

The Bible's Core theme

Enlarging the Family of God

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IS Introduction and Summary

IS.1 Since at least the late 1960s, I have been tracing particular Biblical themes (such as *Baptism, Communion, Creation, Law, Redemption*) through the Scriptures. In the beginning I had no idea that I was following a particular method of Biblical interpretation – the *thematic method* (see McGrath & Manser, 1996) – that was then not commonly followed. From the early days I had recognised that one of the themes I studied was unique – the theme I have entitled ***Born from Adam, Begotten by Jesus Christ*** (hereafter shortened to the ***Begetting/Begotten*** theme). This theme provides a grand literary structure for the whole Bible. I have therefore categorized it as a *Framework* theme and a separate paper (Jones 2020) discusses it in detail.

IS.2 Given the enormous number of Biblical themes and sub-themes – McGrath & Manser (1996) list over 2000 – I wondered if there was a unique *Core* theme, namely a theme, or story, that stands above all the other themes and stories and that provides the ultimate, or deepest context for the understanding of them all. For a long time I thought that the traditional¹ summary of the Bible story – ***Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation*** – was that *Core* theme. However, over the last two years I have come to the conclusion that this summary of the Biblical story has serious deficiencies. This paper presents the evidence and arguments that there is another theme that is indeed the *Core* Bible theme, a theme that I have entitled ***Enlarging the Family of God***.

IS.3 There are many issues on which equally Godly and intelligent Christians defend opposing positions. This paper argues that a first step in resolving the differences is ensuring that all sides know and accept the *same* *Core* Bible theme and corresponding Christian worldview.

In the light of the Biblical revelation of the nature of God, the *Core* Bible theme – ***Enlarging the Family of God*** – is a love story in which the incarnation of God the Son, Jesus the Messiah, was not just to deal with the problem of sin, but, first and foremost, that redeemed humanity might be adopted into the Family of God as the Bride of God the Son. That story/theme and the corresponding worldview should govern our approach to the many divisive issues.

¹ This theme is generally traced back to Augustine (354-430 AD).

IS.4 Another purpose of this paper is to show how the Bible story enables us to embrace all of our life’s work as part of our Christian vocation, as part of God’s mission purposes for His people. The Bible story provides a standard against which every aspect of our work can be measured, as well as being a constant stimulus and encouragement. Work so affirmed has real value in itself and should be seen as much more than just for the provision of income, or of opportunities for personal evangelism.

To be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ is to be a participant in the *Core Bible* story, calling each and every person – from all people groups, from every sphere of daily life and culture – to enter and live in the Bible story, as sinners saved by grace and now members and heirs in God’s family.

In contrast to the Bible story, non-Biblical worldviews dominate Christian thinking and discourse on every hand, pitting sacred against secular, spiritual against material, those in ‘full-time ministry’ against those who are not, and even ‘church’ against weekday life and work. The result is a serious weakening of Christian outreach in much of our society and culture.

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Prologue

P.1 There are many themes (See **IS.2**) that can be traced through the Bible and that bear witness that it is the same God and the same divine purposes throughout both Old and New Testaments.

All these many Bible themes have their strengths and weaknesses; all present opportunities to enlarge our understanding of the Biblical revelation, but also threats to restrict it. To grasp Scripture in its fullness, we need them all.

P.2 The number and diversity of Bible themes immediately prompts a key question: ‘Is there a *Core* theme?’ Is there a central, cardinal, primary, or fundamental storyline, or plot, that grounds (incorporates, integrates) all the diversity of individual themes? Put another way, is there a theme, or story, that stands above all the other themes and stories and that provides the ultimate, or deepest context for the understanding of them all? This paper presents the evidence and arguments that there is indeed a *Core* Bible theme/story which I have entitled ***Enlarging the Family of God***.

P.3 The analysis so far raises another question: ‘Given that there is indeed such a *Core* theme, then does the bible have a unitary, literary structure that reflects that

Core theme?' Evidently it does, but surprisingly it is not the *Core* theme itself that gives the Bible that literary structure. Rather it is a closely related theme that is most precisely entitled the ***Begetting/Begotten*** theme. Clearly (*sic!*) that title is quite opaque, and calls for a thorough explanation and detailed exposition, which is given in Jones 2020. We will categorise this as a *Framework* theme. It is actually the only theme that provides a grand literary structure for the Bible as a whole.

