

# Living at the Crossroads

An Introduction to Christian Worldview

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# Preface

## Our Stories

Life is—or should be—about knowing God deeply. This book emerges out of the journeys we have been on since God turned our own lives upside down by drawing us to his Son.

Mike grew up in a Baptist church. The gospel that was preached there was one of individual, future, and otherworldly salvation. It was all about going to heaven when you die. Nevertheless, that church was a place where God was at work through the gospel; people loved the Lord, and their faith was alive. Mike remains grateful for much in this tradition—for example, its earnest commitment to reading Scripture, to prayer, and to evangelism; its stress on the importance of individual holiness and morality; and its emphasis on the personal relationship that we have with Jesus. These remain important issues for every Christian, and Mike is thankful for this early training. Yet it had little to say about the broader, public life of Western culture—politics, economics, scholarship, education, work, leisure, entertainment, and sports.<sup>1</sup>

During Mike's seminary years he began to see that the gospel that Jesus preached was a gospel of *the kingdom*. The good news is much bigger than Mike had been led to believe: God is restoring his rule over all of human life in Jesus and by the Spirit. Further reading during those seminary years in literature that explored the Christian worldview began to open up the implications of this scriptural insight for a Christian approach to the public life of culture. It was exciting, akin to a second conversion! The gospel had something to say about all of human life.

Doing his doctorate on the work of Lesslie Newbigin, one of the greatest missiologists of the twentieth century, Mike found his conviction deepened

and strengthened. Having served as a missionary in India for most of his adult life, Newbigin was concerned in the last years of his life to bring the gospel to bear on the public life of Western culture. Newbigin shared many of the convictions that Mike had embraced during his seminary days. But Newbigin also had fresh emphases and critiques that were important in Mike's worldview development.<sup>2</sup> Mike got to know Lesslie Newbigin well, and his influence helped Mike to see the integral connection between mission and a Christian worldview.

For the better part of the last two decades, Mike has taught numerous worldview courses to undergraduates and graduates of varying denominational backgrounds in various parts of the world. But the importance of worldview for living has moved beyond the classroom for Mike. It moved him and his wife, Marnie, to struggle with the implications of the gospel for education and to undertake the home schooling of their four kids with the intention of shaping their education with the gospel. This change affected numerous areas of life, but it has especially opened up the arts, literature, and music. Marnie shared and participated in the same "worldview conversion" that Mike did. Her new appreciation of the arts as God's gift was passed along to her family. Their four kids became an accomplished string quartet and devoted themselves to the study of literature, music, and the other arts. It has led on to graduate studies in the arts and music for several of them up to the PhD level. Mike and Marnie's life is still filled with concerts, now at a professional level, in which their children play. This is only one way that a broadening worldview has affected Mike and his family, but it shows that one's view of the gospel does have consequences.

For Mike, worldview is about opening up the wide-ranging scope of the gospel and the church's mission to embody that gospel. Few things excite him as much as helping Christians to see the length and breadth and depth of God's love for us and his world.

Craig grew up in South Africa during the era of apartheid, by which every aspect of South African life was structured along racial lines. He went to a whites-only school, lived in a whites-only neighborhood, and enjoyed all the "benefits" of being a white South African. Craig was radically converted to Christ in his teens through the evangelical youth group of the Church of England (into which he was eventually ordained as a minister). Like Mike's Baptist church, Craig's Anglican church was evangelistic and alive but had nothing to say about the oppressive, racist social context in which they lived. Really committed Christians went into "full-time ministry" (as pastors or missionaries); it was better to stay away from politics, since, after all (so it was reasoned from Rom. 13:1–7), the government had been appointed by God!

Craig has a great love for horses, and when he left high school, his choices were between becoming a vet and studying theology. He went to Bible college in Cape Town, where he was exposed to Reformed theology and the worldview thinking of Francis Schaeffer (though this was never explicitly brought to bear on the South African situation). Later Craig began to think through Schaeffer's work, and he realized that if the gospel is a worldview, then it applies to all of life, *including* politics—a dangerous insight to have at that time in South Africa.

