

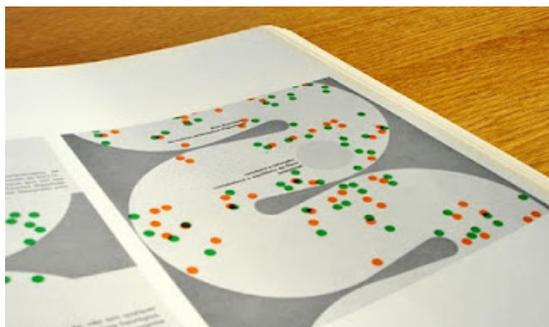
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GREEN



THE ONE AND ONLY GREAT COMMISSION

BY RICK JAMES



From the age of two until she was twelve, Grace was raped by her grandfather. The abuse ended with her grandfather's death, but the trauma would stand over her for several decades, strong-arming her choices and direction in life. To survive the pain and anger, Grace began drinking and by the age of 15 she was—for all intents and purposes—married to Jack Daniels Tennessee Whiskey.

She met Ben at a party while she was still a junior in high school: they were both young and both liked to drink and that's more than enough to sustain a romance in high school, or at least to get pregnant, which is what happened.

Raised in Christian homes, they were pressured into marriage in an attempt to hide the out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Grace was now married to a man she barely knew, didn't love, and as an added bonus, beat the hell out her. The abuse was daily—bruises, welts, cuts, scratches—which everyone treated as normal, but is only normal in a *Roadrunner* cartoon.

By the time Grace was 22 she had three children. Ben was now a full-blown drug addict. He would disappear for weeks at a time, come home, beat her, traumatize

the family, and head back off to wherever. With no alternatives, Grace courageously ended the cycle: she grabbed the kids, pawned her wedding ring, moved into an apartment, and took on three jobs to support her family.

The story might have ended here—not a happy ending, but not a bad one considering her life to this point. But life keeps going so the story must.

As a single mother holding down three jobs, Grace's workweek left little time to spend with her kids. There aren't many jobs where you can support a family by working only a few hours a day. But there is one. Grace took a job at a strip club: great hours, great tips, more time at home—and considering the trajectory of her life, things were actually looking up.

But she felt an emptiness inside, a spiritual void she couldn't fill, and this is what led to her conversion. Grace became a witch. Giving in to the darkness that had courted her for so long, she began practicing witchcraft, and within a few years she had given her soul completely to Satanism. She began to traffic drugs at the club where she worked, selling to high paying, high profile clients, celebrities, and rock stars. By the fall of 2006 she had moved herself and her children into a 3.2 million dollar estate. It seemed that Satan had blessed Grace beyond her wildest dreams. But Satan doesn't do that, so it was all about to go away.

Grace quickly became hooked on the cocaine she was selling, so to finance her habit, they left the large house and moved into a smaller one, and then they left that smaller one to move into an even smaller one, until finally she and the kids moved into a little



apartment. This didn't last either, and when they were forced to leave the apartment, the kids were parceled out to friends and family while Grace lived in cars, hotels, or on the street.

In 2008 Grace made her final drug run. At 10:36 at night, driving through Philadelphia with copious amounts of drugs and money in her car, she had the misfortune of being pulled over for making a wrong turn. For whatever the reason, the policeman asked to search her car. Grace was sent to jail on 78 counts of Possession and 78 counts of Intent to sell.

Sitting in her jail cell with despair and hopelessness sinking in, Grace asked for a Bible:

"I didn't open it at first. I just placed it on the desk and stared at it for hours. My first night in jail: it was time for lights out and there I was alone with my thoughts, my pain, my guilt, my shame, and a Bible."

Grace describes a war that took place that night: a struggle between evil and the love of God that tore apart her soul.

"I felt the love of God and it was unbearable. I cried out to God. I cried out for him to stop, because I knew he was loving me and I didn't want it, I didn't deserve it. But he wouldn't stop. He was relentless.

When I awoke in the morning my whole body ached, like I had physically gone through a war. All I could say were three words: "Jesus loves me." I felt perfect love, perfect peace. I came out of my cell that morning and I looked at all the broken people around me and I loved them. I had never loved anybody in my whole life."

