

Living and Working with Purpose

Our Ordinary Everyday Lives and Work are an Essential Part of God's Story and Mission

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PART A: INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

Summary

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the Bible story that provides a stimulus and check for our daily lives and work. Whatever our area of work, we should be able to own it as part of our Christian vocation, as part of God's mission purposes for His people. As such, our work has real value in itself and carries its own mission imperatives; it is not there just to provide income, or opportunities for personal evangelism.

Sadly, non-Biblical worldviews dominate Christian thinking and discourse on every hand, pitting sacred against secular, spiritual against physical, those in 'full-time ministry' against those who are not, and even church against everyday life. The result is a serious weakening and distortion of Christian mission.

The goal of Christian work and mission is that we all become life-long disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, who disciple others. To be disciples is to be participants in the unfolding Christian big story, which centres in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That big story is the story of God's Mission – His call to us to reach out to all people groups in all the spheres of our daily life and work.

The Biblical story into which we have entered as Christians is:

- **purposeful**
- **thematic**
- **wholistic**
- **down to earth**

Purposeful	<i>it is intentionally and resolutely oriented to God's mission.</i>
Thematic	<i>it displays its divine unity in the way that numerous Biblical themes are consistently and interrelatedly developed through the Bible, pointing forward (in the OT) to Jesus Christ, His life and ministry, death and resurrection, and (in the NT) back to Him.</i>
Wholistic	<i>it concerns every area of human life and culture.</i>
Down to earth	<i>it is practical and realistic, connecting with ordinary everyday life.</i>

Given that Biblical context, our life-long discipleship should:

- *bring an assurance that our life's purposes and meaning flow from loving God with all that we are;*
- *lead us into occupations of our working week that we can embrace as callings of God;*
- *bring us Biblical insights that apply to our work issues;*
- *enable us to provide clear Christian leadership in our homes, work places, and professions;*
- *equip us to help develop resources that set the standards in our areas of work;*
- *empower us to work for peace, justice, and the common good through our various callings;*
- ***through all of the above, qualify us to commend Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom in word and deed.***

Put differently, the goal is that we will not be moulded by the non-Christian cultures around us, but be equipped – by the grace of God and the empowering of the Holy Spirit – for roles in a Christian transformation of those cultures.

What is Mission?

Our starting point is that all mission is God's mission – *missio Dei*. Chris Wright (Wright 2006: 22-23) helpfully defines this mission as follows:

Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means 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. (See also Goheen, 2011, a book commended by Wright)

Now this assumes the Christian big story (worldview story) which can be summarised in the traditional Creation → Fall → Redemption → New Creation storyline.

- God's creation of a good world and his mandate to humans to have dominion over his creation in order to cultivate and develop it to His glory
- Humanity's fall into sin which has affected all our relationships – to God, to ourselves, to each other, and to the rest of creation.
- God's promise to reconcile all things through the choosing of Abraham and then of the Jewish nation, and ultimately through the life, death and

resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ and the ministry of Jesus' New Covenant Church

- Christ's future return to heal His creation and restore and fulfil all the relationships that were damaged by the Fall.

Worldviews are like 'spectacles behind our eyes' – we look (at the world) *through* the spectacles; we don't look *at* the spectacles:

"To look at the world through Scripture is, in fact, to look at the world through three lenses at the same time: as something created by God, twisted by sin, and being redeemed by the work of Christ. Remove any one of these lenses and the biblical worldview is distorted." (Goheen & Bartholomew 2008:63; see also Bartholomew & Goheen 2013)

For many of us, our Christian heritage has given us a way of reading Scripture that tends to individualise and spiritualise what we read. I want to deliberately seek to correct that by focusing on Scriptures that cannot be read in that reductive way.

Overall I want to highlight the down-to-Earth-ness and ordinariness of Scripture and the range and depth of the rich cultural life it would create and nurture. It is in the ordinariness of life – where none of us have any privileged status or position – that the power and authority of God are most commonly experienced.

A crucial point is that the redemption of Christ is not limited to saving humans, but includes the whole of Creation — redemption is cosmic! Both Chris Wright and Tom Wright (they are not related) rightly warn us against reducing mission to (just) evangelism.

The sciences and the arts, farming and fishing, psychology and theology, homemaking and business – and education – should all be part of the working out of the implications of Christ's redemption in the world.

Faith in Christ doesn't give us the answers to all of the issues we face in life, but He is the appropriate starting point for everything we do. The Bible story may not engage directly with a present task or issue, but it provides the orientation or perspective from which we can engage in a Christ-honouring way.

PART B: THE BIBLICAL BIG STORY

Introduction

The Bible can helpfully be understood as a drama, a play written in six Acts (*cf.* Wright 1992: ch 5.3)

- Act 1:** Creation – God (in Christ, by the Spirit) establishes his kingdom.
- Act 2:** Fall – Rebellion in the kingdom – sin cripples, twists, and corrupts the creation, threatening to thwart God’s purposes.
- Act 3:** Redemption initiated – Abraham’s line and the nation of Israel.
- Act 4:** Redemption accomplished – the king Himself comes to heal, straighten and restore.
- Act 5:** The Mission of the Church – spreading the Good News of the kingdom.
- Act 6:** Redemption completed – The eternal kingdom: God reconciles the entire creation to himself.

But there is a problem here. Like an unfinished play, we have Acts 1-4 and 6, but Act 5 – where we play our life parts – is mostly missing (it finishes at the 28th chapter of the NT book of *Acts*). How then do we construct the missing Act? How do we know if we have got it right? Like literary scholars trying to reconstruct a lost text, we would have to immerse ourselves (‘marinate’ as my colleague Mark Roques likes to say) in the other Acts and draw on all the other works that the author has written and any other historical evidence on his or her work as an author. Only then can we begin to imagine how he/she would have crafted that missing Act. We have an advantage over the literary scholars in that we have God with us by the Holy Spirit, but Christian history tells that the soaking in Scripture is not optional – otherwise we so easily fail to hear, or mishear what the Spirit is saying and fall into error (see also **1.4** below)

So let’s begin!

Act 1: Creation – God establishes his Kingdom

1.1 Here and for the following Acts we are just focusing on a few key aspects. There is, of course, much, much more that could be said. This is just a selective – but importantly corrective – overview.

1.2 Trinity According to *Genesis* 1 there is only one God and everything else is the work of His hands. The whole creation is called into being *ex nihilo* (‘out of nothing’) by God. Everything depends moment by moment on God and has meaning only in relation to Him.

But what a God!

In his person and work, Jesus is the full presence of the living God in human flesh: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father ... It is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (*John* 14:9-11). When Jesus returns to the Father, he

promises not to leave his followers as orphans but rather to come and live again among them with the fullness of his presence in the Holy Spirit (*John* 14:16-18). A faithful biblical worldview begins with this Trinitarian confession – there is one God in three persons – centered in Jesus Christ. (Goheen & Bartholomew 2008:32)

The Bible declares to us the richness of the unity of God as a unity of three persons in eternal communion. Thus the Biblical story is about God the Father – in Christ, by the Spirit – creating, sustaining and upholding all things, ruling history, and restoring and renewing all things when they have been crippled and thwarted by sin. This God will finally reconcile the entire creation to Himself.

