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The plot of history and the drama of today

by Rick James

Apart from Christ, life is without context. By “context,” I mean a story line that gives meaning to life and significance to our actions. As no one likes being in a story without a plot, the secular world is constantly generating plausible story lines to imprint some kind of meaning upon our existence. Think, for example, of the children’s movie *The Lion King*. How do we make sense of all of the living, dying, and suffering in the world? Answer: we are part of “the circle of life”! You’re not just roadkill; you’re a meal for something further up the food chain, so . . . cheer up, I guess. As all such invented story lines are but painted backdrops for the stage of life, you don’t want to look too closely at the frail conceptual framework that props them up. They’re just catchy soundtracks, something to whistle when the lights go out.

Here’s another popular story line: what gives ultimate meaning to our life is to be remembered, living on in the hearts and minds of others. So forget your wallet, forget your car keys, but for the love of God, remember the 300 (Frank Miller’s *300*). Or remember the Titans. Or remember the Alamo. Or remember the Holocaust. Or remember, remember the fifth of November (*V for Vendetta*). You’d better remember—if you forget, we’re dead.

You can go to a Borders or a Blockbuster and find dozens of these invented contexts or story lines that—in a random universe—provide meaning to our lives and purpose to our existence. It’s as if

Satan, fearing the loss of his audience, went out and hired J. J. Abrams (*Lost*, *Alias*) or M. Night Shyamalan to generate plausible story lines for a life without God.

But, as Christians, that’s not our problem. Not anymore. Our salvation brought with it spiritual riches beyond measure, not the least of which is a sense of purpose and meaning. Because we know God, we have answers to our deepest existential questions: who and what we are; how we got here; why we exist; why people suffer; where we’re going when we die . . . and the list goes on.

In Search of a Plot

Well, almost all questions. While our relationship with God gives context to everything and answers any number of angst-ridden questions, it doesn’t necessarily answer the question “What should I do on Monday morning—or for the rest of my life for that matter?” I mean, sure, every day we can get up and love God and neighbors in any number of ways. But while that is meaningful, it’s more of a purpose to life than a plot. Christian lives always have a purpose (to glorify God, in case you forgot) but not necessarily a plot.

This point couldn’t be more important, so let me explain what I mean. Let’s start with the definition of *plot* so we can distinguish it from *purpose*. The dictionary defines *plot* as “a series of causally related events, involving some sort of conflict or tension, leading to a climax and a resolution.”

What, for example, was the purpose of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*? It’s clearly defined in the last book: the purpose is that, having come to love Aslan in Narnia, the reader might come to love Christ in the real world. That’s the purpose of the story, but it’s not the plot or story line, is it? While one could get confused with all the talking badgers and other critters, the story line goes something like: there is a struggle between good and evil going on for control of Narnia and the fate of its inhabitants. See, that’s worth a \$28 bag of popcorn. That’s a story line complete with protagonist, antagonist, tension, conflict, and resolution—the elements that always revolve around the nucleus of plot.

Or let’s imagine a new show we’ll call *Christians LOST*. A plane crashes and strands a group of Christians on a mysterious island. The purpose of the Christians on the island is the same as for Christians everywhere: to glorify God. To serve others to the glory of God, cook food to the glory of God, encourage one another to the glory of God, turn coconuts into dinnerware to the glory of God, and so on, ad infinitum. It’s a purposeful little community but as boring to watch as *Teletubbies*, and that’s because there’s no plot. But what if I add this to the story: the castaways must struggle to find a way off the island while malevolent forces try to thwart their efforts and annihilate the community? See, now we have tension, conflict—plot.

The point is this: Christians by and large mistake purpose for plot. We were created to glorify God, to love and serve him in everything we do. But there is a plot to the Christian life, not just a purpose, and it is not until we understand that plot, and the broader story line of history, that we truly have a context for our life on this planet.

So, what is the plot? The plot of the Christian life, as it so happens, is identical to the plot or story line of Scripture. And that plot is the expansion of the kingdom of God in this world and the proclamation of its king, over and against the powers of evil that oppose the purposes, plans, and reign of God.

It’s true that every life is a story; it’s just not true that every story (life) is interesting—or even worth reading for that matter. And that holds true for Christian lives as well. But when we embrace the biblical plot, our lives also take on plot. As soon as we seek to expand God’s kingdom, we experience the opposition of Satan (the antagonist), persecution and conflict, created tensions, victories and failures, climaxing action and resolution, and through the intensity of the struggle, character development (the other hallmark of a good story). Our lives become a darn good story, the book

jacket littered with superlatives: “pulse-pounding action”; “90-mph thrill ride”; “pure adrenaline.”