P.4 We can now distinguish three main categories of Bible themes: *Core*, *Framework*, and *General*. For explanation and discussion of this categorisation of themes see Jones 2020. As just noted, the first two categories contain only one theme each and are straightforward and clear. For information on the huge number of *General* themes see McGrath *et al.*, 1996, Jones 2013 and Jones, 2020.

A The Nature of the Bible Story

A.1 The Bible STORY into which we have entered as Christians is:

- **Purposeful**
- **Thematic**
- **Wholistic**
- **Down to earth**

Purposeful it is intentionally and resolutely oriented to God's creation purpose and mission.

Thematic it displays its divine unity in the way that numerous Biblical themes (see **Prologue**) that are consistently and interrelatedly developed through the Bible, pointing forward (in the OT) to the Lord Jesus – to His life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension – and (in the NT) back to Him.

Wholistic it concerns every area of human life and culture.

Down to earth it is practical and realistic, connecting with ordinary everyday life.

A.2 Given that Biblical context, life-long Christian discipleship should:

- bring an assurance that life's purpose and meaning flow from loving God with all that we are, and loving all people as we love ourselves²;

² Our *neighbours* (*Leviticus* 19:18, *Matthew* 19:19; 22:39; *Mark* 12:31; *Luke* 10:27; *Romans* 13:9; *Galatians* 5:14; *James* 2:8), and even our *enemies* (*Matthew* 5:44; *Luke* 6:27).

- lead us into occupations of our working week that we can own as callings of God;
- bring us Biblical insights that apply to all the issues that arise in our lives, in our homes and families, and at work;
- enable us to provide, or support, clear Christian leadership in our homes, in our outside work and leisure places, and in the professions;
- equip us to help develop, and/or support and promote, resources that set Biblical standards for every area of our life and work;
- work for peace, justice, and the common good through our various callings;
- **through all of the above, empower us to commend the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our Lord and King, 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 fitting roles in a Christian transformation of those cultures.

A.3 There are many issues on which Christians are divided – the status and role of women in church, family, and society; gender/transgender issues; healing ministries; creation/evolution/origins; church governance; demon possession; nature and method of baptism and communion (eucharist, Lord's supper) ... and many, many others! On all these issues, equally intelligent and Godly people line up on different sides. An essential first step towards resolving these divisions is ensuring that all sides share and follow the *same Bible Core* theme/story and the corresponding Christian worldview.

B Foundational Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Christians belong to different Christian denominations and traditions, with different views of the Bible, so we must begin by declaring our foundational principles of Biblical Interpretation:

B.1 The Old and New Testament scriptures are God's inspired Word and our ultimate written authority, as Christians, in all our discussions (see, e.g. 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

“For any serious follower of Jesus, the starting place must surely be that Jesus himself trusted these Scriptures and saw them as God's word. For Jesus the Scriptures were both authoritative and binding (e.g. Mt 5:17-19; Jn 10:35); the word of God, not of merely human origin; and he accepted its stories as both instructive and true (e.g. Mt 12:39-42; 19:4-6). In the Gospels we find him frequently quoting from these Scriptures to settle issues (e.g. Mt 19:17-19), authenticate his actions (e.g. Mt 10:34-36; 21:16), support his teaching (e.g. Mt 13:13-15; 21:42) and challenge his opponents (e.g. Mt 15:7-9; 22:41-46).”

(McGrath 2014, page 18)

This, in turn, presupposes a whole Christian *worldview* – an understanding of the world that both reflects and enhances our grasp of the Biblical *story* – for which, see, e.g., the works of such Christian scholars as Roy Clouser (2005, 2007), Willem Ouweneel (2014), Danie Strauss (2009) and Andree Troost (2012). Of course it is a two-way dynamic relationship – the better we understand the Bible, the better we will understand the world it addresses, and the more we see the world in the light of the Bible, the more we will see in the Bible, and the better we will understand of its relevance to our situation today, and its applications to our current issues.