If we confess only “Jesus is my personal Savior” and neglect “Jesus is Creator, Ruler, Redeemer, and Judge,” then we have an emaciated worldview. A biblical worldview is about getting right who Jesus is. (Goheen & Bartholomew 2008:32)

Getting Jesus wrong is idolatry (see *1 John* 5:21 “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”– John’s letter is all about who Jesus really is.).

1.3 Creation – God’s rich hospitality to humans.

In a right sense, *Genesis* 1 is strongly ‘secularising’. The pagan gods and demons, spirits and powers, are completely absent. The great sea monsters (1:21) are mere creatures and even the sun and the moon (1:16-18, significantly not given names) “are not gods, but lamps and clocks hung in the sky by the one true God to give light and to tell the time by!” (Holmes 2007:21). In the Biblical understanding of creation, neither the world as a whole, nor anything in it, is sacred or enchanted. Rather, as God’s good creation it is a medium of His self-disclosure, full of signs pointing to Him. Nothing has meaning independent of reference to God (Kettle 2011:49-53,112-114).

It is never rationalism or science that drives superstition away. However technologically advanced, people rapidly return to pagan beliefs when they depart from the God of the Bible (Holmes, *ibid*).

1.4 Out of Nothing There is far more to the doctrine of *ex nihilo* (1.2 above) than that God created the universe from nothing. There is an on-going significance. *Genesis* 1:2 describes the newly created Earth as essentially ‘nothing’ (‘formless and empty’ NIV). All that now adorns the Earth (dry land and seas, creatures of water, land and air, human beings) comes out of that ‘nothing’ through God’s Spirit (*Genesis* 1:2) in response to His word (*Genesis* 1:3,6,9,11,14,20,22,24,26,28,29). This is the beginning of a theme that runs through Scripture – that humans were created (designed) to be nothing, have nothing, and achieve nothing, except by that same Spirit and word. It is Jesus Himself who finally and fully exemplifies the theme:

“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” (*John* 5:30, NIV)

“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”
(*John 5:19, NIV*)

The reference here to ‘seeing’ what the Father is doing is surely significant *for us* (see **1.16** below). Our hearing can so easily be distorted by what we expect the Bible and the Spirit to be saying, *i.e.*, by what our personal, or denominational theologies allow. A helpful corrective is to pay attention to what we see God doing in His world. For example, many a church clings to (elements of) theology that are contradicted by what God is doing in their midst (see, *e.g.* **4.5** below).

“I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the Father has taught me.” (*John 8:28, NIV*)

“The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.” (*John 14:10, NIV*)

If being nothing sounds threatening and a fear of insignificance seems overwhelming, then remember this is our Lord – God as perfect human being – who is speaking here. In reality it is this utter dependence on God that allows us to be fully and richly all we could ever want to be (though, of course, we often only discover this with hindsight – our loving Father knows us better than we know ourselves, *1 Corinthians 8: 1-3, 13: 12, Galatians 4: 8-9*).

“I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. ...” ... “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” ... “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (*John 6:53-54, 63, 67-68 NIV*)

“I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command [is] eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.” (*John 12:49-50, NIV*)

So this is what ‘eternal life’ truly is – a life of utter obedience to all that God says to us, which allows His life to flow unhindered through ours.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (*John 15:5 NIV*)

That ongoing creation and sustenance nurtures the most richly satisfying and productive life there can be.

The apostle Paul take up the theme in his letters:

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If

I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (*1 Corinthians 13:2-3 NIV*)

I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the “super-apostles”, even though I am nothing. (*2 Corinthians 12:11 NIV*)

If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. (*Galatians 6:3 NIV*)

Here is the bedrock of the Biblical perspective on mission and ministry. All the natural gifts God has given us, and all the education and training we receive, are to be employed in His service in every area and facet of our lives. We will discover that this only works as we obey His Word (= what He tells us to do) and His Spirit gives us the life and power (*Acts 1:8, 11:15-18*) to fulfil that Word. Necessarily, therefore, humility and generosity (magnanimity) of spirit should be part of the character of every man and woman of God (*cf Moses, Numbers 11: 26-29, 12:3*).

1.5 The Image of God In *Genesis 1:27-28* we are told, “God created human beings in his image ... male and female he created them. God blessed them and said “Have many children and grow in number. Fill the earth and be its master ... Rule over the fish in the sea and over the birds in the sky. Rule over every living thing that moves on the earth.” This (with *Genesis 2:15*) is often called *The Cultural Mandate* – see **1.9** below.

It is characteristic of almost all pagan and secular religions that they separate out a small controlling elite and regard the majority of people as nobodies. Only the elite are either gods or the images of the gods on earth. All other humans – most people (and, almost always, all women) – are non-persons, expendable cheap labour.

In striking contrast, *Genesis* tells us that *all* human beings are in God’s image, *all* are called to be heirs of His promises:

- *all* are addressed by God
- *all* are accountable to God
- *all* have equal dignity and sanctity
- *all* are blighted by a common rebellion
- *all* may be restored through one Gospel

The importance of this is highlighted throughout the Biblical story. Consider Jesus Himself – the angels didn’t announce his birth to the Emperor in Rome, or to the Chief Priest in Jerusalem, or to historians to make sure all was recorded properly, but to despised shepherds on a Judean hillside – men who are not even named in the story! On Easter Sunday He didn’t appear first to any great man, but commits the announcement of the life- and history-changing good news of the Resurrection to one very ordinary woman.

1.6 In *Genesis* God creates as a king, issuing royal decrees. As a bearer of God’s image *every* human being is a king, responsible to rule the world on behalf of God.

This rule is characteristically self-denying service – like a good shepherd with his sheep (*Ezekiel 34:1-6; John 10:1-18*)

1.7 Work and Rest In *Genesis* God works on the Earth and takes rest. Work is not something to be despised and avoided but – embraced by God – is a fitting activity for His human creatures. As God’s image-bearer, every human being is called to work and every human being is called to take rest (*Exodus 20:9-10*). In Israel all – servant as well as master – worked and rested together. Indeed, it is especially through work that we learn and engage with the wisdom of God (e.g. *Exodus 28:3; 1 Kings 4: 29-34; Isaiah 28: 23-29; cf. Genesis 2:12 with Deuteronomy 8:7-9*)

1.8 God’s Law – not the King’s The pagan kings, as gods (Egypt) or the images of gods (Babylon), made their own laws. Israel’s kings were not law-makers, but under the same law – God’s law – as their people:

“When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law ... It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left.” (*Deuteronomy 17:18-20*)

The king rules in order to *serve* (cf. *1 Kings 12:6-7; Mark 9:35, 10:42-45*).

So even slaves could appeal to the judges for justice. Job refers to this in his defence of his innocence:

“If I have denied justice to my male and female slaves when they had a case against me, what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when he calls me to account? Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?” (*Job 31:13-15*)

1.9 Cultural Mandate The *Cultural Mandate* (*Genesis 1:28, 2:15*) is not annulled by either the *Fall* (*Genesis 3*) or the *Great Commission* (*Matthew 28:19-20, Luke 24:46-48, etc.*). God still desires all people to share in the cultural development of His creation. In fact the *Cultural Mandate* and the *Great Commission* are fundamentally the same thing: both are about representing God (*i.e.* being the image of God) with authority.

