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Our Place in the Grandest Story of All

by
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Two books have just come out from Baker Academic (Grand Rapids, Michigan) that should be read, discussed, and acted on by Christians everywhere. The first is *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (2004), by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen. The second is *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers* (2005), by Alan Storkey.

The One True Narrative

Bartholomew and Goheen both teach at Redeemer University College in Ontario. Their aim in the book is to show that the Bible needs to be read as a grand drama, from beginning to end, about God's kingdom and our place in it. Drawing on the work of teachers such as Lesslie Newbigin and N.T. Wright, they argue "that the Bible offers a story that is *the true story of the whole world*. Therefore, faith in Jesus should be the means through which a Christian seeks to understand all of life and the whole of history. This is not just because the scriptural story is comprehensive, or because it happens to be the story that we have inherited, or because it is the story that works for us. We must take the Christian story seriously in this way because *it is true* and tells us truthfully the story of the whole of history, beginning with the creation and ending with the new creation."

People have lots of stories by which they make sense of their lives. There are family stories, vocational stories, national stories, and more. But ultimately one story serves as the basic story, the fundamental story on which the others depend. "The whole point of a basic story or grand narrative is to make sense of life as a whole, and such grand narratives cannot easily be mixed up with each other. Basic stories are in principle *normative*—they define starting points, ways of seeing what is true—and Wright says: 'The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'"

The remarkable thing about *The Drama of Scripture* is that the authors are able in less than 250 pages to draw us into the entire drama of the Bible, from the creation and fall into sin, through God's call of Abraham and the choosing of Israel for a special role

among the nations, on through to the coming of Jesus, his death, resurrection, and ascension, and the mission of the church carried forward, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in expectation of Christ's second coming. Engaging almost every book of the Bible, Bartholomew and Goheen help us see the dynamic forward movement of the story that has not yet reached its end. The story encompasses us and calls for our conscious, enthusiastic engagement. That engagement cannot be simply in worship and evangelism, only in prayer and fellowship. It must be with all that we are and have as God's creatures in all of life, including political life.

John's vision in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, "indeed, in the whole New Testament," write Bartholomew and Goheen, "does not depict salvation as an *escape* from earth into a spiritualized heaven where human souls dwell forever. Instead, John is shown (and shows us in turn) that salvation is the *restoration* of God's creation on a new earth. In this restored world, the redeemed of God will live in resurrected bodies within a renewed creation, from which sin and its effects have been expunged. This is the kingdom that Christ's followers have already begun to enjoy in foretaste."

The kingdom of God, fulfilled in and through Christ, that is the underlying theme of the Bible, according to Bartholomew and Goheen. The hymn of praise to Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation (4:11), where the Lord is celebrated for creating all things, "is set in the very throne room of heaven. This is appropriate because it echoes a truth about God implied from the beginning of the creation account in Genesis. By causing the creation to come into being by his word of power, God establishes it as his own vast kingdom."

And what about humans? Where do we fit in to all of this? We have been created in God's image to "serve as his 'under-kings,' vice-regents, or stewards. We are to rule over the creation so that God's reputation is enhanced within his cosmic kingdom." In other words, the biblical story is all about God's kingdom and the responsibility of royal servants to glorify God by doing justice to one another and to the other creatures. The biblical story is political in this sense from start to finish. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and fell under God's judgment and mercy, that was not the end of the story. Rather, it was the beginning of the creation's corruption, including the disintegration of the divine-human relationship. Discord and evil all around us arise from our refusal to participate in the creation drama on God's terms. But we cannot succeed in our disobedience. God's kingdom purposes will be upheld and fulfilled through judgment and redemption. That is the story that unfolds through God's mercy to Noah and his family, through the call of Abraham and Israel, through the monarchy of David, God's judgment on Israel, and the appearance of the Messiah, Jesus. This is a kingdom story, the story about human governance of the earth (whether in obedience or in failure) and about the ultimate praise and glory of God through Jesus Christ, when every knee will bow before him and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. Jesus, the redeemer, is the one who brings the kingdom home to God, and in the process, brings many redeemed citizens of that kingdom into God's throne room.

Jesus and the Powers

One of the great things about Alan Storkey's book, *Jesus and Politics*, is that without the author knowing it, his 325-pages fill out in greater detail the 41 pages in *The Drama of Scripture* that are dedicated to the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension

of Jesus. Storkey, in tune with Bartholomew and Goheen, let's us see that the life and ministry of Jesus is all about the establishment of God's kingdom. That is what Jesus came preaching—the kingdom of God. That is why he threatened Roman and Jewish authorities alike. That is why his disciples finally recognized him as the Messiah, the Christ, the one authorized by God to rule. That is why the placard nailed to his cross read “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” That is why when God raised him from the dead he told his disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth now belongs to him. That is why when he ascended to his Father his followers saw him ascending to sit on the throne at the right hand of the Father to rule forever.