While working as a pastor in South Africa, Craig made contact with Afrikaner Kuyperian<sup>3</sup> Christians in Potchefstroom, and together they developed the Christian Worldview Network, which held annual conferences and published a *Manifesto on Christians in the Arts* and a quarterly magazine called *The Big Picture*.<sup>4</sup> Craig believes that what South Africa went through then, and the general failure of evangelical Christians to relate their faith to the realities of South African life, have a great deal to teach us now about the vital importance of understanding the gospel as a worldview. We now know from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission what terrible injustices were perpetrated in South Africa during the apartheid years under its “Christian” government. How was it that evangelical Christians could not see the evil right in front of them? How was it that, on the whole, evangelicals ended up reinforcing this evil rather than challenging it?<sup>5</sup> One important answer is that they lacked a coherent Christian worldview. How different might the history of South Africa have been if evangelicals there had combined their “passion for souls” with a sense of Christ's lordship over all of life!

As Craig's thinking about a Christian worldview developed, he began (under the influence of his Kuyperian friends) to see the importance of philosophy for Christian scholarship, and this led him to Toronto for a year of philosophical study and then on to the UK, where he completed his doctorate on the book of Ecclesiastes. Craig's current research deals with the ways in which the gospel as a worldview shapes academic biblical studies.

A Christian worldview gets you interested in everything. Craig loves reading novels and listening to music; he makes crafts and sells jewelry, has two chinchillas as pets, and enjoys teaching philosophy and religion. A Christian worldview also helps you to meet interesting people. Several years ago Craig and Mike met in Canada and then again in England, and they discovered a mutual commitment to mission and Christian worldview. Out of this friendship came, first, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, 2004), and now this book.

## Lessons We Have Learned

Both of our stories have underscored a number of things that are important to what we hope to share with our readers in the chapters that follow. First, Christianity involves a personal relationship with God through Jesus. In this respect, we remain grateful for the Pietist tradition that has deeply shaped English-speaking evangelicalism in general and both of us in particular. We believe that this tradition often has unfortunately narrowed the true scope of the gospel, but we also believe that it has emphasized some aspects of biblical truth that are of the utmost importance, such as the need for a personal relationship with Christ, a high view of the Bible as God's Word, and the importance of evangelism.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the gospel as recorded in Scripture is as broad as creation. Since the church has been sent to make known this good news in all of life, in actions and in words, the church's mission is, likewise, as broad as creation. Indeed, our deepest concern in this book is to give expression to the gospel of the kingdom and the cultural mission of the church that follows from this. Our hope is that the readers of this book will be interested in relating their own faith to every part of God's good creation.

Herman Bavinck has expressed these first two emphases in a helpful way. He quotes the well-known preacher J. Christian Blumhardt, who said that a person "must be twice converted, first from the natural to the spiritual life, and then from the spiritual to the natural." This is a truth, Bavinck believes, that is "confirmed by the religious experience of every Christian and by the history of Christian piety in all ages."<sup>7</sup> The first conversion is to God and is expressed in the sigh of the psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (Ps. 73:25). The Pietist tradition understands this well. But we must be converted *again*, this time back to the breadth of our cultural calling in this present world. Bavinck himself was raised in a Pietist home and went through these "two conversions." Our own similar experiences have led us to be thankful for our Pietist past and its important emphases, as well as our Reformed present with its broader understanding of the gospel. And we are concerned that each of these traditions can neglect the important emphases of the other. It has been our goal in writing this book that the breadth of the gospel would shape it from beginning to end.

Third, the term *worldview*, in spite of all of its philosophical and historical baggage, remains a valuable concept by which to open up the comprehensive scope of the gospel. The term does have its dangers and limitations: it retains some of its early associations with humanistic philosophy, and more recently it has taken on intellectualist overtones within some Christian traditions. But

its value as a tool of Christian thought is real, and thus in this book we seek to carry on in the worldview-conscious tradition of James Orr and Abraham Kuyper, whose aim was simply to shine the brightest possible light on the Christian church's mission in the public life of culture.