And as one day you and I will need to give an account of our stories (our lives) to the Lord, we would be wise to give due attention to the development of this plot.

Now, as I said, the plot, or story line, of the Christian life is one and the same as the plot of the Bible. So what we want to do is trace that plot as it is introduced in Genesis and develops over the pages of the Old and New Testaments. This is a critical exercise, because at some point you and I are called to jump into the story ourselves and play a role in bringing it to its climax and resolution.

The Genesis of Genesis

In most books the opening pages introduce us to the plot, and in this sense—though it feels heretical to say it—the Bible is like any other book. In fact, almost everything we need to know about the plot of the Bible is found in the first chapters of Genesis. Through the account of Adam and Eve, we learn that humankind was a unique creation bearing the stamp of God’s image like Roosevelt on a dime. As such, we were to be *his* representatives administrating his kingdom in this world, whatever that might have looked like prior to the Fall of Man. But fall we did.

As the drama reveals, being made in God’s image carried with it an unusual capacity: the human creation, among other things, came off the assembly line with the option of free will. But this capacity came bundled with a liability, namely the possibility to sin, to make the alternate choice. And so the stage is set and now all our story needs is an antagonist, and sure enough he slithers in on cue.

What we know of Satan in Scripture is all that God wants us to know, and it’s not a whole heck of a lot. Apparently, all we need to know is that there is a spiritual dimension apart from the physical and it includes spiritual beings who possess intelligence and independence of will. Though a different order of creation, they are not unlike us, and where there’s a will, there’s always a way for rebellion. The result of which has been a cosmic struggle in the spiritual order, a struggle that bleeds through into the physical universe as seen in the lives of Adam and Eve and billions of other people since them.

But all things being equal, all things are not equal. There is not a “balance in the force,” or equity between good and evil, just an almighty Yin and finite, sniveling little Yangs. God alone is all wise, all powerful, and all knowing. God is Creator and

part of his creation is an order of spiritual beings, some benevolent (angels), some no longer so (Satan and demonic forces). That these evil forces are able to persist in their rebellion against God is not a reflection of their power but of God's ultimate purposes in allowing them to do so.

What ultimate purposes might there be? I'm sure there are many, some knowable and some not. One purpose we witness in Genesis is for spiritual evil to play a role as antagonist in the human story. God's infinite intelligence means that second-guessing the author would be foolish, but Adam and Eve up and did it anyway.

Yet even as Adam and Eve failed and fell, God immediately intervened to preserve his plan and expand his kingdom, regardless of how costly the salvage operations might be.

Salvage Operations

Although God's kingdom could not be effectively governed through Adam and Eve, hope sprang up through a godly son named Abel. But hope didn't live long. In fact, hope was brutally murdered out in a field by his brother Cain, and now another chess piece is yanked from the board, with the pawns of evil multiplying.

By merely the sixth page of Genesis, we encounter this evaluation of humankind, sounding much like a eulogy: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain" (Genesis 6:5-6).

Sin had spread through the body of humanity, and the only hope was an emergency operation: find a gland, organ, or appendage where the cancer had not

fully spread and amputate the cancerous remains. And so a righteous man was found by the name of Noah. He and his family were preserved from the flood of judgment—godly seed artificially inseminated into a new postdiluvian world.

But while the immediate threat of evil was drowned in the deluge, sin persisted and proliferated. The spiritual arms race wasn't over, not by a long shot. In Genesis 11 we see that sin once again coalesced, this time in the city of Babel, where the human race rallied around a great tower to make a run at heaven. God's assessment of the danger to the expansion of his kingdom was as follows: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (11:6). So God splintered the human language at the city of Babel, and while sin could and would continue to spread, this merciful intervention diluted its potency.

In these opening chapters of Genesis the plot and action come at us like the opening sequence of a James Bond movie, and it's about to settle down to the pace of life. The plot, if you missed it, is that God is seeking to establish his kingdom and reign within his creation, this world. The enemy at first was Satan and the dark spiritual forces, but these were quickly joined by the vast majority of humanity who find greater pleasure in sin and rebellion than in serving and loving God. However, as we see in Genesis 12, God was going to unveil a new means by which to establish and spread his kingdom on earth, an experiment that would occupy the rest of the Old Testament.