On the day of her sentencing Grace stood before the judge. After reading her charges and declaring her sentence, the judge asked if she had anything to say on her behalf. This, word-for-word, is what Grace said to the judge:

"Every charge you have read, sir, is true, and I'm guilty for everything and guilty of many things you haven't read. Your honor, Jesus found me in my cell, broken and scarred and hopeless and he has given me new life. I am ready to serve this sentence and pay for my crimes. If this is where God wants me, he will use me in the next years to tell of his glorious love and power of forgiveness. And sir, I will be back to this very jail, but not as a criminal but as a testimony for my Lord and Savior."

There was complete silence in the courtroom. Even the court recorder stopped typing. Grace's lawyer broke down at her words and began sobbing and then the judge spoke:

"Ms. Jenkins, I have never heard anyone speak with such truth and sincerity and if you do all that you say then you are going to be successful. Ms. Jenkins, I am changing my judgment against you. Today you are a free woman. And today you will be released."

It was Good Friday, 2008, and Grace walked out of jail a free woman.

A GOOD STORY

Grace is my friend, and a part of the biblical community that orbits our life and home. I wanted to start this chapter with her story because I knew you'd like a story and Grace has a good one.

But we don't simply *like* stories—it's bigger than that. We see, think, dream, and comprehend our world through stories.

Following 9/11, writer William Langewiesche, spent 9 months on the site of Ground Zero interviewing firefighters, policemen, construction workers, and volunteers for a series of articles he wrote for *The Atlantic*. According to Langewiesche:

"The response was unhesitant and almost childishly optimistic: it was simply understood that you would find survivors, and then you would find the dead, and this would help their families to get on with their lives, and that the resources were unlimited, and that you would work day and night to clean up the mess, and this would allow the world's greatest city to rebuild quickly, and maybe even make itself into something better than before."

In his book *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, psychologist Dan McAdams sites the above as an example of the redemptive narrative deeply engrained in all of us: the story of something bad turned into something good. His research shows that most Americans, when asked to tell their story, describe it in chapters, typically following a redemptive outline similar to the life of Moses or "Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus." Mind you, this is not a Christian book. "We find," says McAdams, "that these narratives guide behavior in every moment, and frame not only how we see the past but how we see ourselves



in the future.”

To explore how deeply a narrative framework is embedded in our thought, a series of experiments were conducted at the Yale Perception and Cognition Laboratory. In one of the experiments, short films of basic geometric shapes were shown to test subjects. One film was simply of two squares, A and B, situated side by side on the screen. In the film sequence, Square A moves closer to Square B, but as soon as square A nears, Square B moves away, back to the original distance they were apart.

Asked to describe what they saw, observers described a chase scene: Square A chasing Square B. Some saw a romance: Square A, in pursuit of the hot, sexy, but-not-too-curvacious, Square B. The experiments demonstrate how instinctively we create stories and use them to interpret experience. It goes without saying that the Squares weren’t “chasing” one another, nor mating as they are prone to do in trigonometry, just two geometric shapes moving about on a screen.

Because we look at life through a narrative lens and see it as a story, it is the plot of life, more so than the events, that fuels our motivation and keeps us pushing forward, always hopeful that the story will get better, or at least the next chapter will. It is this narrative framework, this “pushing toward an ending” as theologian Jeremy Begbie puts it, that is responsible for our perception of life’s forward movement: that sense that even repeated activities are, in some way, a progression.

Conversely, it is the absence of a plot—whether in a book, movie, relationship, or life—that induces drowsiness and the longing for sleep. Finding our days dull, our jobs boring, our lives going nowhere, our careers at a dead end, has everything to do with a narrative perspective of life, a perceived lack of plot.

So we know what we mean when we say “plot,” let’s define it as: “a series of causally related events, involving some sort of conflict or tension, leading to a climax and resolution.” Plot is the story line that gives meaning and purpose to the events and actions of a story. Plot is a cattle rancher and the activities and experiences of life roam aimlessly until plot corrals them, brands them, and drives them in a direction. For Christians, the biblical story of redemption is that cattle rancher, wrangling all of our experiences under God’s redemptive framework. And when Scripture

warns, “see to it that no one takes you captive by [worldly] philosophy and empty deceit,” it refers to other cattle ranchers seeking to corral us: competing storylines that redefine the plot and meaning of life.

