

The Biblical Storyline

In order to take up the issue of the biblical storyline, I start with a rather simple question: What is Christianity all about? While that is a simple question, unfortunately the answer is not so simple, at least if one were to listen to the long pauses that precede the answers most people give, which are then often painfully partial, confused, and contradictory. Almost half a century ago now, C.S. Lewis put forth the proposition that most Christians just do not seem to get it. We are confused about the nature of our faith. We cannot give a credible answer to the question—what is Christianity all about? But why do believers in general fail to understand the nature and goal of Christian faith? At least part of the answer is that we fail to understand the Bible. Most Christians cannot make heads or tails of Scripture. Even after I had been in a Bible college for three years and received a diploma that said that I had some kind of expertise, I have to admit I could not make heads or tails of what the Bible is all about.

Judging from the way we Christians actually use the Bible, we might conclude that it is a rather loose collection of material: historical stories, doctrinal codes, legal codes, apocalyptic tales, and morality plays, among others. And we are not quite sure what holds it all together. If we confess that the Bible is the Word of God, however, I think we ought to expect it to comprise a coherent message, and we ought to understand it as addressing us as a coherent whole, a unified proclamation. I say that because, if the Bible is not a coherent whole, then we should not call it the Word of God. We might better call it the ‘words of God,’ ‘The God Anthology,’ or maybe ‘The Best of Yahweh.’ Often we have been taught that the Bible is really a kind of theological textbook or a collection of doctrinal statements, with maybe a few other things added into the mix. If we are asked what holds it all together, we might reply that a system of doctrine holds it all together. By that, we usually mean the system of doctrine we ourselves hold. When we examine Scripture, however, we find the great majority of its contents are not doctrinal but narrative in character. The Bible is as a whole best understood as a narrative, a story, or a drama.

John Frame is certainly correct when he cautions us that the Bible is more than a narrative. It does have collections of wisdom sayings and psalms, along with moral instruction, and doctrinal reflection. But what holds it all together is the drama of redemption. The non-narrative pieces of the story make sense only in their appropriate context. The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck said, “The essence of the Christian religion consists in this: that the creation of the Father devastated by sin is restored in the death of the Son of God and recreated by the Holy Spirit into the kingdom of God.” Notice what Bavinck has called the essence of the Christian religion here: it is a trinitarian story. Three hundred forty years before Bavinck, Calvin spoke of the Bible as the story of God’s works in our world on our behalf.

At the surface level there are at least four crucial elements in any story. First, any good story has an introduction. In that introduction you are going to be introduced to the primary characters, have some kind of context set, and get some idea of the environment in which the story will transpire and make sense. A second crucial element in any story is a conflict that forms the dramatic problem of the story. A story that does not move beyond its introductory materials or characters is not very interesting. If the first page says, “John loves Mary,” and the second page says, “John loves Mary,” and the third page says, “John loves Mary,” how many more pages are you going to read before you give up and move on to something else? So any good story must have a conflict, a dramatic problem. Third, a good story has a resolution of that conflict. And fourth and finally, there is a conclusion, something that ties up the loose ends. It tells us how the original relationships have been modified by the conflict and the resolution, and perhaps there is a telling of the moral.

The Bible demonstrates that it too has these four structural elements. It has an introduction, a problem that arises, a resolution to the problem, and finally a conclusion. We commonly refer to these four

elements within the biblical storyline as creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. We find in Scripture that it is first of all the story of God creating a wonderful universe. Secondly, it is the story of our fall into sin. Third, it is the story of God's provision in Jesus Christ to address that sin. And finally it is the story of God bringing His creation to His promised consummation. This creation, fall, redemption, and consummation storyline is the central, all-encompassing theme of the Bible. It forms this fundamental or over-arching structure at both a literary and a thematic level.