Genesis 1:26-28: Human beings representing God to the rest of creation

Matthew 28:19-20: Christ's disciples representing God/Christ to all people.

Moreover, as people come to Christ, *Romans 8* tells us, they end up fulfilling the original cultural mandate (*Romans 8:18-23*) because the Holy Spirit enables them to do this. (For a fuller discussion see Basden 2003)

1.10 Eden *Genesis 2:15* “The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to serve it and to keep it.” We can bring out the meaning by amplifying it as follows: “The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to fulfil, carefully and responsibly, through diligent service, the whole will of God for His world.” (see, e.g. Wenham 1987:67)

Genesis 2:12 [of the land of Havilah] “The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.” These are all things that are brought into human use through craft and technology. But this is *Genesis* 2, the unfallen world as it came from the hand of God before the entrance of sin. So, from the beginning, God intended us to develop technologies.

1.11 Promised Land Similarly we have this description of the promised land: “The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing ...” Most readings stop there, but that’s not where the passage finishes. It finishes with “... a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.” (*Deuteronomy* 8:7-9) Compare this statement with the description of the craftsmen for the tabernacle in *Exodus* 31:4-5.

The Christian choice is not the unspoilt wilderness, nor the industrial wasteland, but the much more difficult choice of a responsible, compassionate development of the Earth and a stewardly use of technologies and of the Earth’s resources.

1.12 The Human Population Grows and Diversifies In *Genesis* 4 we already read of “shepherds ... farmers ... city-builders ... cattlemen ... tent-makers ... musicians ... tool-makers” and in *Genesis* 10 of “nations ... lands ... languages ... hunters” Despite a common assumption, there is nothing in these passages to suggest that these developments were not intended to happen if there had been no Fall.

1.13 Craft and Artistry In *Exodus* 31:1-6 God says to Moses: “I have chosen Bezalel ... and filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kind of crafts ... Moreover I have appointed Oholiab ... to help him.”

Many stop reading there and assume that God had supernaturally gifted two special people. But is that what the passage means? Here are some other verses from those chapters:

Exodus 28:3 “Tell all the skilled men to whom I have given wisdom in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron.”

Exodus 31:6 “Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you.”

Exodus 35:10 “All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the LORD has commanded.”

Exodus 35:25-26 “Every skilled woman spun with her hands ... all the women who were willing and had the skill spun the goat hair.”

In the light of all the relevant verses, we have an affirmation of artistic ability and craft in general with natural gifting flowing inseparably with Divine appointment. It is not so much a matter of who has the gifting, as a matter of in whose service and for what purpose that gifting is being employed.

Another passage in *Isaiah* leads to the same conclusion:

1 14 Farming *Isaiah 28:24-29* “When a farmer ploughs for planting, does he plough continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil? When he has levelled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way. Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick. Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on threshing it for ever. Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horse does not grind it. All this comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.”

It is not that the farmer has had a special revelation from God (though that is always available) but that he has learnt from reflection on experience how God has designed each variety of plant and seeks to cultivate them in accordance with their design.

1.15 Animal Husbandry Here’s another interesting verse: *Proverbs 12:10* “A righteous man *knows* the life of his animals.” What the verse means, of course, is that “A righteous man *knows how to care for* his animals. (and does so)” and that is how modern translations render it. A wise/righteous man searches out God’s design and way in everything and attunes his work and way accordingly. God certainly cares about how we treat His creatures: *Deuteronomy 22:4* “If you see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help him to get it to its feet.”; *Deuteronomy 25:4* “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” (See Paul’s commentary in *1 Corinthians 9:9-10* where he states a general principle that the one who works at a task ought to share in its benefits. See also *1 Timothy 5:18* and also *Job 12:7-10* in section **3.10** below).

1.16 The Bible was written for us

This is an appropriate point at which to note that whenever the Bible refers to a scripture that was originally written to people at another time and place, it always affirms that God was addressing it *to us* as well (Adams 1982: 131-137)

Though the Spirit addressed His Word to an immediate situation, with all of its color and ethos, He also designed that Word for us and for the whole church of all time. (Adams 1982: 132)

Listen to some New Testament passages:

The Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, ‘Why don’t your disciples live according to the traditions of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?’

He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about *you* hypocrites, as it is written:

“These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain,
Their teachings are merely human rules.” [*Isaiah 29: 13*]

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.’ (*Mark 7: 5-8 NIV*)

[Of Abraham believing God’s promise of a son] The words ‘it was credited to him’ [*Genesis 15: 6*] were written not for him alone, but also *for us*, to whom God will credit righteousness – *for us* who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. (*Romans 4: 23-24 NIV*)

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach *us*, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide *we* might have hope. (*Romans 15: 4 NIV*)

... it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this *for us*, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written *for us*, because whoever ploughs and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ... Don’t you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve the altar share in what is offered on the altar? *In the same way*, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. (*1 Corinthians 9: NIV*)

[Most Israelites who came out of Egypt in the Exodus died in the wilderness] Now these things occurred as examples to keep *us* from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings *for us*, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. (*1 Corinthians 10: 6, 11 NIV*)

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses *you* as a father addresses his son? It says,

‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastens everyone he accepts as his son.’ (*Proverbs 3: 11-12*)

(*Hebrews 12: 4-6 NIV*; see also *Hebrews 6: 13-18* and *13: 5*)

What scripture is declaring in these passages is its strongly *thematic* nature. There are numerous themes that are consistently and interrelatedly developed through the Bible, centring on our Lord Jesus Christ, such that all the scripture speaks *to us*, whenever (in history) or wherever (in the world) we live.

However, before we leave this topic, there is a very important caveat. The Biblical story is a developing one, particularly in regard to the presence and effects of sin and God’s redemptive response. That must always be born in mind when listening to earlier scriptures. For example, in *Matthew 19: 3-9* (*Mark 10: 2-9*), Jesus responds to Pharisees who question him about divorce and points out that the Mosaic Law only allowed divorce because of the effects of sin (the hardness of peoples’ hearts), but that divorce was never intended by God: “from the beginning it was not so.” (*Matthew 19: 8*). See, similarly, **4.4** below.

1.17 Science and Christian Faith The verses we have surveyed are important in terms of a Christian perspective on science and technology. The first thing to emphasise is that no human activity is worldview-neutral. Even science and technology operate – can only operate – within a faith context (a belief system, a worldview). So the tension is not between science and faith, but between secular science (science founded and shaped by secular beliefs) and Christian science (science founded and shaped by Christian beliefs). The verses we have surveyed highlight one of the significant differences. Governed by a materialist worldview, secular science and technology view the world as fundamentally physical (made of matter/energy) and as a source of raw materials for industry. In a Christian framework we are looking for God’s design and purpose with regard to every aspect and entity of His world. We then seek to attune our lives and utilisation to God’s plan and ways.

Example: Limestone Limestone is a form of the chemical calcium carbonate. It is generally a white or grey mineral, which may be hard or soft. When mentioned in school science lessons it will be in relation to its use as a building material and in roads, its role in the making of glass and cement; as a chemical feedstock and in the extraction of iron. Children should certainly be taught about these industrial uses of limestone, but what about its primary functions in God’s creation? Limestone has many valuable functions left where it is (storing water, creating recreational landscapes, containing fossils and important precious minerals, forming caves, preserving archaeological artefacts, forming good agricultural soil, supporting diverse arrays of animals and plants). Knowing these aspects of God’s design and purpose for limestone, we learn that in any location we must mine only a certain proportion of the mineral, so that enough is left – and in the right places – to fulfil its other important functions.