These competing storylines ooze from the lyrics of songs, the dialogue of movies, the plot of books, the lure of advertising, the curriculum of education . . . they ooze from every pore of our culture and society. Knowing the true meaning of life, it seems unfathomable that you or I could be taken in by any of these “call now” \$19.99 versions of the truth, but you can’t underestimate the seduction of evil, a moving story, and a great soundtrack.

But if it’s true—and it most certainly is— that we as believers have the true storyline of life, why are so many Christians sleeping through their Christian lives, wandering aimlessly, without purpose, motivation, or direction—all of the hallmarks of a missing plot? To answer this, we need to make a crucial distinction between the purpose of a story and the plot.

PURPOSE VS. PLOT

A plot, as we defined it, is “a series of causally related events involving conflict or tension, leading to a climax and resolution.” Plot is the story line, not the reason the author wrote the story.

What, for example, was the purpose of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*? Lewis actually tells us in the final pages of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Aslan explains to the children that, though they must return to their world, they will find him there also. Aslan says, “There I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.” There it is: the reason, or purpose, for which Lewis wrote the Narnia series. But this is not the plot of the Narnia series, which I imagine is something to the effect of: the forces of good seeking to rescue Narnia from the evil enchantment of the White Witch.

To see the distinction between purpose and plot, let’s imagine a new TV series based on the successful drama “LOST:” a Christian version airing on TBN and starring Kirk Cameron. In the show, a plane crashes and survivors are stranded on a mysterious island. The *purpose* of the Christians on the island is the same as the *purpose* of Christians everywhere: to glorify



God.

So they cook to the glory of God, sing to the glory of God, fish to the glory of God, turn coconuts into iPads to the glory of God, and so on and so forth. On the whole it's a purposeful little community, but as boring to watch as Teletubbies because there is no plot.

Purpose, but not plot. Now, if we introduce into the story that the castaways must find a way off the island, rescue an indigenous tribe of headhunters who live on it, before a hurricane swallows up the island: well then I just might be able to sell the story to TBN.

It has been my observation that Christians, generally speaking, have mistaken the purpose of the Christian life for the plot of the Christian life. We were created to glorify God, to love and serve him in everything we do. This is the purpose for which we are made, but this is not the plot for which we are made. And it is not until we engage in the plot that we experience a driving, motivating, eye-opening context for living on this planet.

So, what is the plot? The plot of the Christian life, as it so happens, is identical to the plot of Scripture: *the expansion of the kingdom of God in this world from chaos, over and against the power of sin, death, and Satan that oppose the purposes, plans, and reign of God.* Now you could nuance a word or two or expand it a bit but this is the storyline.

There is a seemingly endless, or perhaps a truly endless, number of themes found in scripture, but only one plot, one storyline, one axis around which rotate conflict, tension, climax, and resolution. As Greg Bealle puts it in his *New Testament Biblical Theology*: it is not a topic that binds the Old Testament “but rather a storyline around which the major thematic strands of the OT narrative and writing revolve.”

Here is a highly, highly condensed summary of the storyline:

THE MISSION OF GOD

In most books the opening pages introduce the major elements of the plot, and in this sense—although it feels a bit heretical to say—the Bible is like any other book. In the account of Adam and Eve we are introduced to the crown of God's creation, made in his image, entrusted with the administration and expansion of God's kingdom in this world.

Being made in God's image carried with it a freedom of mind and will that allowed for the unthinkable—not just the freedom to choose alternatives, but to choose alternatives to God. The stage is set, then, and all the story needs is for the antagonist to slither in.

Satan appears without a backstory. What we know of Satan is no more or less than what we need to know: there is a spiritual dimension beyond our world and, in the temptation of Adam and Eve, that world bleeds into ours. Evil begins here but doesn't start here. Adam and Eve are the first corrupted, not the first to corrupt. There is a cosmic struggle that is played out in The Garden, and in this struggle we chose the side of evil.

Yet even as Adam and Eve conspire to treachery, God intervenes to preserve and protect Creation and rescue the administration of his kingdom in this world.

SALVAGE OPERATIONS

While the first couple falls, hope springs to life in their godly offspring, Abel. But hope doesn't live long and neither does Abel. By merely the sixth page of Genesis we are reading a requiem for the human race: “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, spreading so rapidly through the human populace, leaves a lamentable option: preserve the healthiest moral specimen and amputate the gangrenous remains. And so a righteous man is found by the name of Noah. He and his family are preserved from the flood of judgment—godly seed artificially inseminated into a postdiluvian world.