Fourth, the burgeoning study of mission can immeasurably enrich worldview studies. Those who work in cross-cultural missions have struggled to understand the engagement of gospel and culture at a deep level. Moreover, they have struggled with this issue from the biblical standpoint of how best to embody and announce the gospel—that is, from a missional concern. The literature of missiology, and especially the rich literature on the contextualization of the gospel in other cultures, will inform much of this book.

Fifth, worldview studies must be increasingly ecumenical. Paul says that the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ can be known only “together with all the Lord's people” (Eph. 3:18). “Together” here implies, for us, a dialogue with Christians from other places, from other times, and from other confessional traditions. Both of us have been shaped by the Kuyperian tradition, and surely this tradition has taken the lead in worldview studies. But we are not uncritical participants in this tradition, and we believe firmly that no single tradition is able adequately to grasp or to express the fullness of the gospel. We have much to learn from our brothers and sisters from other parts of the world, from other historical eras, and from other denominations and confessional traditions of the Christian church. Both of us have taught the material of this book in many parts of the world and to people from many different Christian traditions. Those experiences have provided much enrichment and correction, and we hope that this will be evident in this book.

## About This Book

Worldview is a concept that emerged in the European philosophical tradition, and it is valuable only insofar as it enables us to understand more faithfully the gospel that stands at the center of the biblical story, and to live more fully in that story. It is for this reason that this study of Christian worldview follows on from our former book, *The Drama of Scripture*. We have found in our teaching that a course on worldview is far more effective when it follows a course on the story of the Bible: worldview follows Scripture so as to deepen our commitment to living in the biblical story.

There is another reason it is important to emphasize that *Living at the Crossroads* follows on from *The Drama of Scripture*. Many traditional evangelical

approaches to worldview have seen it in intellectualist terms; that is, they look at worldview as a merely rational system. We believe that worldview should have a narrative—a *storied*—form, since this is the shape of the Bible itself. We often have occasion to quote N. T. Wright’s observation that a story is simply “the best way of talking about *the way the world actually is*.”<sup>8</sup>

This book is meant to be (only) an introduction to worldview. We recognize the danger in simplifying and summarizing large amounts of material on some very complex theological, philosophical, and historical issues. Something that is meant to be simple can all too easily become simplistic, but it does not have to be that way. We believe that this kind of book is needed to get undergraduate students and church members excited about the scope of the gospel and the breadth of their own callings. If you catch a glimpse of the possibilities here, other study can follow later.

When we wrote *The Drama of Scripture*, we constructed a Web site that provides slides, articles, and numerous other resources for studying the Bible as a single, coherent story (<http://www.biblicaltheology.ca>). The feedback that we have received about that Web site suggests that many of our readers have found it helpful. So we are offering a similar one for *Living at the Crossroads*, at [www.christian-worldview.ca](http://www.christian-worldview.ca). It too will provide slides to be used for teaching, supplementary articles, and much more to help encourage the discussion of Christian worldview generally.

Worldview has to do with the most basic, comprehensive, foundational religious beliefs that we have about the world as they are embodied in a story. This means that Christians will elaborate and understand these beliefs that flow from Scripture. But these beliefs cannot be separated from a cultural context, for the gospel is always expressed and embodied within some human culture. Therefore, in the study of worldview we must also struggle to understand the fundamental beliefs of the surrounding culture within which each Christian community lives. The relationship of the Christian faith to the other cultural “faith” that surrounds it must be explored. This is a very complex and highly dangerous enterprise. As contextualization studies in missiology show, there is always the danger of allowing the gospel to be compromised, accommodated to the idolatry of any given culture. Worldview studies, then, must deal with the Bible’s foundational teachings, *and* those of the surrounding culture, *and* the complex interaction of the two belief systems.