Act 2 Fall – Rebellion in the Kingdom

2.1 Isaiah 24:4-5: “The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.”

All the created relationships were broken:

- God to humans
- humans to humans
- men to women
- humans to themselves
- humans to animals
- humans to the earth

2.2 This is all too horrifyingly true in everyone’s experience, but let me focus on where I am in the UK. Here, in the years in which I have been developing this paper, we have witnessed the collapse of belief in foundational Christian assumptions, which, even just a generation ago, would have seemed irreplaceable. As secular materialism has become ever more pervasive and embedded, it has become the new societal default position. In reality secularism has been growing throughout the last century, but cultural change takes time. The change became publicly visible in the 1960s and publicly dominant in the last decade of the 20th century. Many may still believe in (some kind of) God, but, in terms of everyday private and public life God has become irrelevant and we don’t do God any more (Carey & Carey, 2012). With no public appeal allowed to a God out there, no ultimate plan or purpose, no inherent meaning or morality, it is hardly surprising that all the created relationships are falling apart to an extent maybe unknown before.

2.3 Humans to humans: The economic crisis of 2008 revealed that great banks, often founded on Christian principles, no longer stood for corporate integrity and the common good, but for individual greed, using fair means or foul. In our national health service came startling reports of patients receiving far less than the expected care and compassion. Instance after instance of police corruption and dishonesty have undermined the public’s regard for the police. The last is particularly worrying. The general presumption is that the police are honest unless there is compelling evidence otherwise. If the presumption that the police can be trusted is lost, the work of the courts will become much more difficult and complicated. Indeed, trust and the trustworthiness that it presupposes, is the essential lubricant of all the systems of public life (see O’Neill 2002, 2012 and, for the sciences and scholarship in general, Shapin 1994).

2.4 Men to women The revelation that there have been many historic cases of the abuse, even rape, of girls and ladies by men in positions of authority or privilege has been truly shocking. Discrimination against women and oppression in families and communities remains a problem and, sadly churches and Christian organisations have not been guiltless.

2.5 Humans to themselves Without a worldview capable of generating meaning and purpose, instances of the culture of self-worship, narcissism and entitlement at

one extreme, to anorexia, self-harm and (attempted) suicide at the other, abound (see Harrison 2013, Vitz, 1994)

2.6 Humans to Animals We often look down on other nations because of their treatment of animals, but we, too, have much to be ashamed of in this regard. Cases of cruelty to farm animals and pets might be dismissed as applying to a minority of farmers and pet owners, but the conditions under which animals are transported to slaughter, and, especially, the practices at abattoirs, implicate us all. Our excessive desire for cheap, plentiful meat has caused much suffering to animals. The welfare condition of, e.g., cows bred for maximum milk yields, should also give reasons for concern.

2.7 Humans to the Earth Our abuse of the Earth itself in terms of pollution and altering the balance of the crucial geochemical cycles (carbon cycle *etc.*) is now too well known to need any further coverage here. We may not be able to change Government policies (local or national) in the short term, but we can ensure that our own Christian communities exemplify environmental good practice.

2.8 Sadly, behind it all lies Christian culpability. For much of the last century, the church in the Western world was in a period, which the American historian Timothy L. Smith (1924-1997), termed *The Great Reversal* (Moberg, 1972; Stott, 1984), a turn from Christian social concern to a focus on the salvation of the individual soul. Today the tide has turned, but much has been lost and we have still a long way to go to fully recover the Gospel as public truth (Newbigin 1991), as a proclamation of the Kingdom of the God, whose rule extends to every area and aspect of human life.

Genesis 3 speaks powerfully *to us* today (see **1.16** above).

Act 3: Redemption Initiated – Abraham’s Line and a Nation

3.1 Abraham “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* 12:3)

This is one of the most important texts in the entire Old Testament. The promise given here is repeated to Abraham (*Genesis* 18:18-19), Isaac (*Genesis* 26: 3-5) and Jacob (*Genesis* 28:13-15). It is central to understanding God’s plan of redemption. The problems posed by the Earth’s early history of sin and judgment (*Genesis* 1-11) will be resolved through Abraham and the nation of Israel. Just as the early history of the Earth is universal, so, too, is the scope of God’s redemption – all nations on Earth will be blessed, so that all human beings might flourish in all their relationships (2.1 above) (See Goheen 2011: 26-32; Wright 2010 Ch 4, 63-81).

3.2 Israel and the Law (Torah)

God’s redemption is to be worked out through a nation, Israel, which is a redeemed, covenanted, missional community (Goheen 2011: 32-48; Wright 2010). The key provided by the Old Testament account is that the mission is not accomplished primarily by words or deeds, but by *presence*. Robert Martin-Achard summary draws out God’s message for our churches today:

God converts the nations by working in the midst of His own People. His interventions, and these alone, make Israel the light of the world. The Church does its work of evangelisation in the measure in which its Lord gives it life; when it lives by Him its very existence is effectual. In contradistinction to what has sometimes been believed, mission has nothing in common with any sort of political or commercial enterprise; it is entirely dependent on the hidden activity of God within His Church, and is the fruit of a life really rooted in God. The evangelisation of the world is not primarily a matter of words or deeds: it is a matter of presence – *the presence of the People of God in the midst of mankind and the presence of God in the midst of His people*. And surely it is not in vain that the Old Testament reminds the Church of this truth.

(Martin-Achard 1962: 79, cited by Goheen 2011: 47)

What makes the presence of Israel distinctive and missional is being a people living according to God’s Law (Torah) – in God’s way – publicly before the eyes of the nations. So it is God’s Law that we must scrutinise to understand Israel’s missional calling.

The Ten Commandments express the whole aim and spirit of the Law, but for daily life Israel needed a detailed explanation and application of those laws. This latter was constantly updated as statutes and judgments were added to the *Book of the Covenant* (*Exodus – Deuteronomy*, cf. *Exodus* 24:3-8; *Joshua* 24:25-26; *1 Samuel* 10:25; *2 Kings* 23:2-3; *Hebrews* 9:19-20).

The *Book of the Covenant* was kept by the priests (*Deuteronomy* 17:18; 31:9, 25-26) and they taught the people (*Leviticus* 10:11; *Deuteronomy* 3:9-13; 33:10; *Malachi* 2:6-7). In particular they instructed the ruler (*2 Kings* 11:12; cf. *Deuteronomy* 17:18-20; *Joshua* 1:8) and the central judge (*Deuteronomy* 17:8-13; 19: 16-21; 21:5).

Throughout the Old Testament period heads of households (elders) were responsible for domestic jurisdiction. The heads of households together (as the body of elders) were responsible for communal jurisdiction. It was some of these who were specifically set apart as judges in every town (*Deuteronomy* 16:18-20). If any cases were too difficult (*Deuteronomy* 17:8; 19:16) they referred the matter to the central judge.

We must not fail to note that, Biblically, kings and leaders exist for the benefit of their people – to serve them, to care for their needs, to provide justice and protection, and to avoid oppression, violence and exploitation (*Deuteronomy* 17:14-20; *1 Kings* 12:7). They are *servants* (not even servant-leaders which today tends to emphasise *managerial* leadership!)

