

people access truth not so much by propositions, but through seeing something “work,” then connecting conversion to the two-way calling of spiritual transformation and a missional encounter with the world may be the best form of witnessing we have for contemporary society.

The Holy Spirit

Seeing the essential connection between conversion and a life of service not only properly locates conversion in God’s intentionality for a people, it does one additional crucial thing: it makes sense of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. If one is merely trying to go to heaven when they die, and if such a person thinks they achieve heaven on the basis of a decision that is executed by saying “the sinner’s prayer,” then the person and work of the Holy Spirit will not mean much. If, however, one sees conversion in more covenantal terms; if one sees that to be a follower of Jesus means to announce, demonstrate, and embody the Gospel of the Kingdom, then there is a need for and value of the Holy Spirit. Smith³⁶ notes that “...in Acts the defining feature of conversion is the presence of the Spirit in the life of the new believer.”³⁷

Welcoming the person and work of the Holy Spirit into one’s life and into the life of the church has an important practical application for postmodern seekers. Contemporary seekers often prefer to learn and accept new truths based, at least partially, on experience. This is how they know something is real. It is a common testimony from Alpha courses that people come to faith because they have felt or sensed the presence of God, or they

³⁶ See Appendix 3.

³⁷ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 115.

witness a friend get healed or touched by God in some way. Jesus proclaimed his message by both word and deed, through words and works. When the work of the Spirit is active in a community of faith, seekers are communicated to in a language they understand and value.

Did the Reformers Go Far Enough?

Crucial to the thrust of this dissertation is that Luther and the early reformation did not go far enough; nor did those who picked up on and popularized justification by faith as the essential tool for revivalist and mass evangelism. I do not say that key leaders such as Luther were wrong about fundamental assertions such as justification by faith alone. I suggest they failed to locate justification on a new, correct map. They continued to let the church or the needs and wants of the people set the agenda. The people wanted assurance of salvation; the church said she was the keeper and dispenser of such salvation. Luther and later evangelists only changed the way one received salvation, not the meaning of salvation itself.

For instance, while the Reformers challenged the church regarding issues like the sale of indulgences (the antithesis of “faith alone”), Luther did not challenge the church about what indulgences were meant to buy or what “faith alone” would achieve. Post-Luther, the Christian story was still about avoiding purgatory or hell and achieving heaven after you died; now one just did so by “faith alone.”

While not true in the whole, and while it is not fair to blame it on Luther or Calvin when you consider the whole of their writings, there has been a strain of overemphasis on “justification alone” in the justification by “faith alone” camp. It is as if the post-Luther

focus shifted from Luther's focus on faith versus works to an emphasis on justification.

Worse yet, what justification was supposed to achieve was tightly tied to going to heaven.

Smith confirms this saying:

The American notion of conversion has been shaped largely by revivalism and crusade evangelism...in the reformation...justification became the believer's primary point of reference...if Roman Catholic Christianity has always struggled with the threat of works righteousness, Reformed Protestantism has always struggled with cheap grace. For many, if not the majority of Protestants, God's love and acceptance do not lead to personal transformation.³⁸

The major evangelists (Moody, Sunday, Finney, Graham, Kennedy, and Palau), who with reference to soteriology, come from a largely Reformed point of view—see Smith largely as a “New School Calvinist.”³⁹ There is some theological diversity in that group, but they have very similar praxis based on that theology. Calling for a decision, asking seekers to walk the aisle or to come forward to the altar is a practice informed by a theology.

These acts are supposed to have the effect of gaining an eternity in heaven. In my judgment, there has been a severe unintended consequence to this practice: it reduced “necessary” obedience to these outward revivalist acts. Any further obedience, in popular thought, was seen as optional at best. A quick thought about the intention of God for his people or a simple overview of covenantal notions shows that obedience cannot be reduced to a single decision.

It should be carefully noted that in the covenantal view, no decision, either to “accept Christ” or to obey God in acts of service or decisions for personal holiness, are to be seen

³⁸ Ibid., 80, 82.

³⁹ J. D. Douglas, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2001), 376.

as meritorious. The covenantal obedience expected of Israel and the church does not earn any favor with God. Such obedience is simple cooperation. It is to our glory as humankind. In one's cooperation with God, we are made fully human and experience the gift of eternal life—fullness of life.

The notion that the Christian story is about going to heaven when you die, because you said a certain prayer, is no longer compelling to contemporary culture. Though that is a pragmatic statement, from the point of view of biblical theology, it was never the true story. It was a truncated and misleading rendering of a story that includes forgiveness and heaven, but that cannot be reduced to forgiveness of sins and going to heaven.

Lots of bad things happen when a truncated story is told. For example, Smith says that in our time “the language of conversion has had a strong emphasis on Christ to the neglect of the Father and the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰ A little thought makes it clear why such would be the case. If an era of thought conceives of the Christian story as getting one's sins forgiven so one can go to heaven when they die, then Christ—the penal sacrifice for our sins—not only takes center stage, but virtually all else is pushed aside. Put crudely, the common person has an imagination that goes something like this: they know they have done wrong—sinned—they know God (the Father) is really ticked off about it and that he killed his Son to placate himself on their behalf. Look at where such a story leaves us: God is suspect because of his temper, Jesus is cool and self-sacrificial, and the Holy Spirit is, well who knows; he never comes up in the discussion about how I go to heaven when I die.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 45.

The biblical picture is, of course, far richer. The Father in the biblical story is the beginning and the end; he is creator and the one who brings creation to its divine and beautiful *telos*. Jesus—the Son—in the biblical story cannot be reduced merely to one thing he did—death on the cross. He is also teacher of a new way of life, the model for what it means to be human and in covenant with God. Finally, in the biblical story, the Holy Spirit is the coveted, ongoing presence of Jesus within the community of faith. In an era dominated by going to heaven, the Holy Spirit has had no role except that most evangelists knew that he was the one who drew seekers to faith. In contrast, among Jesus' first followers, the Holy Spirit was a coveted presence. They could not imagine living without the continuing presence of Jesus via the Spirit. In fact, they were panicked by the thought that they might have to live without him.⁴¹ The Spirit "reappears" today for converts who are seeking to be God's sent people into the world. Such converts soon learn that one cannot pursue such a life without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have demonstrated that one's notion of conversion sets the plot line for the rest of the story. Arguing against what he views as errant notions of conversion, here's a "good" conversion:⁴²

1. Belief: the intellectual component: belief *about* Jesus and belief *in* Jesus (emphasis his)

⁴¹ See especially John chapters 14-16 for a clear view of the disciples' reaction to news of Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Spirit. The book of Acts and the New Testament letters describe how the followers of Jesus did in fact learn to relate to and follow the Holy Spirit.

⁴² Smith, *Beginning Well*, 138-142.

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⁴² Smith, *Beginning Well*, 138-142.

2. Repentance: the penitential component: confrontation of and unequivocal rejection of sin
3. Trust and the assurance of forgiveness: the emotional or affective component; the trust, faith, belief, and joy that accompany conversion
4. Commitment, allegiance, and devotion: the volitional component: the transfer of allegiance to Jesus, the determination to follow and obey him.
5. Water baptism: the sacramental component.
6. Reception of the Holy Spirit: the charismatic component
7. Incorporation in Christian community: the corporate component

While heartily acknowledging that Smith is far more sensible and holistic than the populist explanations of the Gospel, the list above might be improved by more clearly locating the various components in a story or in a covenantal paradigm. Number four—commitment, allegiance, and devotion point in the right direction, but those crucial ideas would shine much brighter if they were embedded in a purposeful story which moves from Divine Ultimate Intention to Divine *telos*.

Smith goes on to say that “belief and repentance hold the central place in conversion.”⁴³ He elaborates by asserting, “when belief and repentance are understood as the *core* within the conversion experience, this is the fundamental strength of evangelicalism. But when they are understood as the *whole* of the conversion experience, people have been led to a truncated and one-dimensional understanding and experience of conversion that are neither faithful to the New Testament nor effective in fostering spiritual maturity and strength.”⁴⁴

Again, while I celebrate Smith’s careful holism, I believe the words “belief” and “repentance” have very little meaning in today’s society. Where there is any supposed

⁴³ Ibid., 142

⁴⁴ Ibid. The *italic* emphasis is the author’s.

meaning in popular culture, it is muddled at best. Both words take on their proper meaning and attention-getting power when they are situated in the biblical story.

We turn next to the conclusion. In it, I suggest a concept of evangelism that invites a seeker to "...put yourself into the story and see what happens...."⁴⁵ Pulling all the threads of this thesis together, I will seek to articulate an evangelistically useful and memorable way to tell The Story of God.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary*, 149.

⁴⁶ See Appendix 5 for more.

CONCLUSION

THE GOSPEL AS COVENANT LIFE IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Introduction

Misunderstandings regarding the Gospel have distorted the churches' practice of evangelism and discipleship and have thus created false and underachieving forms of Christian discipleship and spirituality. I demonstrate that tract and bumper-sticker versions of God's story, rooted in misunderstanding God's ultimate intention for humanity, have made discipleship to Jesus rare. I have interacted with several explanations of the Gospel and their attendant forms of evangelism, evaluating whether they lead to follower-ship of Jesus. Next, I suggested a view of the Gospel that hears Paul and other New Testament writers in the light of, and against the historical backdrop of, Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom. This move allows one to more fully define the meaning of key terms such as sin, forgiveness, atonement, heaven, and hell, by embedding them in God's covenantal Kingdom story. Finally, the dissertation gives a fresh telling of the Gospel aimed to communicate with contemporary seekers and those who have rejected God, the gospel of "heaven when you die," and the church.¹

¹ See Appendix 5.

Chapter by Chapter

In chapter one, I argue that wrong notions regarding the Gospel often come from well-intended, marketing approaches to communication. This always results in abbreviations of the biblical story. However well-intended our bumper-sticker and sound-bite approach, we now have plenty of obvious evidence that something has gone wrong with “conversion:” it rarely leads to whole-life follower-ship of Jesus.

The antidote I suggest to this state of things is for the church to re-hear and re-tell its story through the grid of the ultimate intention of God. The usual topics of sin, forgiveness, heaven, hell, cross, and resurrection, do not go anyway or get minimized when one tells the whole story. The opposite happens: they shine like fireworks against a night sky. An emphasis on story best highlights the most cherished characters and scenes in our story.