This opens up a wide area of inquiry for Christian academics, and many good books on worldview have dealt with various divisions of the topic. However, only Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton’s *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* has really shown the potential breadth of worldview studies.<sup>9</sup> That book remains, in our opinion, one of the best texts

on worldview studies available, precisely for this reason. Yet it was written over twenty-five years ago, and thus it did not deal with our current complex situation, shaped by globalization, postmodernity, and consumerism. Also, although the way that Walsh and Middleton relate the gospel to culture is, in our opinion, on target, they have not fully explored the dynamic of contextualization. Our book follows Walsh and Middleton's in demonstrating that worldview is a wide-ranging discipline with many smaller fields of inquiry within it. We deal with a biblical worldview, a cultural worldview, and a worldview in action. But between the cultural worldview and a worldview in action we reflect on the way in which the gospel can come alive in a faithful way within a cultural context; that is, we seek to explore the dynamic relationship of gospel and culture.

We begin with the gospel of the kingdom and the call of the church to make known this good news. In chapter 2 we trace the origins of the word *worldview* and how it came to be appropriated by the Christian community, especially by the evangelical church in North America. In chapters 3 and 4 we return to the question of how this concept of worldview might help equip the church for its comprehensive mission today, and to that end we will articulate what we believe to be a faithful biblical worldview: a digest of the most fundamental and comprehensive beliefs about the world that are conveyed by the biblical story. The next three chapters describe the dominant worldview of modern Western culture: chapters 5 and 6 briefly trace the Western story from its origins in Greek culture to the present; chapter 7 asks "What time is it?" in our culture—what are the beliefs and spirits that are shaping our culture? In chapter 8 we turn to consider how the church is to live at the crossroads between these two conflicting and incompatible worldviews. How are we meant to live in two stories and yet remain faithful to the one true story articulated in the biblical narrative? What is involved in a missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture? And finally, chapter 9 offers snapshots of what such an encounter might look like in six areas of public life: politics, business, art, sports, scholarship, and education.

## Acknowledgments

We realize we are deeply indebted to many people, living and dead, who have shaped our understanding of worldview. We mention in particular Al Wolters, Brian Walsh, Richard Middleton, Gideon Strauss, Elaine Botha, Bob Goudzwaard, Jonathan Chaplin, Herman Ridderbos, N. T. Wright, Leslie Newbigin, Francis Schaeffer, James Sire, David Naugle, and John Newby.

Jim Kinney and his excellent staff at Baker Academic have been helpful in forming this book and bringing it to birth. We are again deeply indebted to Douglas Loney, professor of English and dean of the Foundations Division at Redeemer University College. As with *The Drama of Scripture*, Doug has helped to provide a lively literary style. He has done more than simply edit this book and help to unify two writing styles. Doug has entered into the topics at hand, helped express things more clearly, and provided invaluable help not only on style but also on content.

We are delighted to dedicate this book to Pieter and Fran Vanderpol, and to John and Jenny Hultink. These couples have become our dear friends and have demonstrated their commitment to Christian scholarship in tangible and sacrificial ways, not least in endowing the chairs that we occupy. Without such patrons, this book would not have been possible.

# 1

## Gospel, Story, Worldview, and the Church's Mission

### Starting with the Gospel of the Kingdom

As followers of Jesus, our thinking about worldview must begin with the gospel, the good news first announced two thousand years ago by Jesus when he stepped onto the stage of world history: “The kingdom of God has arrived!”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus spoke the language of the Jews of his day, for they well understood the resonance of that word *kingdom*. The Jews had for a long, long time anticipated God's intervention in history. They had waited for God to move again in love and wrath and power, to send his Messiah and restore his reign over the whole world. And at last Jesus does come, claiming the royal title for himself: *he* is God's anointed one, the Messiah. The Spirit of God is on him, he declares, to bring God's purposes for the entire world to their great and terrible climax. The divine King of Creation is returning to reclaim his kingdom!