Israel

If you locate Israel on a map, you'll notice something significant: it is the shared love handle of two obese landmasses (Africa and

Eurasia). This is no accident. God wanted Israel to be "a city on a hill," (Matthew 5:14) the only tourist attraction on the only turnpike between the continents. He wanted people from everywhere in the known world to pass through and see the Magic Kingdom, where God's reign and rule were on display. Israel was God's missionary outreach to the world, the base of operations from which to expand his kingdom to the world.

Consider the genius of the plan. After the tower of Babel, the world had been tribalized: hundreds of little nation-states comprised of clans and families, each in a state of rebellion, autonomous of God. No longer would a single man, woman, or family provide a sufficient witness. What was needed was a lighthouse, not a light: a beacon with sufficient wattage to illuminate the distant, ever-sprawling nations. What was needed was a nation, a godly superpower to draw all nations back to God.

It's just a shame that no such nation existed. The nations

spawned in the judgment of Babel were darkened and degenerate, providing as much light as a flashlight powered by a AAA battery. So God would bake a nation from scratch, using a righteous man named Abram as dough (the name Abram means "exalted father" and would later be changed to Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude"). It is not incidental that the first citizens of this new nation—Abraham and his wife, Sarah—were roughly seventy years of age, for the birth of their offspring, like the birth of the nation, would be a God-created miracle: life out of death.

In Genesis 12 we read how God told Abram to leave his home in Babylon and go to Canaan so that in due time he and his descendants would become a nation serving as a lighthouse to the world, calling all people and nations back to God. Israel was to be a gospel tract plunked down in the center of the world coffee table. Here are the specific instructions and promise that Abraham received from God:



The plot is that God is seeking to establish his kingdom and reign within his creation, this world.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

Please note the goal of the plan put forth in Genesis 12:1-3, the reason for which God created the nation of Israel. It was so that all peoples on earth would be blessed through them and come to know the one true God. They were blessed in order to be a blessing, in order to expand God’s kingdom to the world.

Thus God’s dealings with Israel in the centuries that followed, and in the following thirty-eight books of the Old Testament, all in some way related to the development of this plot and story line. Let me just pull some verses as we flip through the Old Testament on our way to the New, so you can track the arc of the story.

Keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 28:9-10)

The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God. (Joshua 4:23-24)

Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. (1 Samuel 17:46)

Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel. (1 Kings 8:43)

Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God. (2 Kings 19:19)

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. (Psalm 67:1-2)

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

“If you will return, O Israel, return to me,” declares the LORD. “If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray, and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, ‘As surely as the LORD lives,’ then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory.” (Jeremiah 4:1-2)

All in all, the plan was a spectacular one; Israel’s performance in the lead role, less so. Like some of the God-wants-to-bless-you-with-a-fleet-of-Humvees religious broadcasting we see on television, Israel’s portrayal of life in the kingdom was a distortion and often a mockery of that reality. They fell into idolatry, worshiping the gods of other nations; they failed to trust God through their national and international crises; corruption reached all levels of political and religious governance; and their spiritual life was rife with legalism and hypocrisy.

Needless to say, none of this makes for a particularly enticing advertisement for God’s kingdom—just another ugly billboard on the throughway between Africa and Eurasia. In this respect you’d have to say that Disneyworld has done

a better job of drawing all nations to a bright and shining vision of a new social order.

Jonah

Of all the books of the Old Testament, Jonah provides the clearest, most unhindered view of the internal wiring responsible for Israel’s failure to generate light to the nations.

From history, we know that Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, stretched the definition of decadence to the word’s limits. From the book of Jonah, we know that God mercifully sought to warn the great city of its impending judgment. And so God called a prophet from Israel, one named Jonah, to go to Nineveh with this cheery telegram: repent or perish. Upon receiving his mission, Jonah promptly booked a voyage on a boat heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh—Jonah was on strike. God persuasively convinced Jonah of the imprudence of his decision, and Jonah reluctantly headed off to preach to Nineveh . . . just as soon as the whale vomited him back up. At the hearing of Jonah’s warning, a miracle happened: Nineveh repented—the entire city!

It was one of the greatest evangelistic campaigns in history. And here we witness Jonah’s celebration of the event:

Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4:1-3)

Jonah was not happy, not happy at all!

Now for my point: Jonah is a picture of Israel. What Israel wanted was for God to level the city of Nineveh, reduce it to a Stonehenge condition and annihilate its ungodly citizens.

The Israelites had succumbed to nationalism. They presumed that their favored status as a nation was because of their righteousness. It wasn’t. Their blessing by God had been unmerited and for the purpose of blessing other nations. Instead, an us-versus-them mindset fueled national pride, prejudice smoldered as they bunkered down waiting, praying for an air strike from heaven—kill ’em, kill ’em all.