A scene in the movie *Walk the Line* expresses well the theological and practical importance of telling the right story. In the scene, Johnny Cash (J. R.) and his older brother, Jack, are lying in bed on a steamy, southern, summer night. Fantasizing about fishing the next day, which is supposed to be a work day for the two boys, Johnny can't sleep. His brother, lying next to him in bed, is reading the Bible. Jack tells Johnny that fishing will have to wait until Saturday, after they have helped their dad bring in the crops and cut the wood.

Johnny asks, “Jack, why are you so good?”

“I ain't,” Jack retorts.

“Like five times more than me,” answers Johnny.

“Well, I'm bigger than you are,” says Jack.

Johnny: “Well, you know every story in scripture.”

Jack: “Well, you know every word in mama’s hymnal.”

Johnny: “Songs are easy.”

Jack: “They aren’t for me.”

Johnny: “There’s more words in the Bible than in the Heavenly Highway Hymns.”

Jack: “Look J.R., if I’m gonna be a preacher some day I’m gonna have to know the Bible front to back. *You can’t help nobody if you can’t tell them the right story.*” (Emphasis added.)

God’s intention is best understood through his chief revelations of himself, through the major plot lines of the story: creation, covenant, Christ, kingdom, and the Holy Spirit. In contrast to this, most approaches to evangelism begin with the fall or sin. They begin with man and man’s need and are preoccupied with taking care of sin—as if it were the whole deal. But the fall is not where our story starts. It starts in the eternal, pre-space, and pre-time purposes of God—long before anyone “fell.” God’s intention was to have a people; a covenant people who were his co-conspirators to bring about his good to all of creation.

In chapter two, I argue that the Gospel is really about life; a different kind of life in *this* life. It is life begun from and rooted in the Gospel of the Kingdom. It is an eternal kind of life beginning at conversion and going on throughout all eternity. I show that one must understand Paul’s Gospel in the light of Jesus’ announcement of the Gospel of the Kingdom. I show that if we do so, two good things happen: we will understand Paul in his context and produce followers of Jesus, not merely “converts.” Explaining the Gospel on the basis of the whole story has the best chance of producing *life*: Spirit-animated, Spirit-empowered, Spirit-energized disciples, a life lived for the sake of others as the covenant people of God.

In chapter three, interacting with N. T. Wright, the brilliant historian of the first century and theologian, I demonstrate that to do effective evangelism that leads routinely to discipleship, we need to understand that the “Christian” story has deep roots in the Old Testament or covenantal-Jewish story. Through Wright’s work, we discover that God’s covenantal story expresses the intention of God to have a people. God’s covenant activity climaxing in Jesus, creates the church and defines its role. Jesus comes on the scene not *out of the blue*, but precisely within the covenantal context. He makes visible the Kingdom of God—God’s rule and reign. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, Moses, and David that God would vindicate himself and his people and in so doing would make right all of creation. Christians are a part of this story. Christians *are* going to heaven when they die, but they go there as a part of the covenantal story, not the individualistic story of most contemporary evangelism. Embodying the rule and reign of God in the renowned cosmos is our destiny, not disembodied bliss “in heaven”—whatever that might be in various people’s imagination.

In chapter four, working with the writings of Dallas Willard, I show that spiritual transformation is the goal of Christianity. Transformation into Christlikeness by the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit is central to “what it means to be a Christian.” Forgiveness, for all its human benefits, has at its core purpose a restored relationship with God as his faithful, Covenantal–Kingdom partners. Salvation includes at the heart of it, taking on the yoke of Jesus. Willard says that the reliable pattern for spiritual growth into such a life is “vision, intention and means.” Spiritual growth for the sake of a God-partnership is the *vision* that must inform evangelism. Calling for “decisions” is helping seekers *intend* to follow Jesus into such a life. Means are the divine

and human graces that enable intentionality. Re-defining what it *means* to be a Christian is tremendously powerful because it makes the people and events of our everyday, actual lives, the grounds of both discipleship and mission. Spiritual growth, when understood as comprising our already-daily life, has the chance to be viewed as something other than “stuff one must add to an already over-busy life.” There is a deep hunger for spirituality among postmodern seekers. Contrary to many fears, the postmodern world is not just a threat to Christianity, like modernity and pre-modernity before it; it also has inherent within it opportunities for the Gospel. Willard shows us how to articulate our faith in ways that connect to this societal hunger through expressing the Covenantal–Kingdom story of God in a more faithful way.

In chapter five, I dialog with the work of Gordon Smith. Smith suggests that faulty views of conversion are to blame for poor results in evangelism and discipleship. Smith articulates well the goal of conversion. The key thought here for informing the practice of evangelism is that converts should not be told that they are coming “to” the forgiveness of sins. Rather, they are coming “through” the forgiveness of sins to life in God. Conversion is, by definition, the first step in a process—it is a starting line, not the finish line. For Smith, the goal of conversion is transformation of a life—the first step in that journey. But if that journey is not in view from the beginning, the supposed conversion will be false or truncated. When such a seeker later hears that a life of following Christ is what it means to be a Christian, they may feel they were the victim of a “bait and switch” game. I do not suppose that any Christian leader would ever intentionally play such a game. But, in our effort to get “decisions,” we may have inadvertently done just that.

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Beyond his solid, theological contribution regarding conversion/evangelism, Smith gives the church a great gift for our shifting, uneasy postmodern, post-Christendom times. Applying the social set theory of bounded-sets and center-sets to the practice of evangelism, Smith, putting God in the center of the center-set, shows the church how to appreciate and work with “movement toward the center” in a seeker’s life. This a great move for the present church, especially the more conservative churches, which in their fear of the changing world are apt to quickly judge who is “in” or “out” of their particular bounded-set.

Smith is also useful in his discussion of the explicative and apologetic role of community in the task of evangelism. Many seekers today need to see faith working in others’ lives. For them, knowledge derived in this way is a doorway to truth. Seeing further into the social dimension of conversion, Smith rightly argues that salvation, while deeply personal on one level, is not merely personal. It involves a call to serve others in one’s social settings. Last, in my words, I would say that Smith rightly sees that “election is unto service, not unto privilege.” This move allows the Holy Spirit to come to the fore of one’s imagination for a Christian life. This is not so, when a seeker imagines that they are in a story about going to heaven to float on clouds when they die. That story only logically includes the Father who is to be paid, and the Son who pays the bill. The Spirit, however, is a later add-on in the best case scenario. However, seeing the essential calling to service in one’s public life makes the Holy Spirit—his gifts and character transformation—indispensable.

Embedding Iconic Language in Story

Central to the argument of this thesis, and, more importantly, essential to what I hope to contribute to the practice of Christian evangelism, is to locate the bullet points of the reductionism approach to the Gospel on a map, or to switch metaphors, to locate them in a story.² Unfortunately, some people, especially conservative people, expect to hear certain words uttered in a certain order. When things “sound different,” they get nervous; sometimes to the point of accusing others of compromise, heresy, or false teaching. This is too bad, because no compromise is to be feared by placing something in its proper context—even if it takes a few more minutes to explain it; and even if it will not fit a bumper-sticker or sound-bite timeslot. On the contrary, in my view, the amazing concepts of sin, forgiveness, heaven, hell, do not lose their vitality and crucial fundamental role when placed in a story or located on a map. Rather, like a beautiful diamond viewed against the backdrop of pure black velvet, they shine all the more; they sparkle and call out for our awareness, our gaze, and our fixed attention.

In the course of my lifetime, I have seen sin located on several maps or in a few stories. I have both heard and proclaimed the Gospel of going to heaven and avoiding hell when you die. I have experienced attempts to explain the Gospel in terms of making life a little better for society; what is often called “social justice.” I have known about the Gospel of family, relationships, and Christian therapy. Finally, I have been aware of the Gospel of personal piety, known sometimes as the “third blessing” of entire holiness. None of these things are wrong. It is just that they are partial.

² See Appendix 5.

My aim is that these concepts and phrases, such as sin and forgiveness, will become symbols and images that cause one to recall the whole story of God. This aim has a dual purpose. First, it will give the church a new way to do evangelism. It will assist the church in telling the story of God in such a way that it leads a convert to a life of follower-ship of Jesus. Second, to de-churched or disaffected believers, I want to provide a way for us to say “give the Gospel a fresh hearing; perhaps what you are rejecting is not the biblical Gospel after all.”

Putting Theological Reductions to the Test

Here are three questions from Dallas Willard that I believe the reductionism, popular, bumper-sticker versions of the Gospel have to answer:

1. Does the gospel they preach and teach have a natural tendency to cause people who hear it to become full-time students of Jesus?
2. Would those who believe it become his apprentices as a natural “next step?”
3. What can we reasonably expect would result from people actually believing the substance of the message proclaimed?³

Willard goes on to say:

The acid test for any theology is this: Is the God presented, one that can be loved, heart, soul, mind and strength? If the thoughtful, honest answer is; ‘Not really,’ then we need to look elsewhere or deeper. It does not really matter how sophisticated intellectually or doctrinally our approach is. If it fails to set a lovable God—a radiant, happy, friendly, accessible and totally competent being—before ordinary people, we have gone wrong. We should not keep going in the same direction, but turn around and take another road.”⁴

Could it be that the “god” postmodern seekers are desperately trying to figure out looks like Jesus? I think it is true. The implications are vast and startling. We do not need

³ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 58. These three questions are inspired by the content on this page.

⁴ Ibid., 329.

to hide our “best stuff” in an effort to put the cookies on the lowest possible shelf. It is as possible to talk about a life in Christ, the Spirit, and the Kingdom in simple ways as it is to talk about abridged notions of the atonement. I think postmodern seekers are open to a fresh telling of the story. I believe these seekers have ears for a message that announces, “...the people who read [Jesus’] story now, and make it their own, have the responsibility to implement his victory over evil in the world [and] to retell the story so the world gets the message.”⁵

Postmodern Evangelism

Today, people think they already know “the Christian sales-pitch.” They think they have heard the Gospel and rejected it. I see a huge opportunity in this state of affairs. Almost no one “on the street” knows anything about the Gospel according to Jesus, the Gospel of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God to heal and restore the earth and to make his followers into humanity as God originally intended. Life in the Kingdom is the best news any one could ever hear. It is worth selling all one’s land or pearls to get the land with the treasure or the pearl of greatest price. Wright helpfully points out that “...the way to Christian growth is often to allow oneself to be puzzled and startled by new apparent complexity. There is great simplicity at the heart [of Jesus and his kingdom agenda], but it is costly. The price it demands is sustained attention to the specific, and to us strange and perhaps even repellent, first-century ways of thinking that characterized

⁵ Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary*, 148.

