

"Knowing where you have come from is nearly as important as knowing where you want to go. Goheen and Bartholomew trace the deep roots of our contemporary Western worldview in that kind of easy, broad-brush comprehensiveness that makes one exclaim, 'Yes of course, that's exactly the way things are—and why!' But alongside that, they do an equally good job in presenting the biblical worldview as the story that tells it like it really is, for life, the universe, and everything. That's the way things are—but as God sees them. The combination powerfully forces us to see the dissonance between the two and the stark choice that Christians need to make. Which story do we live by? Which road do we travel from the crossroads? But the book is far from all theory. It grounds the challenge of living out the Christian story in a variety of practical, up-to-date, areas of life in the world around us. This is a book filled with eye-opening insight, biblical nourishment, practical challenge, and robust hope. It turns the mission of God into our mission in the world and compels us to make some radical choices."

—Christopher J. H. Wright, international director,  
Langham Partnership International

"Finally, a worldview text that moves incisively beyond mere theory. *Living at the Crossroads* is profound and practical, intelligent and warmly pastoral as it proceeds from a comprehensive understanding of the biblical story to an insightful engagement with twenty-first-century issues. Goheen and Bartholomew write out of their deep missional commitment with admirable clarity. They beckon us into a faithful and relevant involvement with complex issues, including globalization, postmodernity, consumerism, and the resurgence of Islam. *Living at the Crossroads* will stir you to embrace both unbearable tension and unprecedented opportunities to bring genuine hope to a waiting world. It is a must read for all who long to develop a worldview shaped by God's Word."

—Rod Thompson, School of Theology, Laidlaw College

# Living at the Crossroads

An Introduction to Christian Worldview

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and Craig G. Bartholomew

  
**Baker Academic**  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jim Kinney and his excellent staff at Baker Academic have been helpful in forming this book and bringing it to birth. We are again deeply indebted to Douglas Loney, professor of English and dean of the Foundations Division at Redeemer University College. As with *The Drama of Scripture*, Doug has helped to provide a lively literary style. He has done more than simply edit this book and help to unify two writing styles. Doug has entered into the topics at hand, helped express things more clearly, and provided invaluable help not only on style but also on content.

We are delighted to dedicate this book to Pieter and Fran Vanderpol, and to John and Jenny Hultink. These couples have become our dear friends and have demonstrated their commitment to Christian scholarship in tangible and sacrificial ways, not least in endowing the chairs that we occupy. Without such patrons, this book would not have been possible.

## 1

## Gospel, Story, Worldview, and the Church's Mission

### Starting with the Gospel of the Kingdom

As followers of Jesus, our thinking about worldview must begin with the gospel, the good news first announced two thousand years ago by Jesus when he stepped onto the stage of world history: "The kingdom of God has arrived!"<sup>1</sup>

Jesus spoke the language of the Jews of his day, for they well understood the resonance of that word *kingdom*. The Jews had for a long, long time anticipated God's intervention in history. They had waited for God to move again in love and wrath and power, to send his Messiah and restore his reign over the whole world. And at last Jesus does come, claiming the royal title for himself: *he* is God's anointed one, the Messiah. The Spirit of God is on him, he declares, to bring God's purposes for the entire world to their great and terrible climax. The divine King of Creation is returning to reclaim his kingdom!

This proclamation of good news is the climactic moment of a long historical account (told in the Old Testament) of God's redemptive work, stretching back to God's promise to Adam and Eve. God had chosen Israel to be a channel of his redemptive blessing to the nations, but they had failed. Yet, in the midst of their failure, prophets arose promising that God would not let his plan unravel; he would act again in and through a promised king to renew the whole world. Jesus announces that that day has arrived: the power of God to

renew the entire creation by his Spirit is now present in Jesus. This liberating power is displayed in Jesus' life and deeds and is explained by his words. But it is at the cross that the triumph of God's kingdom is accomplished. There he battles the power of evil and gains the decisive victory. His resurrection is the dawning of the first day of the new creation. Alive from the dead, he enters as the firstborn into the life to come. Before he ascends to God the Father, he commissions his little group of followers to continue his mission of making the good news of the kingdom known until he returns. He then takes his place at the right hand of God to reign in power over all creation. He pours out his Spirit and by the Spirit makes known his restoring and comprehensive rule in and through his people as they embody and proclaim the good news.

One day Jesus will return, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. The end of universal history that Jesus announced, revealed, and accomplished will finally arrive in fullness. But until that climactic day, the church is taken up into the Spirit's work of making known, in their lives, deeds, and words, the good news of what God has done for the world in Jesus.