Calvin recognized this fact when he spoke of the two orders: the order of creation and the order of sin and salvation. As a matter of fact, Calvin structured his classic work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, around this storyline. Book One of *The Institutes* deals with God the Father and the work of creation. Book Two deals with God the Son and the fall and redemptive events. Books Three and Four deal with God the Spirit and the works of the Spirit—in effect the Christian life, the people of God, and the *eschaton*, or the last things. Calvin explicitly took this trinitarian and historical sequence from the Apostle's Creed, which faithfully follows the storyline.

The biblical storyline of creation, fall, redemption, consummation in its given sequence is foundational, or fundamental, to the drama the Bible relates. Creation, after all, is the 'something' which the fall and redemptive events modify. We fell from the perfection of God's creation. Therefore the fall story presupposes the creation story. Creation and fall together form the presupposition for the redemption story. So each successive event in the story assumes the entire preceding sequence.

Before progressing much further into the storyline, it will be a benefit to explain some theological and philosophical language—the language of structure and direction. This language can be clumsy at times, but it has proven helpful in the history of the tradition. The word 'structure' refers to what God has made along with God's intention for His creation. The word 'creation' can refer both to the act of creating and a product of that act. The product, or that which God has made, will most often be the denotation of the word as I continue. In philosophical terms 'creation' is 'the thing in itself,' or its 'essence,' 'substance,' or 'nature,' or my own personal favorite philosophical term, 'stuff.' Since Augustine the classical Christian tradition has said, "Whatever is, is good." This is because God is the Creator of all that exists. The world in its nature as creation is good, thus we speak of the structure of creation.

'Direction' is a term with two sides. On the one hand it is the distortion and perversion of creation, yet on the other hand it is the restoration of creation. The essence of 'direction' is a response to creation. Where creation is a thing, a product of the divine act of creating, sin and redemption are events within creation, they take place within creation. Structure speaks of the thing itself. Direction speaks of the use or misuse of the thing.

Calvin would say that anything in creation can be either directed toward God in obedience or misdirected away from God in disobedience. For example, we affirm our sexuality because God has made us as sexual creatures, as sexual beings. Yet we oppose perversions of our sexuality, whether that is pornography, homosexual activity, adultery, or whatever; those are misuses or misdirections of a given creational structure. So creation and its structures are inherently good; they cannot be bad because God calls them into existence, but things can be abused. Philosophically, one would say that sin is 'accidental' in the sense that it does not belong to the structure of things. Sin is not a substance; it is a quality. It is not essence—what a thing is—but rather attaches itself to essence. Another example to help make this point would be trees, which God makes, and are therefore good, but we can use God's trees for sinful purposes. If I cut down a tree, there is nothing wrong in that; we need houses and all the rest. If I then turn that tree into paper pulp, there is nothing wrong there either. But if I use that paper to print racist hate literature that kills the soul, I have misused, I have abused God's creational good order.

Illustrations like this show that even though sin has entered God's world by means of the fall, the world as the stuff of creation remains good. The tree, even though it is misused, even though it is abused, even though it is used against God's divine intention, still remains good, despite being used for evil purposes.

This point is made by Scripture itself. Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." That is an explicit declaration of the goodness of creation even after the fall. Similarly, 1 Timothy 4:4-5 says, "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." Creation was not built with an inherent flaw, nor was it created morally neutral. All the works of God partake of His holy character, because they have been created to praise Him. To suggest that something is neutral is to suggest that the thing exists without God's hand, without His abiding upholding presence. All the works of God partake of His character, and they never lose that character. Sin is moral; it is a disobedient response. But sin does not deprive creation of its status as the good creation of God.