This proclamation of good news is the climactic moment of a long historical account (told in the Old Testament) of God's redemptive work, stretching back to God's promise to Adam and Eve. God had chosen Israel to be a channel of his redemptive blessing to the nations, but they had failed. Yet, in the midst of their failure, prophets arose promising that God would not let his plan unravel; he would act again in and through a promised king to renew the whole world. Jesus announces that that day has arrived: the power of God to

renew the entire creation by his Spirit is now present in Jesus. This liberating power is displayed in Jesus' life and deeds and is explained by his words. But it is at the cross that the triumph of God's kingdom is accomplished. There he battles the power of evil and gains the decisive victory. His resurrection is the dawning of the first day of the new creation. Alive from the dead, he enters as the firstborn into the life to come. Before he ascends to God the Father, he commissions his little group of followers to continue his mission of making the good news of the kingdom known until he returns. He then takes his place at the right hand of God to reign in power over all creation. He pours out his Spirit and by the Spirit makes known his restoring and comprehensive rule in and through his people as they embody and proclaim the good news.

One day Jesus will return, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. The end of universal history that Jesus announced, revealed, and accomplished will finally arrive in fullness. But until that climactic day, the church is taken up into the Spirit's work of making known, in their lives, deeds, and words, the good news of what God has done for the world in Jesus.

## The Bible as the True Story of the World

The proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom is not an announcement about a new religious experience or doctrine. Still less is this an offer of future salvation in another spiritual world. This gospel is an announcement about where God is moving the history of the whole world. Jesus employs a popular Old Testament image to drive this home: the world will one day be the kingdom of God. The good news that Jesus announces and enacts, and that the church is commissioned to embody and make known, is the gospel of the kingdom. We make a grave mistake if we ignore this, the central image of Jesus' proclamation and ministry.

Jesus claims that the establishing of God's kingdom is the ultimate goal of world history. This is not a local tale of interest only to a particular ethnic or religious group. Jesus steps into a long story of God's redemptive work in history that had been unfolding for thousands of years in the Old Testament, into a community that was eagerly anticipating that story's climax. The Jews believed that the God they served was the one and only God, the Creator of all things, the Ruler of history, the Redeemer of all things. After the entrance of sin and evil into the world God had set out to restore his world and his human subjects to live again under his gracious rule. This God was not the God of the Jews only; he was King of the whole earth. The Jewish nation had

been chosen to be channels of his redemptive work to the entire world. All Jews believed that this story was leading to the grand culmination when God would act decisively and finally to finish what he had been working toward in their history: the accomplishment of salvation for all nations, for all creation. They disagreed on how this would happen, and when, and by whom. They disagreed on what they themselves should be doing while waiting for God's action. But they all believed that the story of God's redemptive acts was moving toward a climax that would have consequences for all people.

When Jesus came, he announced that he was himself the goal of this redemptive story, the climax of God's dramatic activity. Such a claim was completely astonishing. Jesus was not simply another rabbi offering some new religious or ethical teaching by which to enrich one's own life. He claimed that in his person and work the meaning of history and of the world itself was being made known and accomplished. He warned that *all* people must find their place and meaning within his story, and no other.

When we speak, therefore, of the Bible as a story, we are making a normative claim about the story told in the Bible: it is public truth. It is a claim that this is the way God created the world; the story of the Bible tells us the way the world really is. Thus, the biblical story is not to be understood simply as a local tale about the Jewish people. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. In between, it offers an interpretation of the meaning of cosmic history. Christopher Wright puts it this way: "The Old Testament tells its story as the story or, rather, as part of that ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. In other words, in reading these texts we are invited to embrace a metanarrative, a grand narrative."<sup>2</sup>