Israel, ceasing to be a channel of God’s grace, was now a roadblock to the mission and a spoiler of the plot. They were the recipients of God’s blessings, unwilling to share it. There are many precarious positions to find oneself in as a nation, but being a hindrance to God’s kingdom is not a desirable state of affairs, putting you at the top of God’s list of “things that need replacing.”

But we get ahead of ourselves. Maybe when the Messiah came, Israel would respond and through them all the nations of the world would hear the glorious gospel of the kingdom. Maybe they would embrace the plot. Yeah, maybe.

The Manhattan Project

In the struggle, both cosmic and terrestrial, we’ve seen quite the arsenal employed by God to impede the spread of evil and expand his kingdom and reign on earth. But the dropping of a Messiah on the unsuspecting town of Bethlehem redefined all rules of engagement.

During his roughly three and half years of public ministry, Jesus would call the nation of Israel to repent and embrace her King and his coming kingdom. But

it was only a minority, a godly remnant, who would turn, curtsy, and follow. It’s perhaps not surprising, then, that as he headed toward Jerusalem and his appointed death, Jesus’ parables turned dark and ominous, seemingly rumbling from his lips. Try this one on for size.

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, “Come, for everything is now ready.”

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, “I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.”

Another said, “I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.”

Still another said, “I just got married, so I can’t come.”

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then





the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

“Sir,” the servant said, “what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.”

Then the master told his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.” (Luke 14:16-24)

This parable of the great banquet is, in effect, an eviction notice from Israel’s landlord. If Israel would not repent and receive her Messiah, then the kingdom would expand all right, but not through them. The message of the King and his kingdom would bypass Israel, and invitations would

instead be sent to the Gentile nations (or “out to the roads and country lanes,” as referenced in the parable), where it would find a willing audience.

The messianic banquet is a powerful eschatological (end of the age) image deeply rooted in the Old Testament. It would have been a shock (though it shouldn’t have been) for Israel to learn that the Gentiles were to be seated at the banquet, but it was incomprehensible that they themselves would be scratched from the guest list.

Yet having provided a personal visitation, what more could God possibly do to reform the wayward nation? Nothing. As Jesus got to the final days of his ministry on earth, hope for Israel as the conduit of blessing to the nations had all but expired. No more pleas, no more parables, no more free loaves or lunches; just a last symbolic gesture, an enactment of Israel’s impending judgment and rejection.

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written:

“ ‘My house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations?’

But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’ ” (Mark 11:12-17)

In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” (Mark 11:20,21)

Jesus looked to the fig tree (a fig tree being symbolic of Israel in the Old Testament) and saw that fruit was nowhere to be found. Likewise, as he entered the temple, the center of Israel’s worship, it too was devoid of produce (spiritual fruit). God had required the Jews to build a special section onto the temple, called the Court of the Gentiles, for those of other nations to come and “know the Lord” (Jeremiah 31:34). Like Israel as a whole, the temple—Jesus reminded his listeners—was to be “a house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11:17). But instead of the court serving its evangelistic function, it had been turned into Walmart and with such an attitude toward missions, the lack of fruit was anything but a mystery.

The verdict had been rendered. In proclaiming God’s glory to the nations, Israel was as superfluous as a fig tree without figs. It would need to be abandoned. The gospel would be preached to the nations, but through a new vehicle—the followers of Jesus, the church, a new Israel. (As could be argued from Romans 11, this does not preclude the possibility that God may one day revisit his covenant with ethnic Israel.)

God’s people were to expand his kingdom to the world, proclaiming its king to every nation.

The Great Commission

After his death and resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples this final instruction, and as they were his last words and last command to his followers, it is more than a little significant: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

See, if you were one of the first disciples, you might have been wondering, *What will happen now that the Messiah has come? Now that Israel has rejected him? Now that God has rejected Israel?* In other words, you might be wondering what was to become of the plot without Israel. Jesus, in his final words, addressed that question and affirmed to his followers that the plot of history—and Scripture—remained the same.

As I’ve stated with considerable redundancy, the Bible, while containing many themes, is driven by a single plot. With that in mind, it is important to read the final words of the Old Testament as if they are the closing words of a very large book—because they are. In the Hebrew Scriptures (which of course were the Bible of Jesus’ day), 2 Chronicles was the last book of the Scripture, not Malachi. (That’s as it continues to be in Judaism today.) So here are the closing words of the Hebrew book of Scripture. As you read it, look for similarities with the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28.