Though the immediate threat is destroyed, evil survives the flood because man survives the flood.

In Genesis 11, human sin has once again concentrated and congealed—it does that. In the city of Babel a great tower is constructed, the hubris of man making a run on heaven. God's assessment of the danger to his earthly kingdom is 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 splinters the human language



at the city of Babel, and while sin will continue to spread, this merciful intervention will serve as a kind of quarantine.

Like the opening sequence of a James Bond movie, these first chapters of Genesis are a sudden, shocking immersion into the storyline and plot, but in Genesis 12 the pace slows. The plot continues—the expansion of God’s kingdom in this world over and against the forces of evil—but at a less frenetic pace. In Genesis 12, we are introduced to Israel, which will be the means through which God’s kingdom will be administered and expanded in the world. Israel will occupy the leading role in the drama for the rest of the Old Testament. As goes Israel, so goes the plot.

ISRAEL

Locating Israel on a map, it resides on the shared love handle of two obese landmasses (Africa and Eurasia). And this is because God created Israel to be “a city on a hill” (Matthew 5:14), the only tourist attraction along the only turnpike between continents, a place where any son of Adam could pass through and marvel at God’s reign and rule, clearly on display.

When Babel shattered, shards of humanity were flung every which way. To draw the ever-sprawling nations back to God required a beacon of sufficient illumination: a godly nation whose renown would spread to the corners of Creation. As no such nation existed, God would create one from scratch, starting with a godly man named Abraham. In Genesis 12, God tells Abram to leave his home in Babylon and head to the land of Canaan:

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)

(Notice how the text emphasizes the storyline: Israel is created as the means through which God’s kingdom will expand to all peoples and nations on earth.)

Over the next eighteen hundred years and thirty-eight books of the Bible, the plot will drag, stall, and sputter as Israel falls into idolatry and disobedience again and again and again and again. Yet hope for the mission endures, a hope fixed on the coming messiah:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

(Isaiah 42:1)

JESUS’ MISSION

Due to Israel’s ponderous string of moral failures, interrupted only on occasion by a righteous individual, plot development grinds to a near halt prior to the coming of Christ. But as Jesus begins his public ministry the pace quickens, and over the next three years the tension and conflict will build and build, until erupting in the climactic death and resurrection of the Son of God. Dying for the sins of the world, Jesus accomplishes redemption for all of mankind, for all who would be saved.

But the story’s not over, though it seems like it should be. That’s what’s interesting about being in the middle of a story: you have no idea whether a sharp rise in the plot is in fact the story’s climax. If it’s a movie, you can only stare at the screen with generalized anxiety, waiting to see if the story resumes, resolves, or the credits role. This is essentially where the disciples find themselves after Jesus’ resurrection. It is the most pressing question on their minds: “What will happen to the plot now? Was that the climax? Is the story over?”

“So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” (Acts 1:6)

To a first century Jew, Israel’s rejection of the messiah and his subsequent death and resurrection, were entirely unanticipated turns in the story. It’s like Charlton Heston galloping down the beach at the end of *Planet of The Apes* and stumbling upon the Statue of Liberty. It changes the entire storyline: this is not a harrowing adventure on some distant planet, it’s an apocalyptic vision of our own.

In hindsight, clues can be found in the Old Testament, and certainly in the words of Jesus. But, foreshadowing never gives the surprise away so the



disciples were, for lack of a better word . . . surprised. They had no idea where the story was going next, but it was important they find out. They were, after all, starring in it.

And this is the great significance of The Great Commission given by Jesus to his disciples. After his death and resurrection, Jesus gives them their final instructions. It is both a summary and explanation of how the storyline of history will proceed, climax, and ultimately resolve.

THE GREAT COMMISSION



And they went up on a mountainside and Jesus said to his disciples:

“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)

If the Bible is a unified story driven by a singular plot then we might imagine that the closing words of Part One (the Old Testament) would, in some way, set the stage for Part Two. Not necessarily, but it's worth investigating.