Thus our stories, our reality—indeed, all of human and nonhuman reality—must find their place in *this* story. In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach makes this point in a striking contrast between Homer's *Odyssey* and the biblical story: "Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, [the Old Testament] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history. . . . Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world . . . must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan."<sup>3</sup> Normally, when we read myths or novels, or when we watch movies, television, or plays, we are meant at least in part to forget about our own world and to enter and live in the fictional world for a time. When the story ends, we emerge on the other side, return to our own world, and resume our own lives. We have indulged in a kind of escape from reality into fiction, perhaps

hoping to be informed, enriched, or at least entertained while we have been “away.” Some of us will seek to carry back some nuggets of truth or wisdom or beauty as souvenirs from the world of artifice, giving us perhaps some new (but admittedly limited) insight into an aspect of our lives in the “real” world. But it is not that way with the biblical story. The Bible claims to *be* the real world. This story, among all stories, claims to tell the *whole* truth about the way our own world really is. Here, inside this story, we are meant to find the meaning of our lives. Here we must find a place in which our own experience was meant to fit. Here we are offered insight into the ultimate significance of human life itself.

Thus, the gospel is public truth, universally valid, true for all people and all of human life. It is not merely for the private sphere of “religious” experience. It is not about some otherworldly salvation postponed to an indefinite future. It is God’s message about how he is at work to restore his world and all of human life. It tells us about the goal of all history and thus claims to be the true story of the world.

### Which Story Will Shape Your Life?

All of human life is shaped by some story. Consider the following illustration offered by N. T. Wright:

What is the meaning of the following comment? “It is going to rain.” On the surface, the statement seems to be quite clear. Yet the meaning and significance of this remark can only be understood when we see the part it plays in a broader narrative. If we are about to go for a picnic that has been planned for some time, then these words would be bad news, with the further implication that perhaps we had better change our plans. If we live in East Africa plagued by drought, where another lengthy dry spell and consequent crop failure appears imminent, the statement would be good news indeed. If I had predicted three days ago that it would rain and you had not believed me, the statement would vindicate my predictive ability as a meteorologist. If we are part of the community of Israel on Mount Carmel listening to the words of Elijah, the statement substantiates the message of Elijah that Yahweh is the true God and that Elijah is his prophet. In each case, the single statement demands to be “heard” within the context of a full implicit plot, a complete implicit narrative.<sup>4</sup>

The meaning of these words ultimately depends on which story shapes it; in fact, each story will give the event a different meaning. It is like that with

our lives: “The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part?”<sup>5</sup> What Newbigin is referring to here is not a linguistically constructed narrative world that we fabricate to give meaning to our lives but rather an interpretation of cosmic history that gives meaning to human life. This is the way God has created the world and the way it really is.

Since human beings are created to live in community, some shared story will inevitably shape the whole life of a social group. The gospel invites all who hear it to believe the good news and repent (Mark 1:14–15). All who hear are summoned to believe that this is the true story and to make their home in it, leaving behind whatever other story had been shaping their lives. From these hearers a community is formed of people who have come to believe the gospel and the story of the world that it offers.

### The Church's Mission

The church is the community that responds in faith and repentance to the good news of the kingdom. They make their home in the story of the Bible and seek to form their lives by that narrative. But this is a community that also is charged with making this good news known to everyone else. This gospel defines the church's mission and calling in the world. Before Jesus returns to the Father, he gathers his disciples and speaks words that are intended to define the meaning of the rest of their lives: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). These words encapsulate what it means to be a community of Christ's followers. Their mission is to make known the kingdom of God—the end and goal of history—throughout the world as Jesus has made it known in Israel.

Christopher Wright rightly sees mission as “a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture.”<sup>6</sup> He believes that the Bible tells “the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world for the sake of God's whole creation.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the mission of the people of God is “our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation.”<sup>8</sup> Our identity as God's people comes from that missional role in the biblical story.

Thus, there is a sense in which the church is essential to the gospel. Jesus did not leave behind a book in which the good news of the kingdom was to be bound up. Instead, he formed a community to carry the message: “As you [God the Father] sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world”

(John 17:18). This community is defined by their mission: to make known the good news of the kingdom.