Any Christian today who wants to understand the Bible and the Christian drama into which God draws us by the power of the Spirit, must read the Bible as the story of God's kingdom and our place in it. And not *our* place only, but the place of every government, every nation, every authority on earth. Nothing and no one stands outside this story of judgment and redemption, which is now dramatically unfolding toward the climactic return of the King, the Lord, Jesus the Christ.

What Storkey shows in great detail, however, is how surprising and odd Jesus' politics were. They are odd and disarming even for us today. He did not come with the kind of power most expected from the Messiah. Jesus refused to take up the sword, laid down his life as the suffering servant, and told his disciples to let the power of God's Spirit fill them. Yet Jesus was doing and saying these things not in renunciation of politics and power, but in order to fulfill God's kingdom on God's terms. The most telling example of this dramatic contrast, says Storkey, appears in the trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin (reported in Matthew 26:57ff.). The leaders are frustrated that they cannot do away with Jesus. The high priest commands him, under oath, to “tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus finally speaks: “Yes, it is as you say. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

“We recognize [here] the conjunction of Messiah and Son of Man,” Storkey writes. “They are one and the same—God's ruler, God's judge—to whom *they* will have to give account. We also note the worthy way Jesus rules and proclaims judgment in the face of the unjust judges. The Son of Man stands trial as Messiah, fulfilling its content as no one can conceive, and on no other terms than his own. Caiaphas tears his clothes after Jesus' response and is incandescent with rage. He has his evidence, and the rest of the Sanhedrin concurs. They hit Jesus with their fists, spit in his face, blindfold him, and say, ‘Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?’ (26:67-68n). There is no doubt what is at issue.”

Clearly, Jesus offends those who think that they hold highest authority on earth. But he goes beyond offense, says Storkey. “The government of God . . . subverts. . . . It sets up a different way. The gentle rule of God pulls down all kinds of existing powers and structures that glory in themselves. . . . The biggest subversion of all is to dethrone the ruler and politics and put them in their limited place under the sovereignty of God. This change is at the fulcrum of world political history.” And with this new approach of authoritative humility and justice, Jesus comes to establish God's rule over all, forever.

It is not possible to summarize or convey the full force of Storkey's book in a few paragraphs any more than it is possible to show how it fits into Bartholomew and Goheen's presentation of the biblical drama as a whole. Storkey stays close to the Gospels, letting them tell the story, uncovering for us political details that we can't see

any more because we don't understand the nature of God's kingdom. Storkey shows us Jesus' political principles, his statecraft, his role as world ruler, and even his view of taxation. Then he follows the King of the Jews to the cross and on through his resurrection.

Storkey, like Bartholomew and Goheen will not let us read the Bible as a book of ancient curiosities that might hold some historical interest for us. The Bible tells us of the drama that now encompasses us whether we like it or not, whether we want to participate in it or not. And it is, unavoidably, a political drama. Christians have only one honest and obedient choice to make: to pursue Christian politics. Otherwise, they misunderstand who Jesus is and fail to give him rightful honor, praise, and obedience. "Many of us are not even conscious of the music of Christian politics that groups and parties are playing on every continent—peacemaking, providing aid, mending families, healing, empowering, and freeing slaves. Christian politics under the rule of Christ can be an explicit part of public discourse, not privatized and unspoken, not marginal to other commitments, but centrally focused on Jesus. . . . A thoroughgoing Christian political response could be part of the normal Christian life for hundreds of millions of people. Political organizations can explore and embody Christ's great principles. Christ's politics can be made explicit in parties and groups for whom this is their central motive. Indeed, such a commitment cannot easily be subordinate to any other political motive. The title 'Christian' in politics claims priority over any other perspective."

With this, Storkey brings us back to where Bartholomew and Goheen began. We cannot live with more than one basic story as the integrating drama of all subordinate stories in our lives. Christians who try to live the Christian drama as a private or personal story alone or only in "spiritual" things, while depending on other stories for their practices in political and economic life, fail to recognize who Jesus is and the role he plays in completing God's kingdom purposes. The commitment Christ calls for in all of life, including politics, "cannot easily be subordinate to any other political motive. The title 'Christian' in politics claims priority over any other perspective."

Where have Storkey, Bartholomew and Goheen drawn some of their insights into the Bible? Let me mention just a few of the people who are important to them and who can serve as valuable resources for us. Earlier we mentioned N.T. Wright and Lesslie Newbigin. Goheen wrote his doctoral thesis on Newbigin, whose book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans, 1989) is perhaps his most important. Wright is a voluminous writer, and two of his most important larger works are *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996) and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003), both published by Fortress Press. Storkey also draws from Wright and many other biblical scholars. The authors of both books also recognize the importance of Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Eerdmans, 1985). Storkey draws from John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1994), and all three draw from writers in the Dutch Reformed tradition of Abraham Kuyper, including the work of Herman Dooyeweerd and Bob Goudzwaard.