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up.” (2 Chronicles 36:23)

In the final scene of the first *Spiderman* movie, Peter Parker’s friend Harry Osborn finds his father’s Green Goblin paraphernalia: mask, tights, weapons—that kind of thing.

In using this connecting sequence, the filmmakers were letting us know that the plot of *Spiderman* was going to be continued in *Spiderman 2*, though the Green Goblin would be replaced by his son, Harry Osborn. That is precisely how this passage functions.

Being a unified story, the Old Testament ends by bringing us back to the plot. The Jews had been exiled from their land (also wondering what was happening to the plot), and God used their captor, Cyrus, king of Persia, to recommission them and call them back to the plot. That plot, once again, was the expansion of God's kingdom, which of course centered around Israel as a lighthouse to the nations. So they were told to "go" and rebuild Jerusalem, knowing that God would be "with them" in the mission. And Cyrus, arrogant mortal that he was, made this declaration on the basis that "all authority" belonged to him.

Jesus, in playing off these final words, was picking up the plot line of the Old Testament and threading it into the New. The importance of the Great Commission and its connection to the last page of the Old Testament is to announce that the plot of Part One would continue in Part Two (the New Covenant), but the role of Israel would now be played by the church, with a few important nuances that Jesus delineated:

- His disciples were to "go out" to the nations, not "go up" to Jerusalem. (Israel, geographically, was no longer central to God's plan.)
- All authority to complete the mission belonged to Jesus, not to King Cyrus.
- Kingdom expansion was now the responsibility of the church, not Israel.

- The church would manifest the kingdom of God on earth as a spiritual kingdom, not a geographic one like Israel.
- This kingdom would be comprised of people from every nation, not just one, as ethnic Israel had been.
- And last but surely not least, the king of God's kingdom, unnamed in the Old Testament, is Jesus.

There are of course other nuances, but these are the ones implicit in the Great Commission. The bottom line: though the plot had thickened, it had not changed. God's people were to expand his kingdom to the world, proclaiming its king to every nation.

Out of the barren womb of Sarah, God created the nation of Israel. And out of a barren Israel, Jesus created the church. All for the furtherance of the plot.

In the Great Commission, Jesus called his followers to engage in the plot, embrace it, and bring it to its climax and resolution. In fact, the New Testament ends with a vision given to the apostle John of the story's resolution, when the kingdom will have expanded to every nation and where at least one person from every people group will "call upon the Lord":

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10)

As the church now heads into its third millennium, you might wonder when

the story is going to end. Jesus has already given us a partial answer. The story will end when the plot has been resolved: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

The Book of Acts

After giving his disciples a Very Large Commission (to take the gospel to the entire world), you might assume that Jesus would have sent them packing and launched them out into the world with a sense of urgency. "Send a postcard when you get there. Don't let the door hit you on your way out." Instead, Jesus told them to do nothing and go nowhere (that's my kind of commandment) but to wait in Jerusalem: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:4, 8).

Let's begin with this historical point of reference: by the early fourth century, the entire Roman Empire had heard and—by and large—embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, how likely is it that a handful of uneducated fisherman could pull this off? Not very. In fact, Jesus had sent them on an impossible errand, its success achievable only through his power. And so they were told to sit on their hands until that power arrived. In Acts 2 power arrives:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

It was like the Tower of Babel, where God confused human speech, only in reverse: members of one kingdom praising God in an assortment of languages. This symbolized the impending proclamation to the nations of the world and their inclusion into the kingdom of God.

Dr. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, made the following observation concerning the Spirit's empowerment for the mission:

But it is a fact of history that the people to whom Jesus gave His Great Commission were common, ordinary, working people, plagued with the same weaknesses that we have. The only difference between most of them and

the majority of us is that two outstanding things had happened to them. First, they had complete confidence in a resurrected Lord triumphant over death. One who lived within them and was coming again to reign on the earth. Second, they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Today, if enough Christians were completely committed to our resurrected and returning Lord, and were controlled and empowered by His Spirit, we would turn our world upside down, and experience a mighty spiritual revolution like that in the first century.

After reporting on the infilling of the Holy Spirit, the book of Acts treks with the disciples for the next thirty years as they moved out to fulfill Jesus' command to proclaim the gospel to every nation on earth. By the close of the New Testament era (roughly the end of the first century), the good news of the kingdom had spread through most of the Roman Empire, making inroads as far east as Asia; throughout eastern, western, and southern Europe; and down into north Africa. An impressive campaign for foot soldiers in sandals.