For solid defence, on this basis, of the truthfulness and authority of the Bible see Blomberg 2014, Vanhoozer 1998, Witherington, 2007, 2009, and Wright, 2011a.

B.2 Given this Christian understanding, we know that behind all the human authors of scripture, there stands the primary authorship of God himself (see, e.g. Plantinga 1998A; 1998B, ch 12, pages 316-327; 2000, ch12, pages 374-421; 2011, pages 152-161).

As Plantinga explains, this entails that we cannot always determine the meaning of Bible passages by discovering what the human authors had in mind (if, indeed, we can ever be sure of knowing all that they had in mind anyway!). There are certainly clues that indicate that the human authors could be aware that they were writing about things that they did not (could not) fully understand (see, e.g. *1 Peter* 1: 10-12; see also the writings of Gregory Beale listed in the **Bibliography**). The meaning of a Bible passage can be more (even much more) than the human authors clearly had in mind, or could have clearly intended. Indeed, what the Lord intends to teach us in the 21st century from a given passage may not be the same as what he intended to teach 5th century Christians (so Plantinga 2000, page 385).

B.3 Almost all the Biblical texts were not meant to be privately studied, but to be read out aloud to a group of people (see Witherington 2007, 2009).

Almost all the Biblical writings, of both the Old and New Testaments, are not texts in the modern sense at all, *i.e.* they were not written for private use and silent reading. All the cultures of the Biblical eras were essentially oral cultures, not text-based cultures. Their texts were *oral texts*, *i.e.* texts that were mostly written to be read out aloud, usually to a group of people.

***Jesus did not say, “Let those with two good eyes, read.”
He said, “Let those with two good ears, listen.”³***

The literacy rates in Biblical times are thought to have typically ranged between 10% and 20%. Texts were enormously expensive to produce (both the papyrus and the ink were expensive, and professional scribes were few in number and very

³ Witherington 2009: 7-8, 49 – see *Matthew* 11:15; 13:9,43; *Mark* 4:9,23; *Luke* 14:35; *Revelation* 2:7.

expensive.). There were no such thing as books as we know them, no trade in books, no book-buying public and no public libraries. Unsurprisingly, all ancient peoples, whether literate or not, preferred the *living word* (i.e. *spoken word*.)

But there is another reason why texts had to be orally delivered. Because texts were very expensive, every measure was taken to condense them. The New Testament Greek texts, for example, contain little or no punctuation and consist entirely of capital letters, with no separation between words, sentences or paragraphs. The best and often only way to decipher such collections of letters was to sound them out aloud.

For all these reasons, the texts are full of rhythm, rhyme, assonance, alliteration *et cetera* in order to have a powerful rhetorical effect. They are meant to be memorable, and even readily memorisable for those who heard them read out aloud.

Finally we must note what the New Testament texts tell us about their authors. These oral texts reflect a remarkable level of literacy and of rhetorical skill. By and large, the early Christian leaders were not illiterate peasants or socially deprived. Those who produced the texts of the New Testament had considerable literary and rhetorical skills. And their co-workers, who went and orally delivered the texts, had to be skilled readers, who already knew the contents, and were able to place the emphases in the right places to pass on the messages accurately and effectively. In some cases an effective Bible reading would be more like a performance!

A great deal of the impact of the Biblical texts can be lost if we do not hear them skilfully read aloud.

B.4 The whole Bible is about Jesus.

John writes that Jesus said to the religious leaders:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:39-40)

As Nancy Guthrie comments:

Jesus was saying that the entirety of the Old Testament – its history, its promises, its people, its laws, its ceremonies, its songs – all of it is all about him. (Guthrie 2010: viii)

Christ is the goal toward which the Old Testament pointed and is the end-time centre of redemptive history. This is the key to interpreting the Old Testament and its promises (see, e.g. 2 Corinthians 1:20; Matthew 5:17; 13:11,16-17; Luke 24:25-27,32,44-45; John 5:39; 20:9; Romans 10:4).