Jesus. It is after all Jesus we want to discover and follow, or would we prefer an idol of our own making?”⁶

Illustrating, in my view, such growth, Wright says:

My proposal is not that we know what the word *god* means and manage somehow to fit Jesus into that. Instead, I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew possessed of a desperately risky, indeed apparently crazy, vocation, riding into Jerusalem in tears, denouncing the Temple and dying on a Roman cross—and we somehow allow our meaning for the word *god* to be re-centered around that point.⁷

This suggestion by Wright has practical value for the task of evangelism. The vast majority of young seekers I have talked with over the past seven years are very open to seeing “god” in new ways. Fearful or cynical Christians assume these seekers will take their thirst for a fresh understanding of “god” in wrong directions. But, it does not have to go that way. Christians can re-discover the Covenantal–Kingdom story and join with these seekers on their journey as something like spiritual directors or spiritual coaches—what we would have called in the past “evangelists.”

The postmodern and post-Christian world is growingly post-secular and post-materialist. Most young seekers I converse with are very open to the trans-rational, the “spiritual domain.” They hunger to know that there is something beyond the empirical world. They don’t want to throw the material world away in a dualistic move. Rather, they want to incorporate the non-material world in their “real” world. Wright says, “September 11, 2001, serves as a reminder of what happened when you try to organize a world on the assumption that religion and spirituality are merely private matters, and that

⁶ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 93.

⁷ Ibid.

what really matters is economics and politics instead.”⁸ Religious stories of ALL kinds have been occasionally distorted by evil. Like all of creation, human attempts to embody any given religious story is fallen. Religiously inspired terrorists are living out of a story. They embed their shoes and clothes with bombs as a way of embedding their lives in their story.

Christians, too, have a story to tell, to live in, and to embody. There may have never been a more important time than now to tell and live the Covenantal–Kingdom–God story. It will help postmodern seekers make sense of the church, especially church attendance, if we can tell a different story. Debra Rienstra agrees saying, “Church is about shaping the soul so that we might bear the presence of God. Everything else about going to church—and there is plenty—flows into that purpose.”⁹

We are the sent people of God, chosen to be his agents of healing, deliverance, and salvation. Wright makes this clear in terms of practice.

We need Christian people to work as healers: as healing judges and prison staff, as healing teachers and administrators, as healing shopkeepers and bankers, as healing musicians and artists, as healing writers and scientists, as healing diplomats and politicians. We need people who will hold on to Christ firmly with one hand and reach out the other with wit and skill and cheerfulness, with compassion and sorrow and tenderness, to the places where our world is in pain. We need people who will use all their God-given skills, as Paul used his, to analyze where things have gone wrong, to come to the place of pain, and to hold over the wound the only medicine which will really heal, which is the love of

⁸ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 20.

⁹ Debra Rienstra, *So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 163.

God turned into your flesh and mine, your smile and mine, you tears and mine,
your patient analysis and mine, your frustration and mine, your joy and mine.¹⁰

We are ambassadors of the Kingdom, armed with power and authority from the Holy Spirit to work for the good of others. "...wherever people responded to [Jesus'] call, he gave them instructions as to how they should live, as the new-Exodus people, the forgiveness-of-sins people. They were to live, in each village or town, as a cell of kingdom-people, a little group loyal to Jesus and his kingdom-vision."¹¹ This is the vision and pattern for Christian spirituality. "Christian spirituality," as Wright says, "is the rhythm of standing in the presence of the pain of the world, and kneeling in the presence of the creator of the world; of bringing those two things together in the name of Jesus and by the victory of the cross..."¹² Our calling as kingdom people exists both in this life and forever in the renewed cosmos. As Willard says, "We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with a unique eternal calling to count for good in God's great universe."¹³

Having such a vision, the church is enabled to re-think approaches to evangelism and discipleship so that the works and words of Jesus are not reduced to "going to heaven when you die." Instead, on the basis of the Covenantal-Kingdom story, converts can be led into a spiritual life that is comprised of living a Kingdom life now for the sake of the world.

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 101.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 54.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 21.

APPENDIX 1

Salvation: The Gift of a Changed Life

No thoughtful person appreciates a proof-text approach to the scriptures. I try to avoid that approach by showing that *life in a Covenantal–Kingdom relationship with God* is the emphasis of the whole New Testament, not just a few selected proof-passages. On the other side of the coin, the “avoid hell, go to heaven” paradigm, while present, is not mentioned in the terms often used today. However, salvation as *new life* is seen in virtually every New Testament book and on most pages. Surveying the relevant passages reveals that a clear emphasis emerges from the Gospel texts: salvation is about life—a different kind of life—an eternal kind of life. Upon review, it is startling to think that so many people have missed it. The main focus has been on forgiveness, and that as only or mostly having to do with going to heaven when one dies.

Seeking to cast a different vision of Christianity, Richard Foster and team write, “The Bible is all about human life ‘with God.’ It is about how God has made this ‘with-God’ life possible and will bring it to pass. *Indeed, the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life ‘with God’ as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus.*”¹ This “with-God” life is the eternal kind of life God has always sought for his creation. As

¹ Richard J. Foster, *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Deuterocanonical Books*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). xxvii. The italic emphasis is in the text.

Willard writes, “Eternal life is an interactive relationship with God and with his special Son, Jesus, within the abiding ambience of the Holy Spirit.” He goes on to say that “...all [the church] needs to fulfill Christ’s purposes on earth is *the quality of life he makes real in the life of his disciples.*”²

As the survey below will demonstrate, this different kind of life is derived from, and lived in, the Kingdom of God. God initiates this life as a gift—“sheer grace”—as *The Message* states it. In contrast, in recent history—for instance, post-World War II—perhaps no idea has been more harmful to the cause of God on earth than the thought that being a Christian has mainly to do with having one’s sins forgiven for the purpose of going to heaven upon death. Though the New Testament, of course, speaks of heaven and the believers’ place in it, it never speaks of heaven as if “getting people there upon death” was the chief aim of Jesus or the main goal of Christian life. In contrast, the biblical data reveals that the goal of Christian life is to be “in Christ,” to take on his kind of life as our own through the grace and power of God. Another way to put it is that while heaven is *the destination* of Christians, it is not *the goal*. Spiritual transformation into Christlikeness is the goal of Christianity.

The texts below describe what salvation means and what it entails. Note the emphasis on *life*: life in Jesus, life in the Kingdom. Also, observe the absence of heaven or hell as primary motivators for dealing with God or following Jesus. I maintain that heaven and hell are real. But in doing so, I also assert that they play a role in the biblical story that is different than the one often heard in “street theology.” The clear emphasis of

² Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), xiv. The *italic* emphasis is the author’s.

the “Gospel” texts of the New Testament is on *life*— which includes death, and thus deals with heaven and hell as well—but in the context of a life.

Dealing with death, which is usually the preoccupation of seekers and preachers alike, is included in this new life. For followers of Jesus, death is not experienced. It is something like a “non-event.” It is simply a transition to the life to come. Jesus said, “I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?” (*The Message*, John 11) One might say death is the last “earthy-this-life-happening” of an unending life in and through Jesus. Salvation is the gift of a changed life in the present—which includes the passage of death and the destination of the Presence of God.

I have chosen to survey the New Testament Gospel texts in *The Message*.³ My rationale for doing so is based upon four assumptions. First, this approach appropriately limits my focus in keeping with the scope of this dissertation. Rather than using space to compare translations or work on the etymology of various words, I assume the exegetical and etymologic ability of Eugene Peterson and the wide acceptance of *The Message* among all kinds of Christians—scholars, pastors, and lay people.

Second, my aim, in keeping with the emphasis of a Doctor of Ministry program, is to do applied research. That is to say, that the ultimate user of my work will be seekers or those trying to find their way back to the faith. Thus, I need language that is simple and

³ *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language*. Eugene Peterson. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. 1993

clear for the former. I need language that sneaks up on the latter with fresh words to convey old ideas. *The Message* fits that twin-focus perfectly.

Third, in my view, *The Message*, in keeping with the feel and purpose of street-level *koine* Greek of its time, communicates to current seekers better than any other translation or paraphrase of the Bible. Rather than seeking a word for word translation, it seeks to communicate the idea of the passage in contemporary language.

Fourth, I judge Eugene Peterson to be the best translator for my purposes. Peterson is rare in that he is highly competent in both biblical languages. But that alone does not uniquely set him apart for my work. Added to his technical competence is his well-known emphasis on discipleship or the spiritual life. He helpfully brings this practical spiritual understanding to his work, giving it both methodological proficiency, and an emphasis on pointing readers to life in God.

THE MESSAGE⁴

Matthew

Matthew 1

...name him Jesus—"God saves"—because he will save his people from their sins.

Matthew 3

There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into *a changed life*....it is your *life* that must change...what counts is your *life*...I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning *your old life* in for a *Kingdom life*... [Jesus] will ignite *Kingdom life* within you...the Holy Spirit within you, changing

⁴ I have added the *italics* in the passages below for emphasis.

you from the inside out. [He'll] make a clean sweep of your *lives*. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God.

Matthew 4

[Jesus] picked up where John left off: *change your life*. God's kingdom is here...God's kingdom was his theme—that beginning right now, they were under God's government, a good government!

Matthew 5

You're kingdom subjects. Now *live* like it. *Live* out your God-created identity. *Live* generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

Matthew 7

These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to you *life*, homeowner improvements to you standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a *life* on.

Matthew 8

Jesus refused [the man asking to wait and follow him later.] "First things first. *Your business is life*, not death. Follow me. *Pursue life*."

Matthew 11

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and *you'll recover your life*. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and *you'll learn to live* freely and lightly.

Matthew 13

When Jonah preached [to the Ninevites] *they changed their lives*.

Matthew 16

This following is reminiscent of N. T. Wright on humanity as God intended, God's renewed humanity.

Self-sacrifice is the way, my way to finding your self, your true self.

Matthew 18

I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in.

Matthew 21

Jesus said...I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God's kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw *their changed lives*, you didn't care enough to change and believe him.

Matthew 23

Do you know how silly you look *writing a life's story* that is wrong from start to finish, nitpicking over commas and semicolons?

Matthew 28

God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in *this way of life*, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.

Mark

Mark 1

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching *a baptism of life-change* that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into *a changed life*...As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will *change your life*. I'm baptizing you here in the river, *turning your old life in for a kingdom life*. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out...." Jesus went to Galilee preaching the Message of God: "Time's up! God's kingdom is here. *Change your life* and believe the Message."

Mark 6

[The disciples] preached with joyful urgency that *life can be radically different*.

Mark 10

Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life? [Jesus said] come follow me.