The Missionary Handbook

Besides reporting on the progress of the gospel as it spread from region to region and nation to nation, the book of Acts serves as a missionary handbook. Over the last two thousand years, churches, missionaries, pastors, mission agencies, and seminaries have turned here for a model and textbook on world evangelization. So, while we're here, we might as well take down a few notes.

Evangelism

I don't know what you picture when you think of the disciples going into a strange town and preaching the gospel. Many probably think it wasn't so weird for people to do that "back then." I don't know why we assume that about the past (*The Emperor used to massacre farm animals by running over them in his chariot . . . but I guess people used to do that back then*). No, there were a lot of things that were weird even back then, and walking into a foreign town to talk about a crucified convict being the Savior of the world would certainly have been among them.

Though empowered by the Spirit, the disciples gave careful, prayerful consideration of how to address and contextualize the gospel to their audience. They assumed that God did not give his Spirit to replace wisdom but instead to animate it.

For example, the book of Acts relates that when the apostle Paul came to a new town or city he would typically speak first to the local synagogue. Good idea. Here you'd find Jews familiar with the Scripture, even anticipating a Messiah.



There were a lot of things that were weird even back then, and walking into a foreign town to talk about a crucified convict being the Savior of the world would certainly have been among them.

You'd also find spiritually open Gentiles, those who had all but converted to Judaism, except for the festive initiation rite of circumcision. As a visiting rabbi and scholar, Paul would have had the synagogue meeting politely turned over to him—then violently taken from him as the congregation heard what he had to say. Still, in those initial meetings, Paul's preaching and the Spirit's conviction would stir the hearts of some. They, in turn, would become the first converts in that city and allow Paul, no longer welcome in the synagogue, to hold meetings in their homes.

Without a public forum, Paul's evangelism would travel along the tracks of relational networks. New converts would immediately share with their friends and family and invite them to meetings in their home where they could hear the message in its entirety from the apostle.

And so we note these same three modes of evangelism as the gospel traveled from town to town and as it has traveled down through the ages. First, there was the public proclamation of the gospel (an evangelistic outreach). Second, there was relational evangelism as new converts shared with their friends and family. And finally, there was "body evangelism"—the term given to inviting nonbelievers to participate in a Christian gathering, such as a church service, a Bible study, or prayer.

Missionaries

In the first few decades of the church everyone was a missionary, one of three varieties. There were full-time pioneers such as the apostles Paul and Peter, whose vocation was preaching the gospel and planting churches. There were short-term missionaries, such as Philip, Mark, and Luke, who jumped into the labor for a season as the Lord led. And there were lay missionaries, or people who simply transported the gospel in the course of their life and work and who provided funding for the ministry.

Every member of the body engaged in some way in expanding the kingdom.

Finances

Projects cost money. Big projects cost big money. MGM Mirage spent \$7 billion for a new City Center (read: casino and resort). If a casino is worthy of a \$7 billion dollar investment, I'm not sure what price tag you'd put on the construction of God's kingdom. Ideally, funding would be equivalent to the magnitude and magnificence of the structure—ideally.

The book of Acts introduces us to the less than ideal financial struggles and budgetary problems of kingdom expansion. A careful reading of the New Testament letters reveal that several of them had as a primary goal raising money for the mission. They were "support letters," as here:

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? . . . If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:7,11)

While some of the early missionaries worked jobs on the side (Paul was a tentmaker) so as not to burden or hinder the new churches they were planting, this was an exception to the biblical principle. As Paul put it, "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14).

The spirit of 1 Corinthians 9:14 is that missionaries have given of their lives to expand God's kingdom and should not have to work two jobs because others are unwilling to give of themselves to fund it. The mission requires sacrifice from everyone.

Parachurch

The last observation is grounded upon this question: what church did Paul and his missionary band report to? What we see in the missionary endeavors of the disciples is the emergence of the first parachurch structure. Organizations such as seminaries, orphanages, book publishers, and mission agencies are not really churches, are they? Yet they serve specific roles in the mission of the church. Some have questioned the legitimacy of such structures, but they are biblically grounded here in Acts. As soon as the church moved out in mission, and anytime in history it has done so, the Spirit raises up such structures to provide focus, resources, and stewardship to the endeavor.



Well, you can read the book of Acts for yourself and add your own observations—our tour bus must move on. We have now traced the Bible's story line through the Old Testament and into the New. Now all we need to complete the picture is an idea of where we stand today: Are we almost done? How many people still need to hear about Jesus? What nations have been reached with the gospel? How long until the words of Jesus are fulfilled: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14)?