With Old Testament Israel we have a concrete historical display of the way God's people should live in a particular time and place. The challenge to us as Christian communities is to learn how – in our different times and places – we can similarly manifest God's justice and righteousness before the world around us.

3.3 In that task, it is important to note that the Law (Torah):

- covered every aspect of life
- worked only by faith
- demanded total immersion, complete obedience
- if obeyed, would create a wholesome society, that enjoys God's blessing
- as instruction for life, is the purpose of God's choice of Israel and the means to mission.

We must remember that many of the points made in the New Testament against Jewish legalism were not directed at the Law as given by God in the Old Testament era, but the Law followed by later Jews as a badge of Jewish identity (and, often, separatist nationalism) with its associated human pride in being Jews.

3.4 The law covered every aspect of life

The law covered material, social, political, and economic matters, as well as religious, e.g., building regulations (*Deuteronomy* 22:8); gleaning (gathering leftover grain after a harvest) (*Leviticus* 19: 9, *Ruth*); treatment of animals (*Deuteronomy* 22:4, 25:4); the response to the needs of the poor, widows, orphans and aliens (*Leviticus* 19: 9-10, 18, 33-34); use of trees during war (*Deuteronomy* 20: 19-20) etc. Every area of life is an area for the practice of Christian obedience (see also *Mark* 12:30 & *Colossians* 3:17).

3.5 The Law worked only by faith

The OT proclaims a God of grace. There is an enduring myth that contrasts the OT and NT in terms of *law* versus *grace*. This misinterprets Paul's attack on a *distortion* of the Scriptures as an attack on what they really taught. In fact there is a fundamental unity between the Old and New Testaments on this matter.

In the OT it was God who acted. It was God who redeemed his people out of bondage, not because they deserved it, or could earn it by keeping the Law, but purely because of His grace and mercy (e.g. *Deuteronomy 7:7-8*). Their obedience was a response to God's grace, not a means of achieving it. The law was not given as a means of salvation, but as a gift of grace to those who had already been sovereignly saved by God.

Justice is costly and demands faith. *First*, God did not create the world (either humanity or the non-human world) as a perfect system which manages itself; He created it to operate in and through the loving presence of His people. *Second*, human sin/failure constantly gets in the way, requiring repentance and forgiveness, the receiving of God's salvation through Christ. *Third*, we have to acknowledge that God is the Creator and Lord of history, and no-one's Debtor. He will bless us abundantly if we deny ourselves (forego our rights, be merciful and generous, bear the cost) for the sake of others, especially those who cannot act for themselves (*Leviticus 25:20; Deuteronomy 15:9*). This is what "loving our neighbour" means in practice. We have the examples of debt cancellation (*Deuteronomy 15: 7-11*), release of bonded labourers (*Deuteronomy 15: 12-18*), no interest on loans (*Exodus 22: 25, Leviticus 25: 35-38*), no second gathering at harvest (*Deuteronomy 24:19-22*); honouring parents (*Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16*); fallow periods for newly planted fruit trees (*Leviticus 19:23-25*); the fallow sabbatical sixth year (two fallow years at the Jubilee, *Leviticus 25:1-7, 18-22*); regular tithes of all produce (*Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 16: 12-15*); redeeming and looking after the land or personnel of an incompetent relative (*Leviticus 25:35-43*), maintaining only a small army (*Leviticus 26:6-8; Deuteronomy 20:1-9*); following justice alone without bribes, partiality, or dishonest measures (*Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 25:13-16*). Many of these practices required significant faith that, if they were an obedient people, God would keep His promises of blessing and more than make up any loss.

The covenant could work only if God blessed his obedient people: the whole of the covenant life was miraculous.

The Torah was based on faith in a God who controls nature and history. Special miracles took place against a background of ordinary daily miracles. Can we expect the *special* if we don't know the *ordinary* in our daily experience? Today only a *believing church community* can model the whole (and wholesomeness) of real life. Mission is a matter of *being* – living as the people of God in the sight of the nations – before it can be effective *going*.

Workers Charter

To introduce statutory rest days and holidays, statutory terms and conditions of employment, statutory protection from infringement of personal rights and physical dignity, statutory provision for fair wages promptly paid (to list just some of the Old Testament regulations for workers' rights) would revolutionize the face of economic life for multitudes of workers in some parts of our world. (Wright 2004: 161)

Now we can understand why the presence of the Lord in the midst of His people is so important. We are given a detailed description of the Tabernacle, not once but twice! (*Exodus* 25-30 and 36-40). So also Moses' prayer in *Exodus* 33:15-16. The presence of the Spirit is no less central for us today (*cf Romans* 8:9; *1 Corinthians* 3:16-17; 6:19-20; *Ephesians* 2:19-22)

3.6 The Law demanded total immersion, complete obedience

The people were commanded to saturate the whole of life with Biblical truth (*Deuteronomy* 4:9, 6:5-8, *cf. Matthew* 22:37-40 and *Ephesians* 6:1-4)

- Sitting, walking, lying down, getting up (*i.e.*, all of ordinary daily life)
- Heart (*i.e.* the controlling centre of human decision – mind, will, character – the place of encounter where we are addressed by God)
- Hands, forehead (*i.e.*, personal life - strength, life and authority)
- Door frames (*i.e.* family life)
- Gates [*sha'ar*, of town, not garden! – the place of markets, courts and public meetings] (*i.e.* communal life, societal life – see *Deuteronomy* 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; *Ruth* 4:1ff)

Here we have a 'personal, familial, and social strategy for living out our commitment to loving God totally'. (Wright, 1996, p 100).

When we look at the Law (Hebrew תּוֹרָה, *Torah*, 'teaching', 'instruction') we find that it is not religious law for a cult, but teaching for a new community of people, who, in every aspect and area of life, are called to reflect (make visible) God's character in terms of justice, peace (*shalom*) and love. Thus the Torah addresses "farming, finance, justice for the poor, orphans and widows, sexuality, parties, celebrations, treatment of animals and the land, healthy diets, and more besides. All these laws reveal wisdom and understanding because they bring life, wholeness and 'shalom' (peace) to those who respond to their wisdom and obey them." (Roques 1989: 23-24) For the people of God, truth is disclosed through obedient living.

Two final comments:

3.7 Family. We must remember that the Torah is a total package as is the New Testament faith. We cannot promote and campaign for some items that we like and ignore others that stand with them. A key example today is the enormous emphasis in Christian circles on family values. A pro-family stance can very easily load the family with expectations and responsibilities – and with guilt and blame when those expectations and responsibilities are unfulfilled. The Torah reminds us that in OT Israel the family stood at the centre of a worldview framework that gave it a pre-eminent place in society, and provided the social and economic support which that place demanded. It was only as part of that wider societal framework that the family could perform its vital role in the everyday life of the people. The lesson for us is if we want to assert the importance of the family in society along Biblical lines, then we must ask serious and critical questions about the nature of our societies today. And we must remember that the Bible, alongside its support for the family (*Mark* 10:2-12; *Matthew* 5:31-32; 19:1-9; *Mark* 7:9-13; *Matthew* 15:3-6; *John* 19:26-27), also reminds us that the call of God may mean a radical reassessment of family ties (*Matthew*

4:18-22; *Mark* 3:31-35; *Luke* 9:59-62; *Matthew* 10:34-37; *Luke* 12:49-53; 14:25-26; *Mark* 13:12-13). For not a few Christians today, the church must fulfil the role of the family (*cf. Hebrews* 3:2-6; *Mark* 10:29f; *Matthew* 19:29; *Luke* 18:29f)

The extent to which Christian groups are prepared to use the Old Testament at all, or, if they are, the use to which they put it is certainly partly affected by how they understand the nature of the church and its role in society in general. (Wright, 2004: 398)

The cultural and societal ineffectiveness and moral confusion of the modern church is not unrelated to the common depreciation of the Old Testament.