In the Hebrew Scriptures (the Bible of Jesus' day) it is 2 Chronicles, and not Malachi, that serves as the bookend to the Old Testament. 2 Chronicles, chapter 36 is the final chapter of the Hebrew Scriptures, and verses 28-30, the closing verses. Here is how the Hebrew Bible ends:

“The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, “The LORD, the God of heaven,

has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.”
(2Chronicles 36:28-30)

In the final scene of the first *Batman* movie, Commissioner Gordon describes to Batman a sociopath on the loose with a “taste for the theatrical,” a criminal mastermind who has left Batman his “calling card.” Turning over the playing card reveals the face of The Joker, and the filmmakers have let us know that this is merely the end of part one, and that the story will resume in *Batman 2*. This is precisely how 2Chronicles 36:28-30 functions in the redemptive story.

The Old Testament ends by bringing the reader back to the plot. The Jews had been exiled from their land and God used their captor, Cyrus, king of Persia, to re-commission them and call them back to the plot. That plot, once again, was the expansion of God's kingdom, which centered on Israel as a lighthouse to the nations. They were told to “go” and rebuild that lighthouse (Jerusalem), knowing that God would be “with them” in the mission. And Cyrus makes this declaration on the basis that “all authority” had been given to him.

In the Great Commission passage of Matthew 28, Jesus is giving a nod to the closing sequence of Part One, picking up the storyline of the Old Testament, and threading it into the New. Notice how Jesus' Commission picks up on the concepts “to go,” that his presence would be “with them,” and that “all authority” had been given to him. Jesus is letting us know that the plot of Part One will continue in Part Two (the New Covenant), but the role of Israel will be played by the church, and there will be some additional twists in the plot as well:

- His disciples are 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 belongs to Jesus, not to King Cyrus.
- Kingdom expansion is now the responsibility of the church, not Israel.
- The church will manifest the kingdom of God on earth as a spiritual kingdom, not a geopolitical one like Israel.
- This kingdom will be comprised of people from every nation, not just one, as was the case with ethnic



Israel.

- The king of God's kingdom, unnamed in the Old Testament, is Jesus.

Though the plot has thickened, it has not changed. God's people are to expand his kingdom to the world, proclaiming Christ to every nation.

When Jesus is asked by the disciples, when this age would come to an end, his response is quite naturally, when the plot resolves: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

The Bible is a unique book in that its divine author is not bound by time. The hero of the story dies in the middle but wins in the end. It's as though the Holy Spirit forgets that we can't traipse through time as he can—so, *following the asteroid crash of 2070, after Greenland has emerged as a Superpower . . . uh, never mind. But through John's Revelation we are allowed to glimpse the end of the story though we are still in its midst. What John sees and saw is this:*

"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" (Revelation 5:9)

This is the conclusion of the story: the resolution of the plot.

WE EMBRACE PLOT TO GET PLOT

The next day, following her miraculous jail cell conversion, Grace was overwhelmed by compassion for the other women in the jail, women as hopeless as she had been only the day before. She asked God that, in the time remaining of her incarceration (however long that was), he might use her to share the love of Christ with these women. She knew almost nothing of the Bible but, like the Woman at the Well recorded in John's gospel, she knew enough to tell people: Come see a man "who told me everything I ever did" (John 4:39).

Nearly every day for the next two months, Grace received a new cellmate. She would share of her miraculous conversion and the love and forgiveness found in Christ and then the next day they would be gone, replaced by a new cellmate. She recalls some 50

different women who came and went in just those few months.

Demonstrated in Grace's life is something unremarkable in the New Testament, but an anomaly in American church life: Grace's conversion led immediately and irresistibly to her engagement in the plot, participating in the expansion of Christ's kingdom. There is an important connection here that needs to be observed because it's vital to our spiritual awareness.

In the Great Commission, Jesus invites his disciples to participate in the plot of Scripture. What we don't realize is that *embracing the big plot is what gives our life plot*, filling it with drive and purpose, conflict and tension, rises and falls, joys and victories: all the essential ingredients of a great story. Think of all the chase scenes, heart-wrenching relationships, harrowing adventures, and dramatic rescues that accompany the apostle Paul, all because—and only because—of his engagement in the mission (the plot).

Grace did not simply have an exciting conversion story; she had a conversion that has led to an exciting story (life). To borrow phrases from the covers of some current bestsellers: our Christian lives are not the "exhilarating," "pulse-pounding," "thrill-ride," "shot through with adrenaline" that they could be, because we are not engaged in the plot: we are not actively engaged in expanding Christ's kingdom and proclaiming Jesus Christ.