Where Are We Today?

So, how many people have heard the gospel? A lot. Next question.

Sorry, I dislike research, but I suppose that won't suffice for an answer, and we really do need some answers. You can't get serious about a task without knowing what has been done and what has been left undone.

But no sooner do we ask the question "How many nations still need to hear the gospel?" than we realize that assigning numbers to this thing is going to get tricky. For example, by "nations," do we mean, countries, languages, or ethnic groups? As there are less than two hundred countries and some sixteen thousand ethnic groups, the difference is not exactly semantics. And when we talk of exposing a nation to the gospel, do we mean they are in range of a Christian radio broadcast? That they have a Bible translated into their language? That there is a viable church within driving distance? No, providing accurate numbers is not going to be tricky; it's going to be impossible. But that doesn't mean we can't get a general picture of the work that still lies before us.

If we were to think about preaching the gospel to the world in terms of exposing it to the gospel message, we have indeed traveled far—insanely far in the last few decades, due in part to the advance of technology. Perhaps the best gauge of this

progress would be the JESUS film, a cinematic version of the Gospel of Luke produced by Campus Crusade for Christ. Produced in 1979, the movie is lacking in special effects, acting, art direction, script . . . all around, just generally lacking. But Oscar nods was not its objective; exposing the world to the gospel was, and on that account it is the greatest movie ever made. As of this moment, 6 billion people have viewed the film, with 200 million indicating decisions to trust Christ. As there are only a little under 7 billion people in the world, this is a staggering accomplishment.

The film has been translated into over a thousand languages, which represent the vast majority of the tongues spoken by the world's population. What I mean by that is that there are currently 6,912 languages spoken in the world (ethnologue.com), but about 2,000 of them are spoken by fewer than a thousand people, and linguists generally agree that roughly 3,500 languages will disappear entirely by the end of this century. In fact, one falls out of use about every two weeks.¹ Ah, globalization.

With that understanding of languages, there are currently 2,400 languages that have some or all of the Bible and 4,037 languages with some form of the Bible in audio recording (CD, Tape, MP3). Only 3 percent of the world speaks a language that does not yet have an intelligible translation of the gospel, and most of these translations can be found on the Internet. In fact, 90 percent of the world's people, should they stumble upon a Starbucks, could go on-line and find the gospel in a language they understand. And they could read it as they sip a cup of coffee that cost them a year's wages.

In light of technology and globalization, I don't think there's an executive at Coca-Cola who doubts that somewhere between the years 2050 and 2075 everyone on the planet will both know about and have access to a can of Coke. I think the same is true for the gospel, and if not, shame on us. It is an amazing time to be alive and involved in the Great Commission. Of all the generations that have lived since Jesus uttered it, we alone live at a time of fulfillment.

Remains of the Day

Yet, having been entrusted with the expansion of God's kingdom to the nations, we want to be the best stewards of the responsibility given to us. Better to do more than not do what we were supposed to. To that end, mission agencies have set as a goal establishing a vibrant church presence within every people group.

In seeking to establish a vibrant church presence in every known people group, this goal goes far beyond exposing a

nation to the gospel or simply planting a church there. This goal goes far beyond reaching the major people groups in the world and even further beyond translating the gospel into all known languages; it breaks down the world's inhabitants into their smallest discernible ethnic identities (a number approximating sixteen thousand) and desires to establish the church there. Again, as we don't precisely know how small and distinct Jesus was being when he spoke of "nations" (ethnic groups), it's better to do too much than not enough.

Current statistics indicate that about 40 percent of the world's people groups are without a significant Christian presence. We refer to them as the unreached or least reached. By definition, the unreached lack an indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize the people group. This is based on a belief that it takes about 2 percent of a people group to be Christian in order for them to be influential enough to impact the whole.

Interestingly, the majority of these people groups (representing some 2.24 billion people) are clustered in what is called the 10/40 window, that area of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that lies between 10 and 40 degrees north latitude. The statistical details of these unreached or least reached people groups are as follows:

- The largest least-reached group is the Japanese, with over 120 million individuals.
- A total of 3,276 groups are primarily Muslim, including nearly 1.3 billion individuals.
- A total of 2,426 groups are primarily Hindu, including about 900 million individuals.
- A total of 555 groups are primarily Buddhist, totaling nearly 375 million individuals.

There are, of course, other unreached people groups in the world, but if you're looking to be on the front lines of the last frontier, think somewhere between 10 and 40 degrees north of the

equator. I mean, the sooner this thing is finished, the sooner we all can go home, right?