3.8 Education The central thrust of the education passages of scripture is not to do with schooling (at least not directly). But can you imagine the effect if the Israelites sent their children to the 'best' Philistine or Phoenician schools? [*cf. missionaries' children!*] Those passages make a very simple point: *our environment is educational, it moulds us*. If we don't create for our children a God-focused environment then the pagan environment in which we allow them to be immersed will seduce them from the Truth – see Smith, 2009, 2013. [**NB** In the West our children spend *c.* 15,000 hours of prime time in school, plus 8-12,000 hours in the grip of the media – most 9-16 year olds today have access – often unmonitored access - to the internet] The fullness of life promised to those who obey God's Law (*Leviticus* 18: 5) is reaffirmed by Jesus (*Matthew* 19:17 and *esp. John* 12:49-50 – see **1.4** above), but to those who live by the faith of Jesus (see *Romans* 10 and *Galatians* 3). We cannot expect to enjoy that fullness of life if we allow ourselves and our children to be totally immersed in secular/pagan culture.

3.9 The Law, if obeyed, would create a wholesome society, enjoying God's blessing

When obeyed as a *whole*, the Law would create a just and merciful society, and the conditions for a high quality of relationships. We must discern the effect of each individual law on the *whole shape and character* of Israelite society, *i.e.*, what was that law there for? What kind of situation was it meant to prevent or promote? Whose interests did it protect? Whose power did it restrict? How did it affect the distribution of wealth and power? How did it impact on the more vulnerable and marginal members of the community? How did it affect the basic values and identity of the community?

At the beginning (*Joshua* 13-19) the land was divided so that every tribe, clan and (extended) family had, not the *same* amount of land, but *enough* to meet all their needs. The guiding principle of OT economics is summed up in the 10th commandment: "You shall not covet." Sufficiency, not surplus; praise not pride (*Deuteronomy* 8:9-10).

Particular laws to consider here are, *e.g.*, every seventh year the national cancellation of all debts (*Deuteronomy* 15:1-11; *cf. Matthew* 6:12, 31-33; *Luke* 6:37-38; *Acts* 4:34) and the releasing of bonded workers (*Deuteronomy* 15:12-18); no

interest on loans (*Deuteronomy 23: 19-20; Leviticus 25:35-38*) etc. In elections, we should certainly be concerned about particular issues of all kinds, but, above all, we should be asking what impact a party's (candidate's) policies will have for the quality of life in society as a whole. How, in our different time and place, can we achieve the same objectives as God's Law achieved for ancient Israel?

We are called to take the Torah as a paradigm, as a worldview guide. We are NOT called to literal imitation. Jesus called his disciples to follow him and the NT commands us to model our lives on his (*Ephesians 5:2; Phillipians 2:5; 1 Peter 2:21ff*), but that is never taken in the sense of literal imitation down to the details. We are not called to practise carpentry, wear seamless clothing, or pursue an itinerant and homeless lifestyle! We can contrast the Christian way with that of Islam, in which details of Muhammad's life and habits have become obligatory on his followers. Indeed much of Islamic ritual and practice is indelibly stamped with its medieval, middle-eastern origins. In contrast Christianity has no such ties and has translated readily into diverse cultural forms around the world and through history.

While we are on this subject we must mention the famous *lex talionis*, 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth' (*Exodus 21:24*). This was never a command for violent retribution, but an instruction *to judges* to make the punishment fit the crime. The examples given prove that: an injured slave is to be set free (*Exodus 21:26-27*); a person who seriously injures another must pay appropriate monetary compensation for the lost income (*Exodus 21:18-19*).

Consider the Israelite Harvest Festival (Feast of Weeks). Read the scriptures (*Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:15-21; Numbers 28: 26-31; Deuteronomy 16:9-12; 26:1-11*). What might an equivalent celebration today look like? (see Wright, 2004: 87)

3.10 Slavery (*Deuteronomy 15: 12-15*) God hates slavery in all its forms (*Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 4:1, 1 Timothy 1:10, Philemon, Revelation 18:13*). In considering slavery in ancient Israel we must put from our minds the degrading and dehumanising slavery of later Greece and Rome and the massive and horrendous commercialised slave trade that Arabs, Europeans and Americans inflicted upon Africa. In Israel it was time-limited bonded labour for offences such as unrepayable theft or debt. The slave was still free to enjoy his own marital and family life, remained within the community, shared the seasons, rest periods and festivals, and engaged in normal, useful work alongside the rest of the community. It is arguable, on humanitarian grounds alone, that this is far preferable to imprisonment (which is not prescribed at all in the Torah). Our 'civilised' prison system has very questionable features and effects. We must be very careful not to ignore the downsides of our own society's systems. At the same time that our forebears were fighting slavery overseas, they overlooked the far worse child slavery in the factories and mills of Britain. Today we overlook economic exploitation just as easily; condemning it overseas, but often ignoring it in our own churches and Christian organisations. These are the kind of challenges from the Torah that we should not evade. For we are under God's Law and will answer to its Author.

3.11 As instruction for life, keeping the Law is the purpose of God's choice of Israel and the means to mission.

Israel was called to be the light of the world and for the world (Goheen, 2011).

Deuteronomy 4:6-8: “[Moses to the Israelites] Keep them [God’s decrees and laws] and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?”

The mission purpose is clear from this passage, but predates the Law as *Genesis* 18:19 declares in relation to Abraham. God’s purpose was never a production line for righteous individuals, but the creation of a new community of people who in their societal life would reflect God’s own character in terms of justice, peace (*shalom*) and love (cf *Deuteronomy* 16:20 “Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.”) Israel existed not simply to bear the message of salvation, but to be a model of what a redeemed community should be like, living in obedience to God’s will. There was, in other words, an indissoluble link between the kind of society Israel was supposed to be and the character of the God they worshipped. We can go further. Biblically, idolatry cannot be confined to any one aspect or area of life. The identity and character of the gods we worship will profoundly shape the kind of society we have. Idolatry will always generate injustice and oppression. If we want a better society we had better start worshipping the true God.