### The Bible as the True Story of the World

The proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom is not an announcement about a new religious experience or doctrine. Still less is this an offer of future salvation in another spiritual world. This gospel is an announcement about where God is moving the history of the whole world. Jesus employs a popular Old Testament image to drive this home: the world will one day be the kingdom of God. The good news that Jesus announces and enacts, and that the church is commissioned to embody and make known, is the gospel of the kingdom. We make a grave mistake if we ignore this, the central image of Jesus' proclamation and ministry.

Jesus claims that the establishing of God's kingdom is the ultimate goal of world history. This is not a local tale of interest only to a particular ethnic or religious group. Jesus steps into a long story of God's redemptive work in history that had been unfolding for thousands of years in the Old Testament, into a community that was eagerly anticipating that story's climax. The Jews believed that the God they served was the one and only God, the Creator of all things, the Ruler of history, the Redeemer of all things. After the entrance of sin and evil into the world God had set out to restore his world and his human subjects to live again under his gracious rule. This God was not the God of the Jews only; he was King of the whole earth. The Jewish nation had

been chosen to be channels of his redemptive work to the entire world. All Jews believed that this story was leading to the grand culmination when God would act decisively and finally to finish what he had been working toward in their history: the accomplishment of salvation for all nations, for all creation. They disagreed on how this would happen, and when, and by whom. They disagreed on what they themselves should be doing while waiting for God's action. But they all believed that the story of God's redemptive acts was moving toward a climax that would have consequences for all people.

When Jesus came, he announced that he was himself the goal of this redemptive story, the climax of God's dramatic activity. Such a claim was completely astonishing. Jesus was not simply another rabbi offering some new religious or ethical teaching by which to enrich one's own life. He claimed that in his person and work the meaning of history and of the world itself was being made known and accomplished. He warned that *all* people must find their place and meaning within his story, and no other.

When we speak, therefore, of the Bible as a story, we are making a normative claim about the story told in the Bible: it is public truth. It is a claim that this is the way God created the world; the story of the Bible tells us the way the world really is. Thus, the biblical story is not to be understood simply as a local tale about the Jewish people. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. In between, it offers an interpretation of the meaning of cosmic history. Christopher Wright puts it this way: "The Old Testament tells its story as the story or, rather, as part of that ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. In other words, in reading these texts we are invited to embrace a metanarrative, a grand narrative."<sup>2</sup>

Thus our stories, our reality—indeed, all of human and nonhuman reality—must find their place in *this* story. In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach makes this point in a striking contrast between Homer's *Odyssey* and the biblical story: "Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, [the Old Testament] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history. . . . Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world . . . must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan."<sup>3</sup> Normally, when we read myths or novels, or when we watch movies, television, or plays, we are meant at least in part to forget about our own world and to enter and live in the fictional world for a time. When the story ends, we emerge on the other side, return to our own world, and resume our own lives. We have indulged in a kind of escape from reality into fiction, perhaps

hoping to be informed, enriched, or at least entertained while we have been “away.” Some of us will seek to carry back some nuggets of truth or wisdom or beauty as souvenirs from the world of artifice, giving us perhaps some new (but admittedly limited) insight into an aspect of our lives in the “real” world. But it is not that way with the biblical story. The Bible claims to *be* the real world. This story, among all stories, claims to tell the *whole* truth about the way our own world really is. Here, inside this story, we are meant to find the meaning of our lives. Here we must find a place in which our own experience was meant to fit. Here we are offered insight into the ultimate significance of human life itself.

Thus, the gospel is public truth, universally valid, true for all people and all of human life. It is not merely for the private sphere of “religious” experience. It is not about some otherworldly salvation postponed to an indefinite future. It is God’s message about how he is at work to restore his world and all of human life. It tells us about the goal of all history and thus claims to be the true story of the world.

### Which Story Will Shape Your Life?

All of human life is shaped by some story. Consider the following illustration offered by N. T. Wright:

What is the meaning of the following comment? “It is going to rain.” On the surface, the statement seems to be quite clear. Yet the meaning and significance of this remark can only be understood when we see the part it plays in a broader narrative. If we are about to go for a picnic that has been planned for some time, then these words would be bad news, with the further implication that perhaps we had better change our plans. If we live in East Africa plagued by drought, where another lengthy dry spell and consequent crop failure appears imminent, the statement would be good news indeed. If I had predicted three days ago that it would rain and you had not believed me, the statement would vindicate my predictive ability as a meteorologist. If we are part of the community of Israel on Mount Carmel listening to the words of Elijah, the statement substantiates the message of Elijah that Yahweh is the true God and that Elijah is his prophet. In each case, the single statement demands to be “heard” within the context of a full implicit plot, a complete implicit narrative.<sup>4</sup>

The meaning of these words ultimately depends on which story shapes it; in fact, each story will give the event a different meaning. It is like that with

our lives: “The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part?”<sup>5</sup> What Newbigin is referring to here is not a linguistically constructed narrative world that we fabricate to give meaning to our lives but rather an interpretation of cosmic history that gives meaning to human life. This is the way God has created the world and the way it really is.