Mark 11

Jesus was matter-of-fact: *Embrace this God-life*. Really embrace it, and nothing will be too much for you.

Luke

Luke 3

[John] preached a baptism of *life change* leading to forgiveness of sins... When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? *It’s your life that must change*, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. *What counts is your life*. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.

Luke 5

[Jesus said to the leper he had just healed] *your cleansed and obedient life*, not your words, will bear witness to what I have done. [Jesus, hearing the controversy surrounding him] spoke up, who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an *invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out*.

Luke 6

You don’t get wormy apples off a healthy tree, nor good apples off a diseased tree. The health of the apple tells the health of the tree. *You must begin with your own life-giving lives*. It’s who you are, not what you say and do, that counts. Your true being brims over into true words and deeds. Why are you so polite with me, always saying ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘That’s right, sir,’ but never doing a thing I tell you? These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner

improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, *words to build a life on*. If you *work the words into your life*, you are like a smart carpenter who dug deep and laid the foundation of his house on bedrock. When the river burst its banks and crashed against the house, nothing could shake it; it was built to last. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't *work them into your life*, you are like a dumb carpenter who built a house but skipped the foundation. When the swollen river came crashing in, it collapsed like a house of cards. It was a total loss.

Luke 11

No one lights a lamp, then hides it in a drawer...Keep your *life* as well-lighted as your best-lighted room.

Luke 24

[Jesus] said, everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms have to be fulfilled. He went on to open their understanding of the Word of God, showing them how to read their Bibles this way. He said, "You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then *a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins* is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You're the first to hear and see it. You're the witnesses. What comes next is very important: I am sending what my Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you're equipped with power from on high."

John

John 1

Everything was created through him; nothing—not one thing!— came into being without him. What came into existence was *Life*, and the *Life* was Light to live by. The *Life-Light* blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.

John 3

Jesus said...unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into *a new life*—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom.

"...it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain *a real life, eternal life*."

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have *a whole and lasting life*.

...whoever accepts and trusts the Son gets in on everything, *life complete and forever!*

John 5

The Son gives *life* to whoever he chooses.

It's urgent that you listen carefully to this: Anyone here who believes what I am saying right now and aligns himself with the Father, who has in fact put me in charge, has at this very moment *the real, lasting life* and is no longer condemned to be an outsider. This person has taken a giant step from the world of the dead to *the world of the living*.

You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me *the life you say you want*.

John 6

The Bread of God came down out of heaven and is giving *life* to the world... [Jesus said] I am *the Bread of Life*. The person who aligns with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever... anyone who sees the Son and trusts who he is

and what he does and then aligns with him will enter *real life, eternal life*. My part is to put them on their feet alive and whole at the completion of time... I'm telling you the most solemn and sober truth now: Whoever believes in me has real life, eternal life. I am *the Bread of Life*. Anyone eating this Bread will not die, ever. I am the Bread—living Bread!—who came down out of heaven. Anyone who eats this Bread will live—and forever! The Bread that I present to the world so that it can eat and live is myself, this flesh-and-blood self.

At this, the Jews started fighting among themselves: “How can this man serve up his flesh for a meal?” But Jesus didn't give an inch. “Only insofar as you eat and drink flesh and blood, the flesh and blood of the Son of Man, do you have *life* within you. The one who brings a hearty appetite to this eating and drinking has *eternal life* and will be fit and ready for the Final Day. My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. By eating my flesh and drinking my blood you enter into me and I into you. In the same way that the fully alive Father sent me here and I live because of him, so the one who makes a meal of me *lives* because of me. This is the Bread from heaven. Your ancestors ate bread and later died. Whoever eats this Bread will live always.”

Jesus sensed that his disciples were having a hard time with this and said, “Does this throw you completely? What would happen if you saw the Son of Man ascending to where he came from? The Spirit can make *life*. Sheer muscle and willpower don't make anything happen. Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is *life-making*.”

John 7

Rivers of *living water* will brim and spill out of the depths of any one who believes in me...

John 8

Jesus once again addressed them, “I am the world's Light. No one who follows me stumbles around in the darkness. I provide plenty of light to *live* in.”

If you won't believe I am who I say I am, you're at the dead end of sins. You're missing God in your lives.

If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.

Jesus said, “I tell you most solemnly that anyone who chooses a life of sin is trapped in a dead-end life and is, in fact, a slave.”

John 12

Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

The Father who sent me gave me orders, told me what to say and how to say it. And I know exactly what his command produces: real and eternal life.

John 14

Jesus said...the Father is the goal and purpose of my life.

John 17

Jesus said these things. Then, raising his eyes in prayer, he said: Father, it's time. Display the bright splendor of your Son so the Son in turn may show your bright splendor. You put him in charge of everything human *So he might give real and eternal life* to all in his charge. And this is the real and eternal life: That they know you, The one and only true God, And Jesus Christ, whom you sent...Everything mine is yours, and yours mine, And *my life is on display in them*...Holy Father, guard them as they pursue this *life* That you conferred as a gift through me...They are no more defined by the world than I am defined by the world. Make them holy—consecrated—with the truth; Your word is consecrating truth. In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world. I'm consecrating myself for their sakes *So they'll be truth-consecrated in their mission.*

John 20

Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have *real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.*

Acts

Acts 2

Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?" Peter said, "*Change your*

life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 3

Peter...addressed the people: Now it's time to change your ways! Turn to face God so he can wipe away your sins, pour out showers of blessing to refresh you, and send you the Messiah he prepared for you, namely, Jesus.

Acts 5

...an angel of God...said, “Go to the Temple and take your stand. Tell the people everything there is to say about *this Life*.”

Peter and the apostles [said]... the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, the One you killed by hanging him on a cross. God set him on high at his side, Prince and Savior, to give Israel *the gift of a changed life* and sins forgiven.

Acts 8

Peter [answering Simon] said, you'll never be part of what God is doing by striking bargains and offering bribes. *Change your ways*—and now! Ask the Master to forgive you...

Acts 10

...John preached a total life change.

Acts 11

[The angel told Simon that] Peter will tell you something that will *change your life*...It's really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to *Life*!”

Acts 13

Paul said...God produced a Savior for Israel, Jesus, exactly as he promised—but only after John had thoroughly alerted the people to his arrival by preparing them for *a total life-change*.

All who were marked out for *real life* put their trust in God—they honored God's Word by receiving that *life*. And this Message of salvation spread like wildfire all through the region.

Acts 15

[God]... treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, *cleaning up their lives* as they trusted and believed him.

Acts 16

The jailer...led them out of the jail and asked, "Sirs, what do I have to do *to be saved, to really live*?" They said, "Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you'll *live* as you were meant to live—and everyone in your house included!"

Acts 17

The unknown is now known, and [God] is calling for *a radical life change*.

Acts 20

[Paul said]...I taught you out in public and I taught you in your homes, urging Jews and Greeks alike to *a radical life-change* before God and an equally radical trust in our Master Jesus.

Acts 26

[Paul told Agrippa that Jesus said to him]: I'm sending you off to present my offer of sins forgiven, and a place in the family, inviting them into the company of those who begin *real living* by believing in me. "What could I do, King Agrippa? I couldn't just walk away from a vision like that! I became an obedient believer on the spot. I started preaching this *life-change*—this radical turn to God and everything it meant in everyday life."

Romans

Romans 1

Through [Jesus] we received both the generous gift of his *life* and the urgent task of passing it on to others who receive it by entering into obedient trust in Jesus.

The person in right standing before God by trusting him really *lives*.

Romans 2

God is kind, but he's not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into *a radical life-change*.

Make no mistake: In the end you get what's coming to you—*Real Life* for those who work on God's side, but to those who insist on getting their own way and take the path of least resistance, Fire!

Romans 3

Out of sheer generosity [God] put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin.

...God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does. We've finally figured it out. Our *lives* get in step with God and all others by letting him set the pace...

Romans 5

If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we're at our best, just think of how our *lives* will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life!

Yet the rescuing gift is not exactly parallel to the death-dealing sin. If one man's sin put crowds of people at the dead-end abyss of separation from God, just think what God's gift poured through one man, Jesus Christ, will do! There's no comparison between that death-dealing sin and this generous, *life-giving gift*. The verdict on that one sin was the death sentence; the verdict on the many sins that followed was this wonderful *life sentence*. If death got the upper hand through one man's wrongdoing, can you imagine the breathtaking recovery *life* makes, *sovereign life*, in those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant *life-gift*, this grand setting-everything-right, that the one man Jesus Christ provides?

Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, *he got us into life!*

When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into *life*—*a life* that goes on and on and on, world without end.

Romans 6

Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his *life-saving resurrection*. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us. From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and *alive to God*. That's what Jesus did.

That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with *that old way of life*. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. *You're living in the freedom of God.*"

...the worse your life became and the less freedom you had...and how much different is it now as you *live in God's freedom, your lives healed* and expansive in holiness?

...now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A *whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way!* Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But *God's gift is real life, eternal life*, delivered by Jesus, our Master.

Romans 7

...now that we're no longer shackled to that domineering mate of sin, and out from under all those oppressive regulations and fine print, we're *free to live a new life in the freedom of God*.

Romans 8

Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. *The Spirit of life in Christ*, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death.

In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all.

Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into *a spacious, free life*.

...if God himself has taken up residence in your life...for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—*you yourself experience life on God's terms*.

This *resurrection life* you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?"

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to *shape the lives* of those who love him along the same lines as *the life of his Son*. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended *shape of our lives* there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun. This is the ultimate intention of God.

Romans 12

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary *life*—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around *life*—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. *You'll be changed from the inside out*. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Romans 14

It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death...

God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake. It's what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy.

1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 1

I send this letter to you in God's church at Corinth, believers cleaned up by Jesus and set apart for *a God-filled life*.

Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this *life*.

2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 1

So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where *God is making new life*, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace.

2 Corinthians 5

One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat. He included everyone in his death so that everyone could also be included in his *life*, a resurrection *life*, *a far better life* than people ever lived on their own.

...anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; *a new life burgeons!*

2 Corinthians 6

Dear, dear Corinthians, I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this *wide-open, spacious life*...Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!

Galatians

Galatians 3

Habakkuk had it right: "The person who believes God, is set right by God—and that's *the real life*."

We are all able to receive God's *life*, his Spirit, in and with us by believing—just the way Abraham received it.

Galatians 4

Do you know how I feel right now, and will feel until Christ's life becomes visible in your *lives*?

Galatians 6

...the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of *real life, eternal life*.