3.12 But throughout Act 3 (under the Old Covenant) there was a constant reminder of the Fall, of human sinfulness (Act 2). The greatest reminder was, of course, the whole sacrificial system. The sinner bringing an unblemished animal for sacrifice had to place their hand on its head and then kill it. A starker reminder of the terrible cost and ravages of sin can hardly be imagined. But there were many further reminders. Until Christ came there was in place what may be called a *veil-order* ((see *Matthew* 27:50-53 with the later commentary in *Hebrews* 9:3-4,6-8;10:19-20), which entailed distinctions that were abiding reminders that the issue of sin was not yet resolved (see *John* 14:6; *Ephesians* 2: 18-19; *Hebrews* 6: 19-20; 9: 2-4,7-14; 10: 1-25). Here are ten of the main veil-order distinctions:

- Holy and less holy
- Israel and the other nations
- Circumcised and uncircumcised
- Levite and non-Levite
- Free and slave
- Men and women (only men could be priests, divorce allowed)
- Eldest son (receiving a double inheritance) and the other children
- Sabbath and the other six days
- Tenth (Tithe) and nine-tenths – this was not ‘religious’, but more like our ‘income tax’.
- Clean and unclean

3.13 King Solomon A great king (1 Kings 4: 20-25)

When we think of Solomon's wisdom we usually think of his wise rule and judgments (as in the famous instance of the two prostitutes, 1 Kings 3:16ff), but it is a big mistake to reduce Solomon's wisdom to political astuteness and sound morality. His wisdom was also expressed in all his cultural activities. This is what we mean by the *Cultural Mandate* (see 1.9 above). When the Bible sums up his wisdom, this is what it records:

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore ... He was wiser than any other man. He spoke three thousand *proverbs* and his *songs* numbered a thousand and five. He described *plant life*, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about *animals* and *birds*, *reptiles* and *fish*. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 4:29-34 NIV)

Compare this passage from *Job*: "But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind." (*Job* 12:7-10, NIV)

3.14 Queen of Sheba

"The queen of Sheba ... came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness". (*1 Kings* 10: 1-9 NIV)

Did Sheba praise the Lord because she experienced God's kingdom, God's rule?

But we are now well into Act 3. In later life Solomon turned away from God (Moloch worship in his old age, 1 Kings 11:3-8) and Israel declined to a very low point by the time of Manasseh (2 Kings 21: 1-9, 16; 23:26, cf., Jeremiah 15:4)

Tragedy! By 587 BC Israel was no longer the light of the world. Exile is just around the corner. What will God do now?

Act 4: Redemption accomplished – The King Himself Comes

4.1 Jesus The Gospel brought by Jesus was the *Gospel of the Kingdom*, of God's rule over all of life:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming *the good news of God*. "The time has come," he said. "*The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*" (*Mark 1:14-15*)

"I must preach *the good news of the kingdom of God* ... for I was sent for this purpose." (*Luke 4:43*)

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching *the good news of the kingdom*, and healing every disease and every infirmity. (*Matthew 9:35*)

He went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing *the good news of the kingdom of God*. And the twelve were with him, and some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. (*Luke 8:1-3*)

We have similar statements in the context of the Last Supper ("I shall not eat the Passover again until all is fulfilled in the *Kingdom of God*." *Luke 22:16*) and in the Lord's Prayer ("Hallowed be your name. *Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" *Matthew 6:9-10*)

4.2 Jesus' preaching was in the context of a small community (the disciples, male and female – Bailey 1994) which itself manifested the kingdom. They were the first fruits, the living signs of the coming kingdom. In their diversity they challenged key cultural taboos.

4.3 So it should be no surprise that Jesus affirms the abiding validity of the Law (Torah) – the Law of the kingdom:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (*Matthew 5:17-20*)

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (*John 8:12*)

4.4 But it is the Torah fulfilled: the Temple veil is torn through (see **3.12** above) and all the limitations and distinctions are now removed:

- between holy and less holy (*Acts* 2:4; *Romans* 11:16; *1 Corinthians* 1:2, 6:19, 7:14; *Ephesians* 1:4, 4:19-22, 5:25-27; *Colossians* 1:22-23; *1 Thessalonians* 3:13, 4:3; *2 Timothy* 1:9; *Hebrews* 2:11, 10:10,14)
- between Israel and the other nations (*Ephesians* 2:11ff; *Galatians* 5:1ff; *Acts* 15)
- between circumcised and uncircumcised (*Romans* 2:28-29, 3:30; *1 Corinthians* 7:18-19; *Galatians* 5:1-6, 6:12-15; *Colossians* 2:11)
- between Levite and non-Levite (*1 Peter* 2:9)
- between free and slave (see **5.8** above)
- between men and women (*1 Corinthians* 12:13; *Galatians* 3:28; *Colossians* 3:11)
- between the eldest son and other children (*1 Corinthians* 7:14)
- between the Sabbath and the other six days (*Matthew* 12:1-13; *Mark* 2:23-28; *Luke* 6:1-11; *Galatians* 4:9-11; *Romans* 14:5-6; *Colossians* 2:16-17)
- between the Tenth (Tithe) and nine-tenths (*Romans* 12:8; *2 Corinthians* 8:9)
- between clean and unclean (*Mark* 7:18-19; *Luke* 11:40-41; *John* 13:10; 15:3; *Acts* 15:9; *Romans* 14:20; *Colossians* 2:16-17)

The Old Testament veil-order has ended. There is now full life in Christ and the Holy Spirit sets apart and consecrates to God whatever he works within. As old Israel was called to live obediently before God in all expressions of personal and communal life, so the new people of God are called to do the same (*1 Corinthians* 10:31; *Colossians* 3:17) – all days of the week, all places on earth, with all of our income and resources, in every area of personal and communal life – not just, not even primarily, in the programmes of our church institutions.

4.5 Of the distinctions listed above, most are uncontroversial among Evangelicals today, except that between men and women – the issue of women in ministry and leadership remains one of the most divisive issues. I cannot enter that debate here, except to note (following **1.4** above) that many a church is blessed with gifted women moving in ministry and leadership in ways that sit uneasily with the church's theology. It is, of course, far better to have a unity of belief and practice, than an unresolved, or even unaddressed tension between them.

I would commend the book edited by Stanley Gundry & James Beck (Gundry & Beck 2005) to those who want to study the opposing positions, but would recommend that they evaluate the arguments in the light of the nature and development of the Biblical story.

4.6 Redemption is accomplished through the cross and resurrection:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. (*Colossians* 1:16)

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (*Colossians* 1:19)

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

(1 John 3:8)

“In the biblical drama Jesus dies for the whole world, for every part of human life, for the whole nonhuman creation. The cross is an event whereby the course of cosmic history is settled.” (Goheen & Bartholomew 2008:56)

Act 5: The Mission of the Church – Spreading the Good News of the Kingdom

5.1 Mark 16:15: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

Jesus announced that the kingdom of God had arrived and that those who responded in faith and repentance to his message would taste the gifts and power of the kingdom. But what actually emerges in the New Testament and beyond is the church. So what is their relationship?

As the realm of God’s reign, the kingdom is the greater entity and the church both functions within it and receives its identity and definition from it. In the New Testament, the church is the first fruits, instrument and sign of the kingdom. “By embodying God’s rule in their lives and in their work in the present, the members of the church together point toward the future coming of the kingdom in its fullness.” (Goheen & Bartholomew 2008:59)

5.2 New Testament Church It should therefore also be no surprise that the New Testament believers continued to follow the Old Testament teaching concerning just and righteous communal life.