Since the gospel is about God's rule over all of creation, all nations, and all of human life, the mission of Jesus' followers is as wide as creation itself. They have been commissioned to witness to the gospel in all of public life—business, scholarship, politics, family, criminal justice, art, media—and every other corner of human experience:

The Spirit thrusts God's people into worldwide mission.  
He impels young and old, men and women,  
to go next door and far away  
into science and art, media and marketplace  
with the good news of God's grace. . . .

Following the apostles, the church is sent—  
sent with the gospel of the kingdom. . . .  
In a world estranged from God,  
where millions face confusing choices,  
this mission is central to our being. . . .

The rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole world.  
To follow this Lord is to serve him everywhere,  
without fitting in,  
as light in the darkness, as salt in a spoiling world.<sup>9</sup>

## Living at the Crossroads of Two Stories

Jesus says, "I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). God's people in the Old Testament were unified ethnically (as Jews) and geographically (in Palestine). The story that shaped their cultural and public lives—or should have—was the same story that shaped their religious commitment: the Old Testament. However, in the New Testament all that changes. God's people take a multiethnic and multicultural form as they are sent into all the world to incarnate God's story in the midst of all the various cultures of humankind. This multiplicity of cultures presents an enormous challenge to the church in carrying out its mission to all peoples, in all places, at all times until the Lord's return. Every cultural community shares a story that shapes and organizes its life together, and none of these stories is neutral, either philosophically or religiously. Cultural stories offer widely differing accounts of how the world came into existence, of its meaning, purpose, and destination. Each culture

tells and lives out a world-story that is to some degree incompatible with the gospel. This world-story is often held below the level of the individual's conscious understanding, yet it shapes and forms the whole of a culture's communal life.

The story that has shaped Western culture for several centuries is a narrative of progress that says we are moving toward ever-greater freedom and material prosperity, and that we are doing so by human effort alone, especially through science embodied in technology, and in the application of scientific principles to our social life, in economics, in politics, and in education.

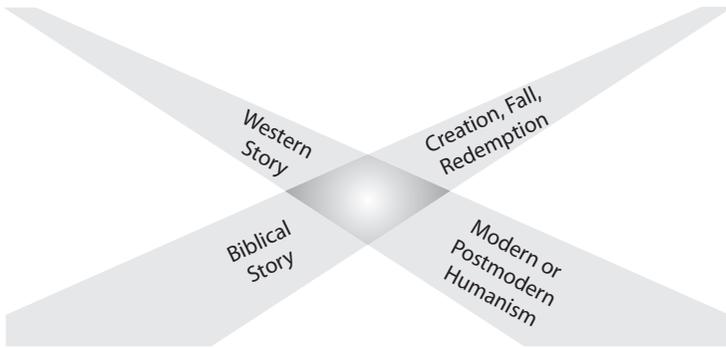
Recently there have been two significant complications to the modern story of progress. It has come under severe attack by what has often been called *postmodernity*, because of its failure to deliver that "better world" that it has long promised. At the same time, the story of progress has taken on a new and apparently powerful shape as it spreads around the world in the process called *globalization*. We will have occasion to examine all of this in detail in later chapters. At this stage it is important simply to grasp that this cultural story is a narrative with an understanding of the world and human life that lies at the foundation of Western culture. Even though the members of modern Western culture are often not conscious of this story, it nevertheless functions for them as a lens through which to see and interpret the world, a map to give direction, and a common foundation upon which to build social and cultural life.

Three more things need to be said about this modern Western world-story in order for Christians to understand the cultural context in which they must seek to live out the truth of the biblical story. First, like the biblical story itself, the Western story claims to be the true story of the world. In fact, it often simply assumes this distinction, masking its own grand claim to truth by relegating all other such stories to secondary status, as being merely "religious." Second, like the biblical story, the cultural story is all-embracing, with claims on every aspect of human life. Third, the Western story is radically, although not totally, incompatible with the biblical story.

In our contemporary culture . . . two quite different stories are told. One is the story of evolution, of the development of the species through the survival of the strong, and the story of the rise of civilization, our type of civilization, and its success in giving humankind mastery of nature. The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God's election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. *These are two different and incompatible stories.*<sup>10</sup>

Thus the people of God find themselves at a crossroads, at the intersection of two stories, both of which claim to be both true and comprehensive (see figure 1).