For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate. Can't you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do—submit to circumcision, reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and he is creating something totally new, *a free life*!

Ephesians

Ephesians 1

Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, *we're a free people*—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. *And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free!* He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

I ask...the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of *this glorious way of life* he has for his followers...

Ephesians 2

The Messiah has made things up between us...he created *a new kind of human being*, a fresh start for everybody.

Ephesians 4

But that's no life for you...everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then *take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life*

renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.

Philippians

Philippians 1

...I plan to be around awhile, companion to you as your growth and joy in *this life of trusting God* continues.

...live in such a way that you are a credit to the Message of Christ.

There's far more to this life than trusting in Christ. There's also suffering for him. And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting.

Philippians 2

Be energetic in *your life of salvation*, reverent and sensitive before God.

Colossians

Colossians 1

The lines of *purpose in your lives* never grow slack, tightly tied as they are to your future in heaven, kept taut by hope.

God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating...we look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created.

...all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of [Jesus'] death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

You yourselves are a case study of what he does. At one time you all had your backs turned to God, thinking rebellious thoughts of him, giving him trouble every chance you got. But now, by giving himself completely at the Cross, actually dying for you, Christ brought you over to God's side and *put your lives together*, whole and holy in his presence. You don't walk away from a gift like that! You stay grounded and steady in that bond of trust, constantly tuned in to the Message, careful not to be distracted or diverted. There is no other Message—just this one. Every creature under heaven gets this same Message. I, Paul, am a messenger of this Message.

Colossians 2

Entering into this fullness is not something you figure out or achieve...through some secretive initiation rite but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin. If it's an initiation ritual you're after, you've already been through it by submitting to baptism. Going under the water was a burial of *your old life*; coming up out of it was a resurrection, God raising you from the dead as he did Christ. When you were stuck in *your old sin-dead life*, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you *alive*—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.

Colossians 3

Your *old life* is dead. Your *new life*, which is your *real life*—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. *He is your life*. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you.

So, chosen by God for *this new life of love*, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 5

God didn't set us up for an angry rejection but for salvation by our Master, Jesus Christ. He died for us, a death that triggered *life*. Whether we're awake with the living or asleep with the dead, we're *alive* with him!

1 Timothy

1 Timothy 2

...there's one God and only one, and one Priest-Mediator between God and us—Jesus, who offered himself in exchange for everyone held captive by sin, to set them all free.

2 Timothy

2 Timothy 3

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.

2 Timothy 4

You take over. I’m about to die, *my life an offering* on God’s alter.

Titus

Titus 1

My aim is to raise hopes by pointing the way to *life without end*. This is *the life God promised* long ago—and he doesn’t break promises!

Hebrews

Hebrews 9

If that animal blood and the other rituals of purification were effective in cleaning up certain matters of our religion and behavior, think how much more the blood of Christ *cleans up our whole lives, inside and out*. Through the Spirit, Christ offered himself as an unblemished sacrifice, freeing us from all those dead-end efforts to make ourselves respectable, so that we can *live all out for God*.

Hebrews 12

We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God’s training so we can *truly live*?

James

James 3

Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It’s the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts.

1 Peter

1 Peter 1

Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given *a brand-new life and have everything to live for*, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now!

As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into *a way of life shaped by God's* life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness.

Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God. It cost God plenty to get you out of that *dead-end, empty-headed life* you grew up in.

Now that you've *cleaned up your lives by following the truth*, love one another as if your lives depended on it. *Your new life is not like your old life*. Your old birth came from mortal sperm; your new birth comes from God's living Word. Just think: *a life conceived by God himself!* That's why the prophet said, "The old life is a grass life, its beauty as short-lived as wildflowers; Grass dries up, flowers droop, God's Word goes on and on forever." This is *the Word that conceived the new life in you*.

1 Peter 2

This is *the kind of life* you've been invited into, the kind of life Christ lived.

1 Peter 3

Whoever wants to *embrace life* and see the day fill up with good, Here's what you do: Say nothing evil or hurtful; Snub evil and cultivate good; run after peace for all you're worth. God looks on all this with approval...

1 Peter 4

Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want.

2 Peter

2 Peter 1

I, Simon Peter...write this to you whose experience with God is as *life-changing* as ours, all due to our God's straight dealing and the intervention of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Everything that goes into *a life of pleasing God* has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you—your tickets to *participation in the life of God* after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust.

So, friends, confirm God's invitation to you, his choice of you. Don't put it off; do it now. Do this, and you'll have your *life* on a firm footing, the streets paved and the way wide open into the eternal kingdom of our Master and Savior, Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 3

Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to *live a holy life*? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival...so, my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found *living* at your best, in purity and peace.

1 John

1 John 1

The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! "...what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: *The infinite Life of God himself* took shape before us."

If we claim that we experience *a shared life* with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we're obviously lying through our teeth—we're not *living* what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience *a shared life* with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin.

1 John 2

If someone claims, "I know him well!" but doesn't keep his commandments, he's obviously a liar. His *life* doesn't match his words. But the one who keeps God's

word is the person in whom we see God's mature love. This is the only way to be sure we're in God. Anyone who claims to be intimate with God ought to *live* the same kind of life Jesus lived.

Stay with what you heard from the beginning, the original message. Let it sink into your *life*. If what you heard from the beginning lives deeply in you, you will live deeply in both Son and Father. This is exactly what Christ promised: *eternal life, real life!*

Live deeply in what you were taught...*live* deeply in Christ.

1 John 4

God sent his only Son into the world so we might *live* through him...he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God...this is how we know we're living steadily and deeply in him, and he in us: He's given us *life from his life*, from his very own Spirit.

1 John 5

This is the testimony in essence: God gave us *eternal life*; the *life* is in his Son. So, whoever has the Son, has *life*; whoever rejects the Son, rejects *life*...My purpose in writing is simply this: that you who believe in God's Son will know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you have *eternal life*, the reality and not the illusion.

This Jesus is both the True God and the *Real Life*.

Jude

Jude

Dear friends, I've dropped everything to write you about this life of salvation that we have in common.

But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit, staying right at the center of God's love, keeping your arms open and outstretched, ready for the mercy of our Master, Jesus Christ. *This is the unending life, the real life!*

APPENDIX 2

The Covenantal–Kingdom Story

If the church is to do better in the task of evangelism and discipleship, it is crucial that it recover the bigger, Covenantal–Kingdom story in which topics such as sin and salvation, heaven and hell, and cross and resurrection arise. If we fail to do this, discipleship will remain a counterintuitive, little chosen path for life. As Shelton writes, “The covenant story is the framework in which all metaphors of salvation function. The story of the covenant relationship is God’s love story of faithfulness to his promises and his presentation of divine expectations for us human creatures.”¹

Absent from this context, twentieth-century evangelism often devolved into an individualist decision to “believe in Jesus” in order to go to heaven when one died. Only rarely was there any thought of being the people of God on earth. “Only really seriously religious people do that,” is the common view. Shelton again is helpful:

Without the historical background of God’s relationship to his people in the covenant relationship, concepts such as reconciliation, redemption, salvation, and justification are only theoretical theological concepts lacking concrete historical examples to give them meaning. The New Testament message of salvation functions as the revelation and validation of God’s faithfulness as the covenant keeping God.²

¹ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 86.

Christians in my lifetime have tended to not think much about the Old Testament. Seeing no connection to the New Testament, the Old Testament certainly had no obvious application to contemporary life. In fact, it seemed to many people that there were two “gods” in the Bible: one in each testament. Reconciling this was too difficult. Thus, many people simply lived with ambivalence toward the idea that there was any cohesiveness between the testaments. Shelton helpfully uses the terms “covenants” in place of “testaments.” He writes, “Though not materially different from the old, this new covenant refurbishes and clarifies and internalizes the old, so that one can get its real message.”³ Holism, beginning with the intention of God and moving to divine *telos*, is necessary to shape a new imagination for articulating a Gospel which leads to discipleship.

Below is a representative sample of biblical texts which demonstrate the essential harmony of the covenants within the one purpose of God to have a covenant people who would be his cooperative, faithful, sent friends. Using the same rationale outlined in Appendix One, I quote here from *The Message*.⁴

THE MESSAGE

Luke

Luke is self-consciously writing a story; a story connected to the story of the covenant God and his people. He is tying the threads together in order to make meaning of God’s most profound revelation of himself: Jesus.

³ Ibid., 96

⁴ I have added the *italics* in the passages below are for emphasis.

Luke 1

So many others have tried their hand at putting together *a story* of the wonderful harvest of Scripture and history that took place among us, using reports handed down by the original eyewitnesses who served this Word with their very lives. Since I have investigated all the reports in close detail, *starting from the story's beginning*, I decided to write it all out for you...

Zachariah's prophecy ties the events of Jesus to the wider covenant story:

Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, Blessed be the Lord, *the God of Israel*; he came and set his people free. He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David his servant, *Just as he promised long ago* through the preaching of his holy prophets: Deliverance from our enemies and every hateful hand; Mercy to our fathers, as *he remembers to do what he said he'd do, what he swore to our father Abraham*—a clean rescue from the enemy camp. So we can worship him without a care in the world, made holy before him as long as we live.

Luke 6

Jesus was surprised when his hearers did not make the Covenantal–Kingdom connection:

I've yet to come across this kind of simple trust anywhere in Israel, the very people who are supposed to know about God and how he works.

Luke 16

Jesus links the Jewish story to the Kingdom of God. Here are two examples:

God's Law and the Prophets climaxed in John; Now it's all kingdom of God—the glad news and compelling invitation to every man and woman.

Luke 24

...Jesus said, everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms have to be fulfilled.

He went on to open their understanding of the Word of God, showing them how to read their Bibles this way. He said, “You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You’re the first to hear and see it. You’re the witnesses. What comes next is very important: I am sending what my Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you’re equipped with power from on high.”

John

John 1

John says:

He came to his own people, but they didn’t want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.

John 4

God’s way of salvation is made available through the Jews.

Acts

Acts 2

In Acts, Luke writes the following:

...this Jesus [was] following the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God...

Acts 3

All the prophets from Samuel on down said the same thing, said most emphatically that these days would come. *These prophets, along with the covenant God made with your ancestors, are your family tree.* God’s covenant-word to Abraham provides the text: ‘By your offspring all the families of the earth will be blessed.’ But you are first in line: God, having raised up his Son, sent him to bless you as you turn, one by one, from your evil ways.

Acts 7

One should read the whole chapter. Stephen interprets post-resurrection reality by telling the story of the Jews: God's covenant people. He does not start his story with the fall; he starts with Abraham. Covenant and kingdom are his interpretive grids.