Engagement in the redemptive rescue of lost people is what inaugurates persecution, spiritual battle, the need for deliverance and divine enablement, a sense of mission and purpose, an invigorated prayer life, and the deepest community with fellow laborers. When we join in the Plot, our life gets plot. Conversely, the absence of these dramatic elements points to an absence of plot, an absence of personal involvement in the mission.

PUBLISHERS CLEARINGHOUSE

No one knows better than the publishing world what makes for a compelling story as their survival hinges on it. Here are some sobering statistics strung together from some popular websites on publishing:

For starters, roughly 4 out of every 5 people in the literate world believe they have "a book in them," that is, some amazing event or aspect of their life that if



put to paper would make fascinating reading. While most people never get that far, there is at the moment somewhere between 6 and 8 million unpublished manuscripts floating around out there. Publishers drastically reduce that number by reviewing only those manuscripts that come to them by way of literary agents who have the unenviable task of separating the wheat from the chaff. Literary agencies can receive upward of 10,000 queries a month, out of which they'll select only a handful of proposals to represent to publishers. Of the books they represent, not all will get published; of those that are published only 5% will make a profit; and of books purchased, the average reader reads only the first 18 pages.

The lesson, hard-learned by the literary world, is this: just because you have a story doesn't mean it's a good one.

Most stories are languoring, uninspired pulp, without any plot to hold them together. And, from a narrative perspective, many lives could be considered the same. Using the grandiose language of narrative, "I'm starting a new chapter" or "I'm on a journey," can give an epic ring to life, but just because our life is a story, doesn't mean it's a good one. It really doesn't. And being a Christian only insures that one chapter will be worth reading—the one where we came to Christ.

Yet one day we will give an account of our story before God, and a determining factor—that which will separate a mediocre story from a great one—will be the plot: the degree to which we engaged in the expansion of God's kingdom and the proclamation of its king.

STRANGLING SUBPLOTS

Imagine if you were to walk into an average high school, not knowing what a high school was. You mill around with the students, hang out after school, read their texts, stalk their Facebook, and go their parties. And then imagine that after all this "outrageously awesome" research, I ask you: "What is high school all about?"

How long do you think I'd need to wait before you gave me any semblance of an answer like: knowledge or education or ethical wisdom or college preparation? Probably a long time, probably never, and that's because the subplots of high school (dating, sports, popularity, friends, sex, etc.) have risen to the level of plot.

Most of the Christians I know want to make a difference for Christ, and they are certainly believers in the Great Commission. But I think what happens is the subplots of the Christian life (important subplots) rise to the level of the main plot and end up serving as our Great Commission. Like mistaking purpose for plot, I believe this is another confusion that separates us from the forward momentum our lives are meant to have. Here are just a few of the many possible subplots.

THE FAMILY SUBPLOT

Throughout the Old Testament there is always a building project that tests the faith and obedience of God's people: an ark to build, a land to be cleared, a wall to assemble. But of all the general contracting it is the ongoing construction of the Jerusalem Temple that has the most direct correspondence to the Great Commission.

The Great Commission is essentially the New Testament continuation of that Temple building project, or as G.K. Beale puts it: the Great Commission is really a "Commission to build a bigger Temple," one that fills the entire earth. And so it's suggestive to observe similarities, for what impeded construction of the Temple in Old Testament times is essentially what impedes the Great Commission today. Listen to the words of the prophet Haggai as he addresses Israel regarding their ambivalence to rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple—their Great Commission.

"Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?... Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house." (Haggai 1:4; 7-9)

The world of the Bible can seem so foreign, that at times it's hard to relate. This is not one of them. Essentially there was a housing bubble in Jerusalem, and people were pouring all their time and money into their homes while neglecting construction of God's Temple. Maybe they weren't completely apathetic: maybe they threw something into the collection plate each week, earmarked "Temple Construction;" let's say 2.9% of their income, which is what evangelicals



give on average to the work of missions. But whatever money they made, the Lord simply “blew it away:” pensions, profit sharing . . . gone, burst like a bubble. With a few liberties, this is essentially what Haggai recounts. It’s a story we’ve heard.

Considering God had just rescued the Israelites from Babylon, it seems a little heartless of them to ignore the Temple. But, remember, the whole city of Jerusalem needed rebuilding, and wasn’t Jerusalem also God’s dwelling place, and what kind of witness is it for God’s people to be living in squaller, and . . . well, you see how easy it is for a “focus on the family” to become the defacto Great Commission, where our mission and vision is that of the “Christian Home” with its Christian children, Christian school, Christian camps, Christian friends, Christian cars , Christian dogs . . .