**Figure 1. Living at the Crossroads**



As those who have embraced the gospel, we are members of a community that believes the Bible to be the true story of the world. But as participating and living members of the cultural community, we are also part of the other story that has been shaping Western culture for a very long time. We cannot simply opt out of the surrounding culture: our lives are woven into its institutions, customs, language, relationships, and social patterns. Our embodying of the kingdom of God must take cultural shape in our own particular time and place. So we find ourselves at the crossroads, where we live as part of two communities, in two stories each largely incompatible with the other, but both of which claim to be true—and claim the whole of our lives.

### **Missionary Encounter or Compromise?**

How can the Christian community live at this crossroads? It all depends on which of these stories is held to be basic, nonnegotiable, the true story of our world. The question is whether our faith will find its focus in Jesus and his kingdom as the clue to understanding the whole of the world and its history, or whether we will embrace the cultural story as true, and thus succumb to its pressure to limit our faith to the private realm of mere “religion.”

If the church is faithful and committed to demonstrating in its whole life that the gospel is true, there will be a missionary encounter, a clash between the biblical story and the cultural story.<sup>11</sup> Since both stories are comprehensive, and since both claim to be true, such an encounter is inevitable. When this

happens, the foundational religious beliefs shared by the surrounding cultural community will be challenged, and the gospel will be held out as a credible alternative way of life. The church, by being faithful to the biblical story, will call people to be converted, to believe the gospel, to come live in the story of the Bible—and also to live it out.

But there is another, darker possibility. If the church, consciously or unconsciously, were to accept the world-story of the surrounding culture as basic, as the true account of the world, then it will be obliged to tailor the gospel to fit somewhere within that cultural story. And if the gospel is adapted to take such a secondary place within another more comprehensive story, the inevitable result for the church is compromise and unfaithfulness, for it will not be offering the gospel to the world on the gospel's own terms, namely, that it alone is the truth about our world and about our lives in it.

Lesslie Newbigin believed that in fact this is what had already happened in the Christian church of the modern Western world. Newbigin had spent forty years as a missionary in India, and when he returned to Europe, he had the gift of “new eyes” to see the incompatibility between the gospel story and that other story that was at work shaping modern Western culture. Newbigin believed that the church had deeply compromised its living out of the gospel, allowing the biblical story to be subsumed within the modern scientific story. He spoke of the Western church as being “an advanced case of syncretism,” having accepted the fusing together of two incompatible viewpoints.<sup>12</sup> (In such syncretism, inevitably, the truth claims of one story or both stories are compromised.) When the gospel is merely absorbed into the Western cultural story, it is reduced to the status of a private religious message about a disembodied, future, otherworldly salvation postponed to an indefinite future. Newbigin believed that the church must recover the gospel on its own terms, as the true and comprehensive story of our world and the declaration of the ultimate goal of cosmic history. Only then, he believed, would the gospel story be liberated for its missionary encounter with Western culture.

### **Liberating the Gospel for a Missionary Encounter: Can Worldview Contribute?**

Over a century ago, two Christian thinkers, like Newbigin, came to see that the cultural story of the West was undermining the biblical story as the foundation of life in the Christian community and thus was hindering a genuine missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture. Although they did not use the language of “missionary encounter,” James Orr and Abraham

Kuyper re-called the church to Christ's claim that the gospel alone offers a true and comprehensive view of the world. Both Orr and Kuyper seized the current notion of "worldview" to demonstrate the gospel's claim to offer its own utterly comprehensive view of the world and of human life—a worldview that simply will not be fitted into any other but instead demands to stand on its own. More than a century after Orr and Kuyper, Christians are still faced with their challenge: could this concept of worldview help us to accomplish today what they called the church to do then, to release the gospel from its bondage to modern Western culture? We believe that it can, and to make that case will be our task for the remainder of this book.