Since sin is not essence, not the thing itself, but it attaches to essence, this means that sin is an alien intruder. It does not belong in creation, but it is a parasite that feeds off the good creation of God. The fall story presupposes creation. If there were no creation, there could be no sin. Sin is the privation of the good. But sin is also spoken of in Scripture as missing the mark. Sin attaches to the good creation of God and makes it miss what it is aimed at. If you put a lead weight on an arrow, when you aim at the target the lead weight will make the arrow spin in such a way that it will not hit the bull's eye. It may miss the target completely. To use another image, sin is like a cancer. Cancer does not change structure, but it feeds off it. If you go to the hospital to visit a friend who has cancer, the person that you visit, that you see, that you hug, is not a cancer; he is still your friend, your loved one. The cancer makes her body act disobediently against herself. In other words, no matter how deeply sin and evil corrupt or misdirect aspects of God's creation, even to the point of turning them away from God and His intended function and place, the distinction between God's creation and our sinful appropriation of His creation holds. To apply this distinction anthropologically, or to the doctrine of man, even though man is a sinner and a sinner at his root, he remains man; he remains the image bearer of God.

The narrative of the fall story begins in Genesis 3 and speaks of an historical disruption that takes place between God and man. It begins when the serpent smuggles in the idea that God the Creator is somehow subject to the judgment of the creature, thus elevating the creature to divine status. The serpent asks, "Did God really say—?" The serpent magnifies the strictness of the divine command not to eat of a particular tree into an all-embracing, unyielding, and restrictive prohibition. The text is clear, however, that it is not the nonhuman creation that sins, but it is the man and the woman, Adam and Eve. Yet both of them immediately seek to escape their responsibility. Both of them seek to escape their culpability. The man blames the woman and then turns on the One who made the woman, God, in order to place the ultimate blame on God Himself; that is described in Genesis 3:8-12. For her part, the woman also seeks a scapegoat; she blames the serpent. In their guilt and shame, both of them seek to misdirect responsibility. It is as though they say, "You created the context, God, therefore it must be Your fault," or, "The serpent occasioned the temptation, therefore it is his fault." But Adam and Eve have missed the point. As God's representatives within the earthly creation, they alone are responsible for their actions. They made the mistake. They made the choice to listen to a mere creature, a creature that is so low that it slithers on its belly and has no perspective whatsoever. They failed to listen to their Creator. They followed their impressions instead of their instructions, the Word of God.

Unfortunately, we are no more sophisticated than our first parents in the garden. We blame temporality; we blame our bodies; we blame our culture; we blame our creation; we blame everyone but ourselves for our sin. And we still blame God, and sometimes men still blame women. During the second and third

centuries, a quasi-Christian cult called Gnosticism taught that males are actually spiritual creatures and females are material creatures. It was claimed that women were put here for the express purpose of bringing us guys down. If we were left to our own devices, we males would be walking around with our heads up in the clouds thinking deep spiritual thoughts. From that day to this one, we still blame our sexuality. And from that day to this one, we still have a hard time dealing with our sexuality. We have found it an easy target to blame for our ills.

Whether it is sexuality or something else, believers still often think that if we could just get enough distance between us and the world, sin would be less of a problem. That was a driving force behind the monastic movement. The implicit claim being made is: the world is our problem. But the point of Genesis 3 is: we are the world's problem. The problem of sin is not that the world God created is an unfit habitation for me. The problem of sin is that I am an unfit citizen for God's creational kingdom. If the birds and the rocks could speak, they would say, "Get out of here! You human beings are driving the property values down. You are stinking up the joint." We cannot put the onus for sin on creation. Neither can we put the onus for sin upon God. The story of the fall comes after the story of God creating man in original righteousness; the Bible persists in viewing sin as an intruder. Sin and its consequences do not belong to the natural or essential or created order of things. We are left with the very strong impression in the fall story that the disruption that comes is non-original and it owes nothing to the divine creativity. The blame for sin falls squarely upon Adam and Eve, the man and the woman—not God. Sin cannot be understood or analyzed in terms of the creative act.

Looking at Genesis 1-3, G.C. Berkouwer made the point that a primary assumption in the Bible is that God is not the source, the cause, or the author of man's sin. The writer of Ecclesiastes said in 7:29, "This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." And Calvin commented similarly, "It is not from creation but from corruption of nature that man is bound to sin." It is man who is the guilty one, the sinner, the rebel. The fall story of Genesis 3 is not one of sin invading as if it had its own autonomous, independent existence; it is rather one of a rebellion by humans against God, His law, and His good creation. Yet a common response, or objection, to this foundational truth of the Bible is that God foreknew His creatures would sin. We make this objection because none of us wants to take responsibility for our sin. A number of answers, however, can be made to this objection.