Acts 10

Peter fairly exploded with his good news:

It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. *The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.*

Acts 10

Paul's preaching is rooted in the covenant story.

Paul stood up, paused and took a deep breath, then said, "Fellow Israelites and friends of God, listen. *God took a special interest in our ancestors*, pulled our people who were beaten down in Egyptian exile to their feet, and led them out of there in grand style. He took good care of them for nearly forty years in that godforsaken wilderness and then, having wiped out seven enemies who stood in the way, gave them the land of Canaan for their very own—a span in all of about 450 years."

Up to the time of Samuel the prophet, God provided judges to lead them. But then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul, son of Kish, out of the tribe of Benjamin. After Saul had ruled forty years, God removed him from office and put King David in his place, with this commendation: "I've searched the land and found this David, son of Jesse. He's a man whose heart beats to my heart, a man who will do what I tell him."

From out of David's descendants God produced a Savior for Israel, Jesus, exactly as he promised—but only after John had thoroughly alerted the people to his arrival by preparing them for a total life-change. As John was finishing up his work, he said, "Did you think I was the One? No, I'm not the One. But the One you've been waiting for all these years is just around the corner, about to appear. And I'm about to disappear."

Dear brothers and sisters, children of Abraham, and friends of God, this message of salvation has been precisely targeted to you...and we're here today bringing you good news: the Message that what God promised the fathers has come true for the children—for us!

Acts 15

One should read the whole chapter. The leaders in Jerusalem sort out the Gentile issue through the grid of the Covenantal–Kingdom story with Jesus as both climax and chief interpretive authority.

Acts 17

Paul's preaching is rooted in the covenant story.

Paul went to their meeting place, as he usually did when he came to a town, and for three Sabbaths running *he preached to them from the Scriptures. He opened up the texts so they understood what they'd been reading all their lives: that the Messiah absolutely had to be put to death and raised from the dead—there were no other options—and that “this Jesus I'm introducing you to is that Messiah.”*

Acts 18

Apollos used the Jewish scriptures to tell the story of what God was up to in Jesus.

Apollos was particularly effective in public debate with the Jews *as he brought out proof after convincing proof from the Scriptures* that Jesus was in fact God's Messiah.

Acts 22

Paul tells the story of his conversion and life of evangelism within the overarching framework of the Jewish story

Then [Paul] said, “*The God of our ancestors has handpicked you to be briefed on his plan of action.*”

Acts 24

Paul defends his manner of life by appealing to the covenant story:

In regard to the Way, which they malign as a dead-end street, I serve and worship the very same God served and worshiped by all our ancestors and embrace everything written in all our Scriptures.

Acts 26

Paul, explaining himself before Agrippa, roots his life, actions and beliefs in the Jewish story:

It's because I believed [the story] and took it seriously, committed myself heart and soul to what God promised my ancestors—the identical hope, mind you, that the twelve tribes have lived for night and day all these centuries....

Acts 28

At the end of Acts Paul is still preaching the covenant/kingdom/Jesus story:

Paul talked to them all day, from morning to evening, explaining everything involved in the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them all about Jesus by pointing out what Moses and the prophets had written about him...Paul lived for two years in his rented house. He welcomed everyone who came to visit. He urgently presented all matters of the kingdom of God. He explained everything about Jesus Christ. His door was always open.

Romans

Romans 1

Paul writes in Romans:

It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, *starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else!*

Romans 3

...in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him.

Romans 4

Paul interprets the work of Jesus in terms of Abraham:

So how do we fit what we know of Abraham, our first father in the faith, into this new way of looking at things?

Romans 9 – 11

As an explanation of the new covenant in light of the old, this is the highpoint in all the New Testament. Paul views the work of Christ among the Gentiles as an extension of, and fulfillment of, the promises of God to Israel.

Romans 15

Paul teaches Christian practices on the basis of God's work, through Jesus, on behalf of Israel:

...reach out and welcome one another to God's glory. Jesus did it; now you do it! Jesus, staying true to God's purposes, reached out in a special way to the Jewish insiders so that the old ancestral promises would come true for them. As a result, the non-Jewish outsiders have been able to experience mercy and to show appreciation to God. Just think of all the Scriptures that will come true in what we do! For instance: Then I'll join outsiders in a hymn-sing; I'll sing to your name! And this one: Outsiders and insiders, rejoice together! And again: People of all nations, celebrate God! All colors and races, give hearty praise! And Isaiah's word: There's the root of our ancestor Jesse, breaking through the earth and growing tree tall, Tall enough for everyone everywhere to see and take hope!

1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 2

Paul explains the mysteries of Christ in terms of the Jewish story:

God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of his purposes. You don't find it lying around on the surface. *It's not the latest message, but more like the oldest—what God determined as the way to bring out his best in us, long before we ever arrived on the scene.*

1 Corinthians 10

Paul instructs the new believers in Corinth regarding Christian life by telling the story of the Jews, saying that Jews and Christians have parallel stories in God.

Ephesians

Ephesians 2

Paul, explaining the purposes of God to the Gentiles in Ephesus, says:

It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this, didn't know the first thing about the way God works, hadn't the faintest idea of Christ. You knew nothing of that rich history of God's covenants and promises in Israel, hadn't a clue about what God was doing in the world at large. Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything.

The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody.

1 John

1 John 2

John connects proper Christian practices and covenantal responsibility in the commandments given to Israel:

Here's how we can be sure that we know God in the right way: Keep his commandments.

If someone claims, "I know him well!" but doesn't keep his commandments, he's obviously a liar. His life doesn't match his words. But the one who keeps God's word is the person in whom we see God's mature love. This is the only way to be sure we're in God. Anyone who claims to be intimate with God ought to live the same kind of life Jesus lived.

My dear friends, I'm not writing anything new here. This is the oldest commandment in the book, and you've known it from day one. It's always been implicit in the Message you've heard.

APPENDIX 3

Kingdom Living: Serving Others in the Character and Power of God

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that while Christian life includes going to heaven when one dies, Christian life is not coterminous with receiving forgiveness and heaven. The scope of God's intention for humanity is much broader than the reductionism of "heaven and hell." So, too, is the duration of God's aim. It started before the fall and it continues into the new heaven and the new earth. God's intention is to have a people who want what he wants and who will work with him, through grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, toward that divine *telos*.

There are several descriptors of this God-intended people in the Bible: "salt and light," "ambassadors of God's Kingdom," and "a nation of priests," just to name a few. The book *Missional Church*¹ is powerful in its challenge to the church to think past the Christendom model of being "a vendor of religious goods and services."² Instead of a vendor mindset, Guder and his colleagues in the GOCN³ cast a vision of the church as "the sent people of God...a body of people sent on a mission...to announce, demonstrate and embody the Gospel of the Kingdom...[acting as] a sign and foretaste...an agent and

¹ Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998).

² Ibid. , 84.

³ "The Gospel and Our Culture Network." The scholars in this network have provided, in my view, the best help on developing a missional ecclesiology.

instrument of the Kingdom.”⁴ An imagination for the life envisioned by Guder, et al, requires us to re-think the nature, meaning, and purpose of a local church.

As I stated in the conclusion, the vast majority of American church-goers would define the church in one of three ways: church as a place (“I go the Crystal Cathedral”), an event (“I went to Mass today”) or would identify it with a famous pastor (“I go to Rick Warren’s church”). Hoping to change that intuitive, but wrong set of definitions, here is a practical vision that avoids those three common misunderstandings and shapes the church people for a missional encounter with their actual daily lives.

What if every Christian simply adopted their everyday sphere of influence as their place to embody, announce, and demonstrate the Gospel of the Kingdom? Several nurses could band together to do this on a hospital floor; families living in the same apartment complex could covenant to do the same there, policemen could do the same for their work-shift or beat. I foresee little bands of Christ-followers agreeing to go on the “inner journey and outer journey together.”⁵ They would agree to seek spiritual transformation into Christlikeness together, thus becoming the kinds of people from whom deeds of goodness naturally flow. They would very self-consciously do this for the sake of others.

Such a vision for Christian life would be useful for casting a new vision for the church and local churches. Willard, commenting on the meaning of the Great Commission, writes, “It is a tragic error to think that Jesus was telling us, as he left, to

⁴ Guder, *Missional Church*, Chapter 4.

⁵ Elizabeth O’ Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* (Washington, D.C.: Potters House Books, 1968). Elizabeth O’Conner is a fantastic recounting of one local church who went on those twin journeys together. Doing so, for the sake of others, they substantially changed a deeply hurting neighborhood in the Washington, D.C. area.

start churches, as that is understood today. From time to time starting a church may be appropriate. But his aim for us is much greater than that. He wants us to establish ‘beachheads’ or bases of operation for the Kingdom of God wherever we are.”⁶

Once one intends to live such a life—growing in the character and power of Jesus for the purpose of serving others—one will promptly see the very practical need of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. While he is often only a Pentecostal or charismatic controversy in a story about going to heaven, he is indispensable to a life of growing in fruit (character) and power (gifts and authority) for the sake of doing God’s will on behalf of others.

The following texts are arranged in two sections. They are merely samples of scores of others that could be cited. The first demonstrates that Christian life is about working with God for the sake of others. The second describes the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in such a life. Using the same rationale outlined in Appendix One, I quote here from *The Message*.⁷

SERVING OTHERS

Matthew

Matthew 10

Jesus’ first followers were sent to work for the good of others in Jesus’ name:

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), xiii.

⁷ I have added the *italics* in the passages below are for emphasis.

Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives.

Mark

Mark 12

Answering the question, “Which is the most important commandment,” Jesus said “The first in importance is, Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.’ And here is the second: *Love others as well as you love yourself*. There is no other commandment that ranks with these.”

Luke

Luke 9

The sending of the disciples:

Jesus now called the Twelve and gave them authority and power to deal with all the demons and cure diseases. He commissioned them to preach the news of God’s kingdom and heal the sick.

Luke 10

Serving others is to path to being our best selves—humanity as God intended:

When you enter a town and are received, eat what they set before you, heal anyone who is sick, and tell them, ‘God’s kingdom is right on your doorstep!

Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self.

John

John 13

Jesus, having washed the disciple’s feet, explains to them the ongoing meaning for their lives. They are to mimic Jesus’ pattern to each other and to the whole world:

Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as ‘Teacher’ and ‘Master,’ and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. *I’ve laid down a pattern for you. What I’ve done, you do.*

John 14

The person who trusts me will not only do what I’m doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, *am giving you the same work to do that I’ve been doing.* You can count on it. From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I’ll do it.