Students

Well, we need to look at one last chapter in the story of God's global plan of redemption, one that has direct implications for us. We need to grasp the significance of this statement made by missiologist David Howard:

All too frequently the Church has fallen into lethargy in relation to its world-wide obligations. But God does not leave Himself without a witness. Whether it be a Nicolas Von Zinzendorf, a Samuel Mills, a C. T. Studd, a Robert Wilder, a John Mott, a Jim Elliot or a hundred others who could be named, God singles out a man to prophecy to His church. And with remarkable frequency that man has been a student.²

In one sense this shouldn't surprise us. When we think of the great heroes of the Bible, it's easy to forget that many of them were just over the throes of puberty when God began to work in their lives. Daniel, Joseph (of Genesis), David, Gideon, Samuel, Solomon, Josiah—when God called them, they had barely begun to shave (which I suppose is a moot point, as clean shaven was not a desired look for Jewish men).

Yet God choosing to use young people is one thing; his choosing to use the university is quite another. The college campus is bested only by the brothel, casino, and communist party for Most Godless Institution on the planet. Consequently, we might assume that God's redemptive plan would have bypassed this worldly setting. But instead it has become the capital of the missionary enterprise, a commuting hub, transporting the gospel and kingdom

workers to all destinations north, south, east, and west.

Campus ministry is not the brainchild of any person or organization but is based on the observation that in the last five centuries God has used the campus and college students as his primary vehicle for fulfilling the Great Commission.

The Reformation was staged on the campuses of Wittenberg, Geneva, Zurich, and Toulouse. The Pietist movement of the seventeenth century was birthed in the German universities of Leipzig, Württenburg, and Halle. The spiritual heritage of the United States was grounded upon the Puritans, who proliferated their teaching and trained their leaders through the institutions of Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Dartmouth. And the great awakenings of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries were invariably led and spread through students and campuses, including the ministries of Wesley and Whitefield, which were incubated at Oxford University. In fact, the greatest missionary thrust in the history of the church was the Student Volunteer Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a collegiate missionary enterprise that sent out some twenty thousand full-time missionaries to the far-flung reaches of the planet.

God has been the architect of the campus mission strategy, and he continues to energize and utilize it today.

A Seamless Strategy for Twenty-First-Century Missions

If you were to ask any missionary what is the most needed resource to complete the Great Commission, his or her answer invariably would be "people." The gospel is powerful, but it cannot provide its own transportation.

Now consider the brilliance of God in addressing this need for missionary labor

through college students:

Today's college students have nearly four months a year allotted for summer break. What this provides is an enormous temporary labor force that can be utilized either by McDonalds or, more strategically, for short-term missions. Think about it: when will working adults ever have four months free of commitments to pioneer ministry in another country?

Now add to this another door open only to students. There are countries—particularly those in the 10/40 window—where missionaries are forbidden access. Muslim countries, for example, do not warmly welcome incoming evangelists. But college students with a student visa can travel to virtually any country and enjoy an open door at any of that nation's universities, providing a place to stay, a reason to be there, and a base of operation for ministry.

And while college students typically comprise less than 1 percent of a nation's





Being involved in the Great Commission is really not an option for a follower of Christ; the only question is how and where we are to be a part of it.

population, they are in fact the powerful percent. In any given country, the religious, athletic, military, social, political, and scientific leaders will all come from this 1 percent. To reach the campus with the gospel is to affect the entire country, making the university the ideal target of missions.

There is a final providential twist to all this. A common obstacle to foreign missions is the time required to learn a new language. However, on the college campus—this being the most educated stratum of society—students often speak multiple languages, and most speak English to some degree, allowing students to share their faith without a language barrier.

And so a group of students, free of commitments for several months, can go into a closed country with their student visas, sharing Christ without a language barrier, and when they leave the country, some members of the team can remain behind (audit a class) and continue to disciple the new and young believers. A seamless strategy.

With the Great Commission in mind, Jesus told his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2). It certainly seems that the college campus has been a major answer to that prayer, and as the task moves toward completion, college students will undoubtedly be at the center of it.

Conclusion

That’s what God has been up to. That is the plot of history, of Scripture, and of our lives as well. Being involved in the Great Commission is really not an option for a follower of Christ; the only question is how and where we are to be a part of it.

¹ John Noble Wilford, “Languages Die But Not Their last Words,” *New York Times*, September, 19, 2007.

² 1. Quoted in David Bryant, *In the Gap* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), p. 97.

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