First, the objection that God foreknew that Adam and Eve would sin is little more than a thinly veiled reproduction of Adam's response in the garden. Adam argued that the woman made him do it, and so since God made her, he was innocent and God was responsible. We argue that since God foreknew that they would sin, therefore Adam and Eve were predetermined to sin. But God did not accept Adam's plea, and we should not expect God to accept it from us either.

Second, the objection is eisegesis, which is reading a meaning into the text from outside of it. It is reading a foreign element into the narrative. Nothing in the Genesis story says that God ordained the fall, yet we rush in and we want to give Moses a theology lesson. We want to say, "Moses, you should have said it this way: 'God predetermined the event.'" When we do that, we end up changing the meaning of the entire text. The text clearly means to declare human culpability for the fall, but the objection by its nature seeks to exonerate man by placing the fault for sin at God's doorstep.

Third, the objection misapplies God's omniscience and foreordination. A person who makes this objection might say that even though the text does not explicitly say God foreknew the event, Isaiah 46 tells us that God ordains the end from the beginning, and therefore all things transpire as a matter of God's predetermination. But this misapplication of the doctrine of omniscience and foreordination fails

to acknowledge that the contexts in Scripture where God's foreordination comes up most often are passages of assurance and comfort. In the Isaiah 46, for instance, an invading army is closing in on Israel, and God is assuring His people that He still maintains sovereign control over history and nothing can thwart His purpose for His beloved people.

Fourth, divine omniscience is not to be appealed to as the universal answer key for historical causation. At the same time that we affirm divine omniscience and even divine foreordination of historical events, we must not theologize from those doctrines. We are not to use them as escape hatches through which we can run away from our responsibility for our actions. Scripture is unrelenting in holding simultaneously to the truths that God is sovereign over all things and that we are responsible for our actions. For example, while God ordains all things from the beginning, He never tempts man to sin. We cannot resolve the tension between those truths by absolutizing one and rendering the other moot.

Fifth, the objection implies that we are to find the origins of sin and guilt in some realm beyond Adam and Eve's response to God. When we read the fall story, we may be tempted to ask whether there is not some more original cause behind the rebellion of the garden. Yet in its own unique way, the Bible issues a much needed and stern reminder of the limits that the Creator has placed upon human rationality. However frustrating it is to our speculative inclinations, the text speaks only of the beginning of sin, not its metaphysical origins. Therefore we must start where Scripture starts, and its starting point is the disobedience of our first parents. In the end, the attempts to explain the "ultimate" cause of sin are attempts to give it a rational reality and a place for it in the world. But sin is not something we explain or rationalize or fit into the world; sin is something we confess.

One of the problems of the reality of sin in our lives existentially and historically is that it is quite difficult to imagine ourselves radically cleansed of sin, because sin is so endemic to us, so much a part of us. Yet God is able to do that, and He calls for us to seek that kind of discernment as well. We need to be able to see the good, to see what He intends, to see His structure. And we are aided by biblical materials in terms of God's ordinances and God's stated intention for creation, apart from the fall, so that we can piously speculate what would have happened if the fall had not taken place. Yet there are limits to these kinds of speculation, which are called contrary-to-fact conditionals. One example of an illegitimate question that students sometimes ask is: "What would have happened if Eve had bitten the apple but Adam had not?" The problem with that is, not only is there no way to get an answer, there is also nothing you can do with the answer if you got it. A legitimate question, however, might be asked such as: "What would the world be like if the fall had not happened?" We can make responsible speculations about an answer to this question because we have a creational pattern described already before the fall, and the answer will help us understand something about God's norms for the world as He intended. In the simplest terms, we would learn from answering that question that human character should be one which sought to serve God in all things, be a blessing to our fellow human beings in all things, and should till and keep God's creational garden. Remember that humans are good in their structure, and in that capacity they remain image bearers. But we actualize that calling to image God poorly, disobediently. God calls us, however, to make a distinction between the sinner and the sin. The very blasphemy of sin is that the good works of God—most of all, human creatures—are used against God, and against God's order.

