

Telling the Gospel Story

The Difference Renewal Makes

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For Gospel City Network

Telling the Gospel Story: The Difference Renewal Makes

The Impact of the Gospel Story

Several scholars have recently emphasized the importance of knowing the biblical story for interpreting the Bible.¹ The classic formulation of the story moves from creation to fall to redemption and finally to restoration.² A number of biblical scholars have added additional “chapters” to this story to explain better the biblical story. Christopher Wright tells the biblical story in six chapters—creation, fall, promise, gospel, mission, new creation.³ Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen tell the story in six alternate chapters—creation, fall, redemption initiated, redemption accomplished, mission, redemption completed.⁴ The Bible itself doesn’t give chapters to describe its story, so each of these constructs focus on unique aspects of the overarching narrative of Scripture.

I want us to consider the gospel story as it applies to the daily life of individuals. How we think about the shape of the gospel story affects how we think about our daily lives. I want to suggest that the often-used formulation of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration misses an important chapter when considered from this perspective. This additional chapter helps believers see how they are both recipients and agents of God’s grace each day. The best way to illustrate the need for an extra chapter in the gospel story comes through thinking about common presentations of the gospel story.

¹. I want to thank Badshah Das Gupta for the ideas behind this article and the encouragement to write it. I have taken liberties to expand, illustrate, and refine some of his ideas. I pray this article both reflects and enhances his original presentation.

². Some prefer the term “consummation” or “new creation” for the final chapter. I hold that restoration better reflects God’s action and preserves the continuity with the original creation.

³. Christopher H. Wright, *How to Preach & Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 34-35.

⁴. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

Common Gospel Presentations

Two-Chapter Gospel (Fall + Redemption)

Rebecca McLaughlin recounts that as a teenager, she heard the gospel presented through an analogy to the movie *Titanic*.⁵ Like Rose, Christians have important information about a sinking ship. We must share the gospel with as many individuals as possible to save them from impending disaster. A similar gospel presentation describes a burning house. A Christian has the gospel and must rush into the burning house to deliver as many people as possible from the burning house before everything burns up. On this gospel story, the world is fallen and needs redemption. On this telling, these are the two aspects with eternal significance.

Well-known presentations of the gospel, such as *Evangelism Explosion*, often employ similar language—“if you were to die today, do you know for sure that you would be with God in heaven?”⁶ After a response is given to the first question, a second question asks, “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into My Heaven?’ what would you say?”⁷ The goal of this presentation is for individuals to believe in Jesus, so that when we die, we will live with him in heaven.

The incompleteness of these presentations becomes apparent when we ask, “Did anything matter to the gospel story that happened *before* the Titanic sank? Did anything matter that happened *before* the building burned down?” What matters is where you end up at the end of the story in this telling of the gospel story.

⁵. Rebecca McLaughlin, *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (And Answer) about Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 51.

⁶. These questions are found on the Evangelism Explosion website at <https://evangelismexplosion.org/the-two-question/>

⁷. Ibid.

This minimalistic presentation of the gospel tends to do at least two things. First, it minimizes our daily lives and careers. Our career serves no purpose other than to provide us with the funds necessary for survival until the point that Jesus returns, or we die. On this telling of the gospel, the only eternally significant work is ministry work that leads to decisions for Jesus. Second, it causes a sharp divide between the secular and sacred.⁸ If the goal is to escape out of this world, then we will minimize the goodness of God's creation. Some presentations even promote the mentality of "it's all gonna burn." This contradicts the clear biblical teaching of the goodness of God's creation.⁹ John Calvin argued that God has imbued his creation with goodness, so that "the power, wisdom, and goodness of God in his works, namely, [might] stir up men to praise him."¹⁰ If we are to live in and praise God for his good creation, then surely our daily lives within that creation matter to the gospel story.

Four-Chapter Gospel (Creation and Restoration)

An improved telling of the gospel story focuses on four chapters—creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.¹¹ This presentation improves the two-chapter presentation by showing the goodness of God's original creation and intentions. On this telling, the shape and structure of God's original creative order provide substance for how humans *ought* to live. The addition of a final chapter looks forward to how things *will* look once the Lord establishes his eternal kingdom.

On this story, God made all things good. Humanity rebelled against God and brought

⁸. Following Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, et al. I believe we should question that the secular even exists.

⁹. Scriptures abound: Gen 1:31; 1 Timothy 4:4 are representative of the view in both the Old and New Testaments.

¹⁰. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, vol. 3, Logos ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible, 2010), 169.

¹¹. There are many helpful presentations that use this structure. See, for instance, the resources from Matthias Media for *Two Ways to Live*.

sin into the entirety of the created order. However, knowing how things *ought* to be serves to remind us that all things can be redeemed. Al Wolters states,

“Prostitution does not eliminate the goodness of human sexuality; political tyranny cannot wipe out the divinely ordained character of the state; the anarchy and subjectivism of much of modern art cannot obliterate the creational legitimacy of art itself ... evil does not have the power of bringing to naught God's steadfast faithfulness to the works of his hands.”¹²

Since God created a good world, all things can find their redemption through him (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20). This presentation of the gospel fits more clearly with the entirety of Scripture.