This vision isn’t wrong, it’s simply insufficient. For me to see the love and leadership of my family as subsuming my involvement in the expansion of God’s kingdom on earth is a subplot of the Christian life rising to the level of the main plot.

THE SUBPLOT OF SELF

Personal well-being and wholeness are not unimportant, but somewhere over the past few decades a “therapeutic gospel,” has emerged as a new Great Commission: a mission to right all wrongs, heal all hurts, rehabilitate minds and memories, break spiritual bondage, eradicate negative emotions, assert boundaries, and live the life we always wanted. Even now, armies of counselors and therapists are being trained and mobilized to fulfill this commission.

I have no doubt that good things have come from this movement, and to be sure the church has often failed to see the kingdom’s growth in us is as important as the kingdom’s growth outside of us. But the quest for wholeness is not the Great Commission, and not unlike the Great Pumpkin, its arrival, I’m afraid, will be interminably delayed: not until the shalom of the age to come (Revelation 21:14).

In this world, personal growth happens in the context of community and mission, not in place of it. It is in the context of loving and serving that our “issues” are raised, and it is in community that they are healed. In any other context the pursuit of personal wellness almost guarantees a degree of narcissism, making the quest self-absorbing, self-serving, and never-ending

because, of course, we never do get over ourselves.

THE SUBPLOT OF UTOPIA

In this time between Christ’s two comings, the church’s task is to “proclaim the gospel to the whole creation . . .” Whatever effects the gospel has in the lives of its hearers and in the wider society in which it is heard, the Great Commission itself is a very specific mandate to get the Good News to everyone who lies in darkness, to baptize them, and to teach them everything in God’s Word.

What Michael Horton addresses in his book, *The Great Commission*, is the propensity to replace the Great Commission with the Great Commandment (love thy neighbor). Like the peanut butter and chocolate of a *Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup*, they are both “Great” and should never be put in antithesis to one another. But the Great Commandment is not one and the same with the Great Commission. And when the two are made synonymous “everything becomes the mission,” and “when everything is the mission, nothing is the mission.”

Well if not the plot, what is the Great Commandment? Let’s answer that question with another weighty question: Why are there so many doctor shows on TV: *House*, *Scrubs*, *ER*, *Grey’s Anatomy* . . . ? The answer is that some settings are better than others for the development of plot. And so it is that the Great Commandment is the setting for the plot of the Great Commission.

In his letter to Titus, Paul exhorts slaves to a life of godliness and good works, and he does so that “in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” The Greek word for “attractive” here is *cosmeo*, from where we get “cosmetics.” Paul is saying that love and good deeds make the gospel “attractive;” they are a context or setting for the message, not the message itself. Actions cannot communicate the substitutionary death of Christ, the need for personal repentance, and salvation is by faith and not works (nor would they ever be inferred by example). And even with cosmetics, the message of “repent and believe” may still look like a pig with lipstick to an unregenerate heart.

Love is the setting, the gospel is the message, and the Great Commission is the plot.

CRU PRESS

GREEN



TIME TO GO

In Jesus' ministry, something is clarified that is somewhat opaque in the Old Testament. How exactly was Israel supposed to have been a light to the nations? Should they have sent out missionaries? Held up "Joel 3:16" at public events? With the exception of Jonah's preaching to Nineveh, it would appear not. Evidence for this is based on Jesus, who perfectly modeled the faith and obedience required of Israel, yet focused his ministry on Jews and only those Gentiles who sought him out.

In Salvation to the Ends of the Earth, Kostenberger and O'Brien make an important delineation between the mission of Israel and that of the church: The Great Commission was a radical "paradigm shift from a centripetal movement (the nations coming to Israel) to a centrifugal one (God's people going out to the nations)." What was most revolutionary about the Great Commission, say Kostenberger and O'Brien, was the word "go."

This is a good place to leave this subject, with the call to go: to go intrude upon the day, a centrifugal witness, initiating and seeking open doors for the gospel, not a centripetal one—responding only to those who initiate with us; to go and engage in the plot where we live and where we work; to go to the ends of the earth where Christ has yet to be preached.