There are physical effects of the fall, and there is an accumulative effect from our sin. We start to smoke, and forty years later we get cancer. Some of those connections are harder to make, however, such as, "What is the connection between the fall and birth defects?" The connection is made in the Bible in Romans 8, which says that because of our sin the creation itself has been brought to futility and it groans and cries and says, "How long?" But we do not know the mechanisms for the connection. But

God can and does distinguish between those defects and whatever other physical problems come from the fall and His own good, original intention before the fall. When Adam was told that he would have to deal with thorns and thistles in his work after the fall, the point was that his disobedience was not an isolated event, an issue that was relevant only to him and God. And that is true of all sin and all moral behavior. Adam's sin was a catastrophic event for the entire creation, and the entire world is caught up and affected by it. The evil effects visited upon the created order come about through no fault of creation. This is so because in the covenant of creation, man has been appointed God's representative, the earthly head of the creation. This means that man's moral responses to God, either in obedience or disobedience, will redound to the rest of creation. When man acts obediently, then blessing will come to all. When he acts disobediently, faithlessly, then misery and covenant curse will come to all.

Genesis 3:14-19 explains that man is cursed, that sin will touch every aspect of man, that sin will bring sorrow on all creation, and that sin will touch everything he does. This is to be expected because man's rebellion in the garden represents his rejection of his appointed position in God's creation. He is saying no thanks to God's call that he be God's representative. Scripture speaks of sin as an apostasy, a falling away, a falling away from our appointed place, lawlessness, a desertion, disobedience, a revolt, usurping God's authority and sovereignty, and a defection from fellowship. What we see is that from front to back, Scripture speaks of sin in relational terms—it is a severance of relationship. We sometimes speak of sin, and rightly so, as a failure to keep the law, but the law itself serves relationship; the law itself is not an abstract reality.

Before the fall, God walked with Adam in the cool of the garden, and He spoke to him there. But that relationship was severed by Adam's arrogance and by his pride. And as the rest of Genesis 3 makes plain, Adam's fundamental relationship to God, to himself, to others, and to the creational world around him is now corrupted and jeopardized. He has been alienated from all. This means he will no longer understand his place in the world correctly. To use some of Calvin's language, man has grown blind. His senses have become dulled. The creation which was designed to be a theater in which man would be schooled in the things of God still transmits, but he is not able to learn well any more.

The antithesis to the curse of man and the curse of the ground is found in the curse of the serpent. God curses the serpent for his corrupting and divisive activity in the garden, and He immediately adds this in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers." This word 'enmity' means opposition, or even hostility. Right here in Genesis 3:15 we have God's formal declaration of war against sin. From that day forward there are going to be two opposing forces at work in the world: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Abraham Kuyper spoke of this enmity as the antithesis, because two kingdoms stand in utter opposition to one another. The word antithesis is related to a term in Galatians 5:17, which says, "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit" (that is, what is 'antithetical' to the Spirit), "And the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature" (again the word "contrary" means 'antithetical'). Because of the fall in the garden, there is now a contention, an enmity, a strife, an antithesis within the world.

But we should note where this antithesis is and where it is not. It is not an antithesis between heaven and earth, nor the visible and the invisible, nor the so-called 'spiritual' and the so-called 'material,' nor between body and soul. It is an antithesis between God and Satan, between obedience and disobedience, between faith and faithlessness. The biblical story gives repeated witness to this tension, this antithesis. In Deuteronomy 30:19, Moses declares, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." Likewise, Joshua cried in Joshua 24:15, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will

serve the Lord.” And Elijah challenged Israel In 1 Kings 18:21 saying, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” The psalmist gave voice to the antithesis in his distinction in Psalm 1 between the broad way and the narrow way, between the wicked and the righteous. The New Testament witnesses to it in its distinction between God and mammon, the old man and the new, the Spirit of God and the flesh. And in the parables of Jesus, we read of the same antithesis, when Jesus speaks of wheat and tares, and the sheep and the goats.