Since human beings are created to live in community, some shared story will inevitably shape the whole life of a social group. The gospel invites all who hear it to believe the good news and repent (Mark 1:14–15). All who hear are summoned to believe that this is the true story and to make their home in it, leaving behind whatever other story had been shaping their lives. From these hearers a community is formed of people who have come to believe the gospel and the story of the world that it offers.

### The Church’s Mission

The church is the community that responds in faith and repentance to the good news of the kingdom. They make their home in the story of the Bible and seek to form their lives by that narrative. But this is a community that also is charged with making this good news known to everyone else. This gospel defines the church’s mission and calling in the world. Before Jesus returns to the Father, he gathers his disciples and speaks words that are intended to define the meaning of the rest of their lives: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). These words encapsulate what it means to be a community of Christ’s followers. Their mission is to make known the kingdom of God—the end and goal of history—throughout the world as Jesus has made it known in Israel.

Christopher Wright rightly sees mission as “a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture.”<sup>6</sup> He believes that the Bible tells “the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of God’s whole creation.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the mission of the people of God is “our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.”<sup>8</sup> Our identity as God’s people comes from that missional role in the biblical story.

Thus, there is a sense in which the church is essential to the gospel. Jesus did not leave behind a book in which the good news of the kingdom was to be bound up. Instead, he formed a community to carry the message: “As you [God the Father] sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world”

(John 17:18). This community is defined by their mission: to make known the good news of the kingdom.

Since the gospel is about God's rule over all of creation, all nations, and all of human life, the mission of Jesus' followers is as wide as creation itself. They have been commissioned to witness to the gospel in all of public life—business, scholarship, politics, family, criminal justice, art, media—and every other corner of human experience:

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

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

The rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole world.  
To follow this Lord is to serve him everywhere,  
without fitting in,  
as light in the darkness, as salt in a spoiling world.<sup>9</sup>

### Living at the Crossroads of Two Stories

Jesus says, "I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). God's people in the Old Testament were unified ethnically (as Jews) and geographically (in Palestine). The story that shaped their cultural and public lives—or should have—was the same story that shaped their religious commitment: the Old Testament. However, in the New Testament all that changes. God's people take a multiethnic and multicultural form as they are sent into all the world to incarnate God's story in the midst of all the various cultures of humankind. This multiplicity of cultures presents an enormous challenge to the church in carrying out its mission to all peoples, in all places, at all times until the Lord's return. Every cultural community shares a story that shapes and organizes its life together, and none of these stories is neutral, either philosophically or religiously. Cultural stories offer widely differing accounts of how the world came into existence, of its meaning, purpose, and destination. Each culture

tells and lives out a world-story that is to some degree incompatible with the gospel. This world-story is often held below the level of the individual's conscious understanding, yet it shapes and forms the whole of a culture's communal life.

The story that has shaped Western culture for several centuries is a narrative of progress that says we are moving toward ever-greater freedom and material prosperity, and that we are doing so by human effort alone, especially through science embodied in technology, and in the application of scientific principles to our social life, in economics, in politics, and in education.

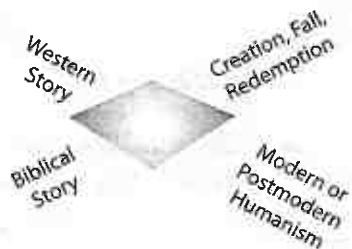
Recently there have been two significant complications to the modern story of progress. It has come under severe attack by what has often been called *postmodernity*, because of its failure to deliver that "better world" that it has long promised. At the same time, the story of progress has taken on a new and apparently powerful shape as it spreads around the world in the process called *globalization*. We will have occasion to examine all of this in detail in later chapters. At this stage it is important simply to grasp that this cultural story is a narrative with an understanding of the world and human life that lies at the foundation of Western culture. Even though the members of modern Western culture are often not conscious of this story, it nevertheless functions for them as a lens through which to see and interpret the world, a map to give direction, and a common foundation upon which to build social and cultural life.

Three more things need to be said about this modern Western world-story in order for Christians to understand the cultural context in which they must seek to live out the truth of the biblical story. First, like the biblical story itself, the Western story claims to be the true story of the world. In fact, it often simply assumes this distinction, masking its own grand claim to truth by relegating all other such stories to secondary status, as being merely "religious." Second, like the biblical story, the cultural story is all-embracing, with claims on every aspect of human life. Third, the Western story is radically, although not totally, incompatible with the biblical story.