John 15

This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. *Put your life on the line for your friends.* You are my friends when you do the things I command you.

Romans

Romans 15

Paul spells out very clearly the imitation of Jesus’ service of others that should mark Christians:

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, “How can I help?”

That’s exactly what Jesus did. He didn’t make it easy for himself by avoiding people’s troubles, but waded right in and helped out. “I took on the troubles of the troubled,” is the way Scripture puts it. Even if it was written in Scripture long ago, you can be sure it’s written for us. God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next.

Hebrews

Hebrews 10

So let’s do it—full of belief...let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out...

1 Peter

1 Peter 2

Having followed Jesus, Peter has picked up the model of Jesus and commends it to his readers:

Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices...make the Master proud of you by being good citizens...exercise your freedom by serving God...

1 Peter 4

Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help.

Absence of Life of Service is the Basis of Judgment

The absence of this kind of life is the basis for judgment:

Matthew 24

The sheep and the goats are separated on the basis of there service to others.

John 3

This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because *they were not really interested in pleasing God.*

THROUGH THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

John depicts the essential connection between a life of serving others in Jesus' name and the sending of the Spirit. John the Baptist foretold the central place the Holy Spirit would have in the life of followers of Jesus:

Luke

Luke 3

John intervened: "I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out."

Luke 4

Jesus' life and ministry was led and empowered by the Holy Spirit:

Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild.

John

John 14

If you love me, show it by doing what I've told you. I will talk to the Father, and he'll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. ...I will not leave you orphaned...The Friend, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send at my request, will make everything plain to you. He will remind you of all the things I have told you. I'm leaving you well and whole.

John 16

It's better for you that I leave. If I don't leave, the Friend won't come. But if I go, I'll send him to you...when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is.

John 20

John expressly connects the receiving of the Spirit with the sending of the disciples in the same manner that the Father sent Jesus:

Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you...then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said.

Acts

Acts 9

Paul's life of service to God is inaugurated by and empowered through receiving the Holy Spirit:

So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 10

The Spirit directs the ministry of the disciples even as Jesus promised:

...the Spirit whispered to [Peter] "Three men are knocking at the door looking for you. Get down there and go with them. Don't ask any questions. I sent them to get you."

Acts 10

It seemed to the Holy Spirit and to us that you should not be saddled with any crushing burden, but be responsible only for these bare necessities...

Acts 10

They went to Phrygia, and then on through the region of Galatia. Their plan was to turn west into Asia province, but the Holy Spirit blocked that route. So they went to Mysia and tried to go north to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them go there either.

That night Paul had a dream: A Macedonian stood on the far shore and called across the sea, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" The dream gave Paul his map. We went to work at once getting things ready to cross over to Macedonia. All the pieces had come together. We knew now for sure that God had called us to preach the good news to the Europeans."

Galatians

Galatians 5

Paul commends life in the Spirit to the Galatians:

Christ has set us free to live a free life...*Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit...Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit*, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.

APPENDIX 4

Free Life Based on the Cross: A Certain Kind of Life

John Douglas Hall's vision of a life rooted in the *theologia crucis*¹ requires a certain kind of life. It is life on this earth to be sure, but it is a different kind of life. In recent years, I have had to work myself away from the popular notions of "eternal life" handed down to me by popular, late modern evangelicalism. Hall's theology of the cross demands us, if it is to become the organizing principle for life, to re-think eternal life. Eternal life that shapes "real" life cannot be seen in spatial terms—out there somewhere beyond the stars; nor can it be seen chronologically—out there somewhere in time after I die. Eternal life in the biblical Story is a different kind of life. Jesus said (John 17. 3) that eternal life was knowledge of God and his Son. As important as good thinking is, "knowledge" of this kind is never merely about cognition or mental assent to doctrine. It is personal, intimate community with the Trinity. Eternal life is life lived from an imagination shaped by the cross. For the cross is the most central and powerful window into the being of Jesus, the way he viewed God, the way he viewed his vocation in the world, and his view of others. Put in other terms, Hall's call is to a life derived from and lived within the kingdom of God. Hall's summons makes me come to terms with myself:

¹ John Douglas Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 16.

Can I actually live such a cross-life or is such a life just an elegant theory invented by a capable theologian?

The Hall-Way to Freedom

Spring 1999 came to me not merely as the routine cycle of seasons: snow, tulips, lawn-mowing and leaf-raking. My friend and mentor, John Wimber, had recently died, leaving me to supervise the 500 plus Vineyard churches in America—to insure that they stayed together and kept the path laid out by their founder. I was, also, personally distracted—no, more: my wife and I were in the grip of a monster called “breast cancer.” To put the cherry on top, there was the mad build up to Y2K.

But, as often happens in life, the cherry was only apparently the “top” of my mountain of trials and challenges. It really got *personal* during what was otherwise a life-memory of a trip to Switzerland. My wife, my best friends, and colleagues were enjoying each others’ company, the chalet, the views of the slopes, and, most spectacularly, the helicopter ride to the summit of the Matterhorn in Zermat.

The balloon burst the next morning when, while standing at the sink shaving in a very brightly lit bathroom, my wife came up behind me and noticed a mole on my back. She thought it looked suspicious and demanded that I get it checked as soon as I got home. There was one big problem for me: the national Vineyard pastor’s conference was coming up. It was to be the first one since John’s death—a kind of coming out party for me—one of those moments where you are expected to be, and want to be, at your best. I had no time for doctors; the conference was only a couple of weeks away.

But...cancer had already visited our home; my wife *knew* how dangerous it was. She persisted; I gave in and went to the dermatologist. I waited in the cramped, but orderly room for a few minutes by myself. Soon the door swung open; simultaneously I heard the words “take your shirt off, young man; let’s have a look at that thing.” He only had to take a quick look before saying, “I’ve been at this a long time and I can tell you that you almost certainly have melanoma.”

To make sure a nurse led me down a short hall to a surgery room where the doctor took out a hunk of flesh about the size of a kitchen melon ball scooper. The chunk of tissue was sent to the best specialist my doctor knew. Confirmation came back: melanoma indeed. Another surgery had to be scheduled with the best of the best at the UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles.

“Sorry,” I announced to anyone who would listen, “I do not have time for a surgery, I have a conference to run and at which I must give the main talks.”

“Okay,” the doctor said, “a couple weeks won’t make a big difference, but you get in here the day the conference is over.”

“Deal,” I said.

During our conference, I attended a workshop led by Richard Foster on the topic “spiritual disciplines.” It was a standard, but good overview of the most widely used disciplines. The one Richard listed last—and running out of time, all he could do was say a sentence about it—was the discipline of “submission.” I had never heard of it and was intrigued by it. Richard described it as “routinely choosing not to have your own way; seeking opportunities to not be in control; preferable in ways that are hidden to, and good

for others.” Somewhere in the back of my mind, that brief definition stuck. As a perfectionist, who requires control to make life happen, it made sense to me. Little did I know how my first opportunity to employ this new discipline would arrive.

The conference ended. It went fine; all my self-focused fears proved unfounded. Then came the day after the conference, the one on which I had agreed to have the cancer surgery at UCLA. To go on, I have to add an important detail: all the stress alluded to in the opening paragraphs was occasionally leading to mild panic attacks rooted in claustrophobia. I was increasingly uncomfortable in small, closed-in spaces like elevators, crowded small rooms, or airplanes.

On this particular hot, southern California day, I began to feel the claustrophobic sensations as soon as we pulled the car into the muggy underground garage. “Okay,” I thought to myself, I can deal with *this*, please just let the elevator not be full. “Ya right,” I said to myself as the elevator doors pulled away from each other. It was lunch-hour; the full elevator of busy people in white medical garb caused the feelings of panic to increase palpably.

Next, I was put into a very small, non-descript room and told to disrobe. Naked, except for the hospital-issue gown, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a young male nurse come into the room. The description, “young male,” however, does not get at the explosive observation I made as a then substantially homophobic man. This young nurse was the most obviously gay man I had ever been near. But he just wasn’t “near.” Seeing the panic on my face, he went into “comfort the patient mode”—and in very bodily ways: rubbing my legs and feet, touching my hands, and comforting me with soothing words.

Just as I was wondering if one could die of panic, Foster's words on the discipline of submission filled my sub-consciousness and came crashing into my present, mental deliberations, "the discipline of submission means choosing to not have your own way...to not HAVE to be in control...one is always safe in the Kingdom of God."

This will sound too good to be true, but God as my witness, as those thoughts passed through my psyche, I could feel my whole physiology change. My nerves calmed, my temperature cooled, and my brain returned to "calm mode;" in short, my inner-man seemed to be re-worked. Looking back, I think my homophobia was cured, too.

The Cross as an Out of Control Life

The story above wondered through my mind several times as a kind of "personal interpreter" of Hall. I could see in every chapter of Hall, in each challenge to "triumphal" Christianity, the need for me to live a certain *kind* of life; a Christ-like life modeled on the kenosis song of Philippians 2. But, how can one do this as a control freak who suffers from mild panic when he cannot have his own way?

Hall calls for "faith that informs and sustains [the] acts of our lives."² He says, "serious Christians know that they must harken to a different theological and missiological drumbeat or quietly concede to the forces of disintegration and decay."³ Pointing the way forward, Hall suggests that "discipleship to Jesus is nothing more nor less than being sent with increasing insistence 'into all the world'...embracing our freedom to manifest something like a new nonchalance about self and a new attention to

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 15.

the other.”⁴ And finally, that “by definition, the theology of the cross is an *applied* theology...in this world of the here and now... [we are to] perceive and translate the crucified one into words and actions.”⁵

To pull myself forward into such a life, to practice the discipline of submission, the image statement I have used for the last three years is a navy blue hat I own with four prominent red letters stitched with white trim: NYFD. I will never forget the pictures rooted in the terror of September 11, 2001. Everyone else was doing what they should do, “run for their lives!” Soon though, in the midst of all the replays, we all noticed something else: the firemen were running “in,” toward the danger. The “stay back 200 feet” on the back of my cap applies to others who could get in a fireman’s way. Far from staying 200 feet back, they rush into every kind of earthly hell. Talk about “a new nonchalance toward self”...these guys and gals have it spades!

In those “incarnational” settings, one is out of control. I haven’t always known how to be out of control with the focused, but seemingly unworried, concentration of a fireman; or The Fireman, who let the forces of this world do their worst to him knowing that he was always safe in the Kingdom and in the will of his Father.