Gordon Spykman added, “This is not a dualism, for the antithesis represents a spiritual warfare between good and evil, which knows no territorial boundaries.” In other words, there is not an area of life we can call sacred and an area of life we can call secular. It is not geographically, locally, or spatially definable. The enmity between two hostile forces does not coincide with two parts of reality, as though one sector of life were holy and the other unholy. It is a directional antithesis which runs through all the structures of life. Sin is totally pervasive. But grace also lays its claim to all reality. Therefore the antithesis may not be dualistically misconstrued as though it drives a wedge between soul and body, faith and reason, theology and philosophy, or church and world, with the former viewed as good and the latter as evil. Both God and Satan lay claim to all things. Thus we experience the reality of two warring sovereignties, two regimes which stand over against one another in their contention for everything. No aspect of life is neutral or uncontested. Kuyper made the point by saying, “All of life is religion.” The kingdom of God lays claim to all things. In the end, the kingdom of God is the only thing that is important. And because the kingdom of God is the only thing that is important, everything is important, because the King is sovereign and lays claim to all.

The sin of our first parents brings all of us into this world as sinners, and thus all of us stand under the curse of sin and death. Man is corrupted by sin, but he is also depraved by virtue of his fallen nature. He is tainted by it and so much so that he now sins by nature. Paul’s argument in Romans 5 is that Adam’s sin has a devastating effect, not just on Adam, but on all of Adam’s progeny. All of us are born sinners, and all of us incur guilt, and we all stand under the righteous condemnation of God against sin. Our created nature has been deranged; the result being that, according to Calvin, “We have degenerated from our original condition.” This means that sin overturns the whole person, head to foot and no part is untouched, which is the theological doctrine of ‘total depravity.’ Scripture gets at this by saying that man’s heart has become corrupt. Now when the Bible uses the word heart, it does not mean a localized part of us, it does not mean a particular organ. It is speaking of our ethical, God-directed core. It is the whole man but from the perspective of his God-ward relationship and it includes all the issues of life, our actions as well as our intentions. For instance, in Proverbs 4:23 we are told that the heart is the wellspring of life, and Jesus said that the issues of life proceed from the heart.

Total depravity does not mean, however, that God has surrendered or given up His sovereign rights over His creation. Sin cannot abolish the created order, for creation is continually upheld by God’s merciful hand; that is sometimes called His common grace. Total depravity also does not mean that the unregenerate are as bad as they can be, or that unbelievers are the incarnations of evil. Sometimes we Christians talk that way, but it is just plain false. My next door neighbors are not Christians, but they are not cannibals and they are not over there killing each other. That is again part of God’s common grace. He upholds His creation. He brings the reality of His creation home to us even if we are unregenerate. What the doctrine of total depravity does mean is that we are spiritually unable. In our unregenerate state, man is unable to even see the kingdom of God, much less enter it. Many texts from Scripture get at this reality of a radically misdirected human heart. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure, who can understand it?” Jeremiah 13:23 says, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.” Romans 7:18 says, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh, for I have the desire to do what is good

but I cannot carry it out.” Romans 8:7-8 says, “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, “The man without the Spirit of God does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolish to him and he cannot understand them.” There are many more texts that could be cited here.

This total spiritual inability is ubiquitously witnessed to in Scripture. And the natural correlate of our spiritual inability is our utter dependence upon God. If we are to be saved, that salvation cannot arise from us; it must arise from God. I think Paul captures this perfectly in one sentence; in Romans 5:8 he says, “God demonstrates His love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” That is the point. It is not that unregenerate people can do absolutely no good, but that they can do nothing to commend themselves to God for redemption. We have been so overturned by sin that we cannot work our way to God for our salvation. God must move toward us, and that is grace.