In our contemporary culture . . . two quite different stories are told. One is the story of evolution, of the development of the species through the survival of the strong, and the story of the rise of civilization, our type of civilization, and its success in giving humankind mastery of nature. The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God's election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. *These are two different and incompatible stories.*<sup>10</sup>

Thus the people of God find themselves at a crossroads, at the intersection of two stories, both of which claim to be both true and comprehensive (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Living at the Crossroads



As those who have embraced the gospel, we are members of a community that believes the Bible to be the true story of the world. But as participating and living members of the cultural community, we are also part of the other story that has been shaping Western culture for a very long time. We cannot simply opt out of the surrounding culture: our lives are woven into its institutions, customs, language, relationships, and social patterns. Our embodying of the kingdom of God must take cultural shape in our own particular time and place. So we find ourselves at the crossroads, where we live as part of two communities, in two stories each largely incompatible with the other, but both of which claim to be true—and claim the whole of our lives.

### Missionary Encounter or Compromise?

How can the Christian community live at this crossroads? It all depends on which of these stories is held to be basic, nonnegotiable, the true story of our world. The question is whether our faith will find its focus in Jesus and his kingdom as the clue to understanding the whole of the world and its history, or whether we will embrace the cultural story as true, and thus succumb to its pressure to limit our faith to the private realm of mere “religion.”

If the church is faithful and committed to demonstrating in its whole life that the gospel is true, there will be a missionary encounter, a clash between the biblical story and the cultural story.<sup>11</sup> Since both stories are comprehensive, and since both claim to be true, such an encounter is inevitable. When this

happens, the foundational religious beliefs shared by the surrounding cultural community will be challenged, and the gospel will be held out as a credible alternative way of life. The church, by being faithful to the biblical story, will call people to be converted, to believe the gospel, to come live in the story of the Bible—and also to live it out.

But there is another, darker possibility. If the church, consciously or unconsciously, were to accept the world-story of the surrounding culture as basic, as the true account of the world, then it will be obliged to tailor the gospel to fit somewhere within that cultural story. And if the gospel is adapted to take such a secondary place within another more comprehensive story, the inevitable result for the church is compromise and unfaithfulness, for it will not be offering the gospel to the world on the gospel's own terms, namely, that it alone is the truth about our world and about our lives in it.

Lesslie Newbigin believed that in fact this is what had already happened in the Christian church of the modern Western world. Newbigin had spent forty years as a missionary in India, and when he returned to Europe, he had the gift of “new eyes” to see the incompatibility between the gospel story and that other story that was at work shaping modern Western culture. Newbigin believed that the church had deeply compromised its living out of the gospel, allowing the biblical story to be subsumed within the modern scientific story. He spoke of the Western church as being “an advanced case of syncretism,” having accepted the fusing together of two incompatible viewpoints.<sup>12</sup> (In such syncretism, inevitably, the truth claims of one story or both stories are compromised.) When the gospel is merely absorbed into the Western cultural story, it is reduced to the status of a private religious message about a disembodied, future, otherworldly salvation postponed to an indefinite future. Newbigin believed that the church must recover the gospel on its own terms, as the true and comprehensive story of our world and the declaration of the ultimate goal of cosmic history. Only then, he believed, would the gospel story be liberated for its missionary encounter with Western culture.

### Liberating the Gospel for a Missionary Encounter: Can Worldview Contribute?

Over a century ago, two Christian thinkers, like Newbigin, came to see that the cultural story of the West was undermining the biblical story as the foundation of life in the Christian community and thus was hindering a genuine missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture. Although they did not use the language of “missionary encounter,” James Orr and Abraham



Kuyper re-called the church to Christ's claim that the gospel alone offers a true and comprehensive view of the world. Both Orr and Kuyper seized the current notion of "worldview" to demonstrate the gospel's claim to offer its own utterly comprehensive view of the world and of human life—a worldview that simply will not be fitted into any other but instead demands to stand on its own. More than a century after Orr and Kuyper, Christians are still faced with their challenge: could this concept of worldview help us to accomplish today what they called the church to do then, to release the gospel from its bondage to modern Western culture? We believe that it can, and to make that case will be our task for the remainder of this book.

## 2

### What Is a Worldview?

Martin Luther once said that the gospel is like a caged lion that does not need to be defended—only released.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18). When it is at work in the words, works, and lives of God's people, it will accomplish its purposes. But the gospel is "caged" when it is accommodated to the story of humanism. Only when the gospel is set free from its captivity to the dominant cultural story will the church be equipped for its comprehensive mission in Western culture. In this book we hope to help set the lion free. And our first question for this chapter is this: Can the concept of "worldview" aid in that task?

#### A Brief History of the Concept of Worldview

Since ideas and the names that we give to them derive from somewhere and someone, here we take a few moments to consider a brief history of the concept of "worldview" and how worldview came to be appropriated by the evangelical church of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a means of regaining the comprehensive scope of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

The English word *worldview* translates the German term *Weltanschauung*, first used by the Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant believed that each human being exercises reason alone in order to arrive at a *Weltanschauung*—an understanding of the meaning of