From the Inside Out

That day in the hospital, the moment I felt my physiology change, taught me something. A cross-based kind of life comes from the inside → out. Something changed *in* me—*then* I could deal with reality in peace. We cannot will ourselves into this kind of

⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁵ Ibid.

life. It is a practiced life, using practices like the discipline of submission. I'm sure those firemen hardly stopped to think; they were simply doing what was "in" them to do. Though that day was far from routine, it couldn't take them from their routine, from what they were trained to do by years of inner and outward disciplines.

To embody this dream of being a person of the cross, I am routinely taking opportunities to be "out of control;" to submit to my surroundings; and to choose not having my own way. I don't do this to earn anything from God; I do not suppose that it is in anyway meritorious. I do this to "practice" so that when the 9/11s of my life come, I can naturally and easily embody a theology of the cross.

The General Pattern for Personal Transformation

I, of course, did come to Hall as a "blank white board." I came, as I've described, as a spiritually-formed person. I am a mix of inner stuff; some of me works well with a life of *theologia crucis*; other aspects of me, by my actual behavior, scream "no!" Thus, some of that formation makes it difficult for me to embody a life of the cross at the points of pain in our world. Profound weakness, sickness and intense poverty scare me. It is not that I don't care about these realities, it is that they overwhelm me. They leave me feeling out of my depth—out of control.

At that point, I return to the key ideas of this dissertation: the story of my life is not my own. We are, all of us, living in God's Story. Incredibly, he has made it possible to live through him in his story. When feeling out of my depth and in need of transformation, I remind myself of Willard's V-I-M pattern discussed in chapter four. I remind myself—thanks to Wright—that God is working in me to make me humanity as

he intended. I recall the social set theory of Smith and remind myself that I sincerely desire movement toward Jesus and his Kingdom—I find rest and peace and joy in that.

In the end, at rock bottom, I overcome “me” by placing my life back into the intention of God for humanity: to be his cooperative friends, seeking to live constant lives of creative goodness, for the sake of others, through the power of the Holy Spirit. I find then a life marked by *theologia crucis*; an eternal kind of life now, drawn from living in the Kingdom of God.

APPENDIX 5

Images: Tracts to Tell the Story

In keeping with the intent of a Doctor of Ministry degree, I move now from the theological and historical analysis to propose a significant change in the practice of evangelism and discipleship. I propose two publishing projects for the outcome of my Doctor of Ministry program. The first project will be a popularized version of this dissertation. It will be a book written for Christian leaders that sets forward a new understanding of the Gospel; one that leads to better approaches to evangelism and discipleship. The second project will be a tract or short booklet. We need a new “tract” for our times.

We need one that enables a would-be evangelist to tell the whole, Covenantal–Kingdom story in a memorable and compelling way through the use of images. “The re-telling of the ancient story, climaxing now in Jesus, carried *power*—power to change minds, hearts and lives.”¹ This is the power I am seeking as I strive for contemporary images to tell the old story.

Temple, Promised Land, and Torah were the core symbols of Israel’s covenant story. What are the current symbols by which current people could understand, tell, and embody the Christian story?

¹ Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, 49.

Below, I suggest some options. But first, I want to offer a point of clarification. Throughout this dissertation, I have highlighted the problems associated with slogans, bullet-points, and clichés. If we think, instead of images or “signs” (“an entity that carries information, particularly about something beyond itself”),² we can develop something very positive. We can give people images that are shorthand ways of telling the whole story. These images perform a role similar to luggage. They become “ways of packing up longer narratives about God, Jesus, the church, and the world, folding them away into convenient suitcases, and then carrying them about with us...short-hands, in other words, are useful in the same way suitcases are. They enable us to pick up lots of complicated things and carry them around all together...to be unpacked and put to use.”³ The problem with the overly simplistic practices I have been criticizing is that they never unpack anything. The sound bite remains the thing itself. Avoiding that pitfall and working with the vision Wright sets forth is exactly the intention behind the proposals below.

Option One

I envision four simple icons, symbols, or a logo, which would cause someone sharing their faith, and someone hearing the story for the first time, to easily remember the whole story. These images would function like a powerful scene in a film that allows one to recall the whole movie. For instance, if one sees even a split second of the scene from the movie *Titanic* where a young man and woman are standing on the rail at the very front of an ocean liner, mist blowing in their faces, they could easily recall and tell the whole

² C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 106.

³ Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, 24.

story. Similarly, if one sees blue-painted faces on men wearing clothes of the period, one could easily tell the story of *Braveheart*.

I will create images which are easily drawn on a napkin at a coffee shop or restaurant. Important bits of the story will hang from, and could be drawn around, each icon: sin, forgiveness, cross, and resurrection. Four frames telling the Covenantal–Kingdom story could be:

- I. Cooperative Friends of Jesus
 - a. Icon/image: covenant; people working together.
 - b. Recalling the outline of the story:
 1. Ultimate intention
 2. Humanity as God intended
 3. Israel: covenant to serve humanity
 4. Moses: to save Israel
 5. Jesus: save Israel; create inclusive people of God
 6. Church: ambassadors of the kingdom to serve the world
- II. Constant lives of creative goodness:
 - a. Icon: Signifying ambassadors of the kingdom; depicting lives as suggested above by Wright, “healing judges, healing teachers.”
 - b. Outline:
 1. Salt and light
 2. Ambassadors of the Kingdom
 3. Co-laborers; covenant faithfulness.
 4. One’s actual life as the grounds of discipleship and mission; maximize authentic community; re-thinking church away from place (“I go the Crystal Cathedral”), event (“I went to Mass today”) or famous person (“I go to Rick Warren’s church”) to include the places Christians, as God’s sent people, already have authentic community; especially the workplace.
- III. Through the power of the Holy Spirit:
 - a. Icon: animation coming to life; wind, fire, power.
 - b. Outline
 1. Animating power
 2. Energizing
 3. Empowering
 4. Gifts
 5. Fruit

- IV. For the sake of others
- a. Icon: Golden Triangle of Presence
 - b. Outline
 1. The church exists for the world
 2. Fundamental orientation of Christians is to live in a Golden Triangle: the events and people of one's life is one point of the triangle, God is the tip, and "others" are the remaining point. We are called to live with constant reference to God for the sake of others.
 3. The Order of the Towel (John 13);⁴ make a fundamental decision—decide what will occupy your hands; taking up the model of Jesus to wash the feet of the world; or, to fill one's hands with that which self-centeredly brings pleasure to one's self.
 4. "For the sake of others" this is the eternal destiny of Christians as well; (Rev. 22.5); participating with God in the renewed cosmos, not disembodied bliss "in heaven."

Option Two

This option would unfold like a printed version of a Power Point presentation. Printed on clear plastic, each image would unfold upon the prior image; each new image adding to what has come previously, thus, telling a story as the images are revealed.

- I. **Frame 1:** A large arrow containing the words, "God's story, plan, will or agenda;" perhaps a subtext word "reality," or phrase "the most 'real' reality;" or "what we must all deal with."
 - a. Sub-points; drawn as a timeline along one edge of the arrow:
 1. Adam and Eve: living in God's story as his fellow-workers in creation.
 2. The fall: alternative stories, and substitute ways of life begin.
 3. God calls a covenant people: Abraham/Israel; Genesis 12.1-3.
 4. Israel, God's chosen people to rescue the world fallen into disobedience; "The firemen have become arsonists,"⁵ God sends Jesus to rescue and fulfill the operation with Israel; in so doing, everyone, every race, every people-group is again invited, through forgiveness provided in Jesus, to work with God in the restoration of creation.
 5. Jesus is Savior and Lamb, but more: humanity (Adam and Eve) as God intended; Israel as God intended

⁴ See Appendix 3.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), Chapter 7.

6. In cooperating with this story, aligning the trajectory of one's life with the arrow (see especially John 5 and 6 in *The Message*), there is a momentum or gravitational pull toward righteousness along with it; through grace one is not just forgiven of sins, but delivered from sin as a way of life; sin's drop off like old leaves making way for new spring growth.
- II. **Frame 2:** The large arrow is pointing at a bull's-eye similar to one found on a dart-board or shooting target. God's story is going someplace; it will not fail. The bull's-eye is labeled: *telos*; "God's ultimate rule and reign; "Kingdom triumphs over alternative or competing stories." The goals for Christian life orient themselves to the heart of the bull's-eye.
 - III. **Frame 3:** A smaller arrow diverting from the trajectory of "God's arrow." This is labeled "living in alternative stories:" "sin" (1 John 2.1a). Sin is defined as choosing to live apart from the story or will of God. There is a momentum or gravitational pull to this kind of life as well.
 - a. Sub-points
 1. Biblical words for sin include, "to miss the mark" (the bull's-eye); "to deviate from the goal," "taking the wrong road;" "defiance of God's rule and reign;" or to "stray from the correct path."
 2. This leads to, "hell," where such a life naturally leads—the end of the wrong road; the end of self-centered goals, "the ultimate wasted life." Gehenna: eternal rubbish dump for wasted lives; self-imposed (God affirms a choice "to want nothing to do with him") exile from God and others.
 3. Show a small arrow departing from God's story but immediately turning to go back into God's arrow. Everyone occasionally commits sins (1 John 1.5-10); but those seeking to align their life with God's story, see sin for what it is, and immediately, by the grace of God, repent and return to the will of God.
 - IV. **Frame 4:** An arrow, pulling the small arrow of sin back into the larger story of God.
 - a. Sub-points
 1. Repentance: to turn, on the basis of a change of mind, and go a different direction—back into the story of God. Mark 1.14-15: repentance as evaluating one's life story and realigning with God's story. Repentance as "reviewing your plans for living to base your life on the remarkable new opportunity to live in the Kingdom of God."⁶
 2. Salvation (*sozo*) is deliverance from the kind of life that would ultimately end in hell—God having affirmed one's decision to want nothing to do with him or with his story.
 3. Righteousness as alignment with God's will, plan and story, "Anyone...who believes what I am saying right now and aligns himself with the Father...has at this very moment the real, lasting life and is no longer condemned to be an outsider. This person has taken a giant step from the world of the dead to the world of the living."

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 15.

4. Justification means that through the grace of God in Christ, one has been put back into God's story (1 John 2.1-2).
5. Our goal, having received this grace, is to be the people of God; his story is now the pre-eminent orientation of our life.

These two options are proprietary and intended for publication as tracts or small booklets to explain the story of God. They are intended for use by new Christians, for seekers and for those seeking to share with others their faith in the story of God. It is hoped that this approach will not fall prey to the practice of reducing the story of God to merely "forgiveness and heaven" without the context of God's intention and *telos*.

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