Despite these improvements, common presentations using this four-chapter gospel story still struggle to show how the gospel relates to day-to-day realities of business, family, politics, et al.¹³ Presentations often fold God's ongoing work in the church back into historical redemption—what God did at the cross—or forward into restoration—what God will do in his eternal kingdom. Christians may continue to ask what difference the gospel makes in their day-to-day lives. Jesus will restore all things at his return, but how does that impact my family or career today?

Five-Chapter Gospel (Renewal)

What if we add a chapter of renewal to the gospel story between redemption and restoration?¹⁴ Theologians often include God's ongoing renewal in believer's lives under the concept of redemption. I believe helpful clarity is found through distinguishing between

¹². Al Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 57.

¹³. Some scholars, especially those in the Dutch Reformed tradition, such as Wolters, strongly emphasize ongoing Trinitarian creational and redemptive work. This article seeks to separate the on-going redemptive work into a separate chapter to help bring clarity for believers who seek to apply the gospel in all of life.

¹⁴. Richard Pratt has used the language of inauguration, continuation, consummation. His language of continuation is what is intended by renewal in this article. See Richard L. Pratt, “What is the Kingdom of God?,” *IJIM Magazine Online*, vol. 4, no. 15 (April 2002).

historical redemption at the cross (justification) and ongoing renewal (sanctification). This helps believers see the ongoing work of Christ in both renewing them and renewing the world through his people. It emphasizes the ongoing work of Christ in the day-to-day lives of believers.

Dane Ortlund says, “Jesus walked the earth rehumanizing the dehumanized and cleansing the unclean. Why? Because his heart refused to let him sleep in. Sadness confronted him in every town. So wherever he went, whenever he was confronted with pain and longing, he spread the good contagion of his cleansing mercy.”¹⁵ The cleansing, healing, restoring, and renewing work of Jesus continues today. Hebrews 7:25 says that Jesus “always lives to make intercession” for his people. Jesus says he will be “with [his disciples] always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20). He does not leave or forsake us, but constantly molds and shapes us into his image. This is the daily renewing work of Christ. He redeems us from sin, renews us into his image, and will restore all things in his time. If we understand sin as “any act—any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed—or its particular absence, that displeases God and deserves blame,” then we realize that sin has corrupted everything.¹⁶ If Jesus has come to bring an end to sin through redemption and renewal, then his renewal extends to everything corrupted by sin. To quote Abraham Kuyper’s famous dictum, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”¹⁷

God uses us, his people, not only as recipients of renewal, but also as agents of

¹⁵. Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 30.

¹⁶. Cornelius Plantinga, *Not The Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 13.

¹⁷. Abraham Kuyper as translated from the Dutch in James D. Bratt, ed., *A Centennial Reader*, edited by James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

renewal. He places us in outposts of the kingdom as his ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). We daily are renewed by him and live out that renewal through obeying his teachings (Matt 7:24; John 14:23; 1 John 2:3). God has not abandoned his good Creation, but in Christ and through Christ is renewing all aspects of his Creation that were corrupted by the Fall. Al Wolters says,

Marriage should not be avoided by Christians, but sanctified. Emotions should not be repressed, but purified. Sexuality is not simply to be shunned, but redeemed. Politics should not be declared off-limits, but reformed. Art ought not to be pronounced worldly, but claimed for Christ. Business must no longer be relegated to the secular world, but must be made to conform again to God-honoring standards. Every sector of human life yields such examples.¹⁸

Consider how an emphasis on the ongoing renewal impacts our understanding of the gospel. The gospel telling not only gives a young professional hope for what will happen when they die but gives them hope for gospel renewal in their workplace. This hope arises once they see that they are not only recipients of God's grace, but agents of God's grace in their workplace. They are agents whom God uses to bring renewal to every aspect of life.

The anime artist who creates God-glorifying work brings gospel renewal to an aspect of Creation corrupted by the Fall. The coffee barista who treats her clients with lovingkindness and grace brings renewal to an aspect of Creation corrupted by the Fall. The factory worker who brings joy to the joyless and humanizes the dehumanized brings gospel renewal to an aspect of Creation corrupted by the Fall. On a five-chapter gospel, the day-to-day lives of believers have meaning, because they shine light on the ongoing gospel renewal of Christ both in believers and through believers.

Isaiah 60 makes clear that various results and aspects of our daily work today will remain in God's kingdom—even his eternal kingdom. The chapter speaks of ships, specific camels and flocks, gold, incense, and other cultural realities being offered to the Lord in the

¹⁸. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 71.

New Jerusalem. Commenting on this important chapter, Andy Crouch says, “The new Jerusalem will be truly a city: a place suffused with culture, a place where culture has reached its full flourishing.”¹⁹ He then goes on to state,

“knowing that the new Jerusalem will be furnished with the best of every culture frees us from having to give a ‘religious’ or evangelistic explanation for everything we do. We are free to simply make the best we can of the world, in concert with our forebears and our neighbors. If the ships of Tarshish and the camels of Midian can find a place in the new Jerusalem, our work, no matter how ‘secular,’ can too.”

By separating out a fifth chapter for renewal alongside creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, believers can gain clarity as to how the gospel applies to the entirety of their lives. It enables us to ask ourselves, “How am I both a recipient and agent of God’s renewing grace *today?*”

¹⁹. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 169.

Resources

More resources on church planting and revitalization can be found at



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