When Paul distinguishes the Christians from both Jews and Greeks / Gentiles (e.g. *1 Corinthians* 10:32; *Galatians* 3:26-28) he is implicitly re-fashioning their identity as distinct from any national culture (cf. *1 Corinthians* 9:20-23). In Acts 6 we find out, almost as it were by chance, that the Jerusalem church had a programme of support for widows (*Acts* 6:1). However, Paul’s reference to the practice shows that it was taken for granted throughout the churches (*1 Timothy* 5:3; see also *Acts* 4:34-35). In *1 Corinthians* 6:1-6 Paul expects churches to have a communal judicial function. But with the Old Testament as their Bible, that Old Testament background is simply taken for granted and only slips out incidentally. Here are two more examples of how that happens. In *Titus* 1:5 Paul tells Titus to formalise church structures and appoint elders in every church. Well, no, actually he doesn’t. He tells Titus to appoint elders “in every town”. Paul takes it for granted that churches are really Christian communities and that the elders are responsible leaders in every area of communal life. This is confirmed by *1 Timothy* 3:7: “[An overseer] must also have a good reputation with outsiders [non-Christians]”. Again the Old Testament background is taken for granted. How else could church leaders have a good reputation in the wider society unless they were known and functioning as respected, trustworthy participants in that wider society – in business, politics or other areas of public life? How many church leaders today could meet that criterion for church leadership?

5.3 Good Work If you ask the question: “What (in our New Testament times) are we created to do?” what is the answer?

Here is the New Testament answer:

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do **good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV)

Ah, but what does the Bible mean by **good works**? Most Christians will immediately think of church activities, personal evangelism, missionary work, healing the sick, helping the poor and needy and such like. Clearly those things are good (!), but is that really what the Bible is talking about? It is salutary to go through the New Testament, looking at all the references to 'good works' or 'doing good' to find passages where concrete examples are given. Here are two key passages where that occurs:

Ephesians 6:6-9 "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for **whatever good he does**, whether he is slave or free." (NIV)

These were slaves and mostly serving non-Christian owners. They were not free to do most, if any, of the 'Christian' things mentioned above. Doing good meant doing their ordinary everyday work *as if unto Christ*.

Titus 2: 14 "[Jesus Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is **good**. ... [3:1] Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is **good**, ... [3:8] I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is **good**. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. ... [14] Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is **good**, in order

How would most Christians expect such a sentence to finish? Well actually it finishes

"... that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives."

Again that last explanatory sentence shows that primarily it is our ordinary everyday work that is in view – *done as unto Christ*. In contrast to the scriptures of the religions, time and again the Bible is down-to-earth and ordinary, speaking to everyone, regardless of their background, education, or abilities.

A similar passage is *1 Thessalonians* 4:11 "Make it your ambition to ..."

How would we expect that sentence to finish? Again what Paul writes catches us by surprise:

"... lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders [= non-Christians] and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." (*1 Thessalonians* 4:11-12)

5.4 Why is all this in important? The ordinariness reflects a crucial aspect of Christian mission that has sometimes been denied in our history. Lesslie Newbigin puts it well:

“What is unique about the Christian gospel is that those who are called to be its witnesses are committed to the public affirmation that it is true – true for all peoples at all times – and are at the same time forbidden to use coercion to enforce it. They are therefore required to be tolerant of denial ... not in the sense that we must tolerate all beliefs because truth is unknowable and all have equal rights. The toleration which a Christian is required to exercise is not something which he must exercise *in spite of* his or her belief that the gospel is true, but precisely *because of* this belief. This marks one of the very important points of difference between Islam and Christianity.” (Newbiggin 1988: 148-149)

You are living in Act 5: ‘walk by the Spirit’ (*Galatians* 5:16,25) and improvise!

5.5 *Romans* 8:19-21: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

Act 6: Redemption Completed – The Eternal Kingdom

6.1 The New Creation

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.”
(*Revelation 21:1-3*)

[God has given us the victory through Christ] Therefore ... stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.
(*1 Corinthians 15:58*)

All that we achieve in this life in obedience to God will find a place in the new creation.

“They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ... For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD”
(*Isaiah 65:21-23*)

6.2 The New Jerusalem on Earth

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. (*Revelation 21:24*)
The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. (*Revelation 21:26*
(*cf: Isaiah 60:5* “The wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.”)

God works through us and with us, but it is never human skill, ingenuity or management alone that accomplishes God’s purposes: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief.” (2 *Peter* 3:10 – “The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” – also *Luke* 12:40). And all will be transformed. (*Revelation 21-22*)

Closing Summary and Conclusion

We live in God's world – a fantastic world that reveals God's glory. We were created in God's image, called to servant-kingship over the Earth and to unfold its rich potential.

But we rebelled against God, broke the covenant, spoilt the Earth. Thus God set out to restore the world and redeem his human subjects that they might again live under his gracious rule. He chose Abraham and through him built up a nation – Israel – to be the channel of his redemptive work to the whole world.

Jesus came as the goal of this redemptive story, claiming that in his person and work the meaning of history and of the world itself was being made known and accomplished. From that point on *all* people must find their place and meaning within *His* story, for there is no other source of real meaning. We are saved by Christ for our lives to become part of His story, as we look forward to a restored and renewed creation in which all our life's achievements wrought in obedience to God will find fulfilment.

Today, our church communities are colonies of heaven – revealing God's kingly rule over all of life, in all the world. The establishing of God's kingdom in Christ is the ultimate goal of world history.

Right now the true God who loves His good creation is busy healing, restoring and reconciling all things through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is good news for sinners but also good news for God's creation project. The whole creation is being blessed!

Our professions and daily work are not just for us to have an income to buy the necessities of life, or as opportunities for personal evangelism. They are an essential part of God's purposes for his people, have real value in themselves and carry their own mission imperatives.

In the light of the Bible story we have surveyed, the conclusion is demanding, but clear:

Our life-long discipleship should:

- bring an assurance that our life's purposes and meaning flow from loving God with all that we are;
- lead us into occupations of our working week that we can embrace as callings of God;
- bring us Biblical insights that apply to our work issues;
- enable us to provide clear Christian leadership in our homes, work places, and professions;
- equip us to help develop resources that set the standards in our areas of work;
- empower us to work for peace, justice, and the common good through our various callings;
- **through all of the above, qualify us to commend Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom in word and deed.**

If, for example, our Christian vocation is in the field of education, then these imperatives should be part of our vision for our educational programmes. In school, for example, does the teaching and learning have the goal that our pupils might become such committed disciples of Jesus in, say ten or twenty years' time? If not, why not? What, then, is our educational goal?

We must not allow ourselves to be moulded by the non-Christian cultures around us, but equip ourselves, in obedience to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for our part in a Christian transformation of our community and country.

So what next? God's salvation comes to us by grace and faith – as a free gift (*Ephesians 2:8*), but we are called to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling”, but with the assurance that “it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.” (*Philippians 2:12-13*, NIV).

There is much hard work for us to do. What is “good” in a particular work or community situation? What will redemption look like there? As we have seen many times in the preceding survey (e.g., **1.9 – 1.17**), God expects us to reflect on our daily experiences of life, observe how God has designed the world around us and seek to use / develop everything in accordance with His designs and purposes. We also know from the Bible that this will work best (often only work at all) if we live a life of total obedience to Him, and, in fellowship with the community of believers, obeying the promptings and direction of His Holy Spirit. It was our Lord who gave us the way to follow (see **1.4** above).

“For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (*Ephesians 2:8*)

Let us go forth, to so love and serve the Lord!

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