Guthrie writes:

Though this is not the way I learned to read and understand the Old Testament – and perhaps not the way you have read and understood it up to now – this is clearly the way Jesus read, understood, and taught it, and therefore the way his disciples began to teach it after his departure. ... The New Testament writers teach us how to read and understand the entire Old Testament with gospel eyes. (Guthrie, 2010, pages viii, ix)

The daily readings provided by, e.g. Guthrie (2010) and Glen Scrivener (2018, 2019) exemplify this key Bible reading strategy.

B.5 Hearers and readers cannot sufficiently, or effectively understand Jesus's and the apostles' interpretations of the Old Testament without the aid of the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., 1 Corinthians 2: 6-16).

This presupposition is just as foundational as the others, but is easily ignored in practice. In the West we live in a *materialist* society, as regards both common meanings of that term

Materialism (aka naturalism) means:

- living *as if* material things (physical matter and energy) are all that exists *and/or*
- living *as if* enjoying material possessions is all that matters.

Atheists are not just those who *believe* there is no God (or gods), but all those who actually *live as if there is no God*

In most Western countries today these beliefs (faith commitments!) are in the very air we breathe and it is therefore extremely easy for Christians to live *as if they are true*: They live:

- *as if* there is no God
- *as if* faith is irrelevant to daily life
- *as if* living without any reference to God, or to faith is, or ought to be, normal and natural for everyone

Many who claim the name of Christ live as practical atheists.

On the contrary (*Romans* 12:1-3), we are called to live our lives in constant conversation with God, continually reforming our thoughts, words and deeds in response to the words and promptings of the Holy Spirit.

B.6 Given these foundational presuppositions, we still face the reality that even orthodox, Bible-believing Christians are deeply divided on the divisive issues. The problem is that too many discussions of these important topics jump straight into a discussion of the (usually few) Bible passages that are taken to be particularly decisive for one view or another. But again, equally intelligent and godly Christian scholars defend divergent interpretations of these critical passages.

So is there a better way of tackling these issues? I am not setting out to resolve any of the controversies in this paper! Rather my aim is to lay out and discuss a different approach – a different paradigm – that – paradoxically – affirms much of what different sides have argued on the issues, but points the way to a resolution.⁴

B.7 My starting point is the affirmation that nothing in life is faith-neutral, *i.e.*, independent of faith commitments – independent of the *worldview*, the *story* (see sections **B.8-9**) – in which each one of us stands, and within which we interpret both ourselves and the world around us (e.g. *Hebrews* 11: 1-3,6; see the scholars referenced in **B1**). From those faith commitments comes our sense of identity, meaning and purpose (or lack of them) in our lives. Indeed, it cannot be emphasised too strongly that this really is true of everything, *including the interpretation of scripture*.

Does the lack of a true (or of any significant) sense of identity, meaning and purpose, lie at the heart of many of our society's social and cultural problems?

B.8 It is just not possible to tackle the divisive issues by appealing to scripture, unless we first scrutinise the *worldviews* that govern our very understanding and use of scripture. And it is not just how we interpret the scripture we see before us, but even what we see in scripture at all – or completely fail to see – that is determined by the faith commitments with which we come to scripture.

Nothing in life is independent of faith commitments

If this were not so, it would be difficult to explain the history of Christianity with its endless disagreements over the interpretation of Scripture and over the distinctive doctrinal emphases of each Christian tradition!

⁴ I must mention John Stackhouse's books *Finally Feminist* (2005) and *Partners in Christ* (2015). In these books he is addressing one particularly divisive issue – as the first title makes only too plain! – but his discussion is relevant to such issues across the board. I do not agree with his approach or conclusion *in toto*, but I have appreciated his eirenic spirit and support many of his steps along the way.

B.9 These points cannot be emphasised too strongly. It is a fact of human psychology that we often see *only what we expect to see*, even when it isn't actually there (see, e.g., Hallinan 2014). And what affects our life and actions is not the scripture itself, but *what we think it is saying to us*. This latter principle is nowadays known as (Aaron) *Beck's Cognitive Principle*, but it was clearly expressed long ago by St Paul in his letter to the *Romans*. The whole chapter is relevant, but here is the key verse:

I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But *if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.* (Romans 14:14, my emphasis).

As Bible-believing Christians, we want a thoroughly Biblical *worldview* to govern our interpretation of scripture. Now, rather obviously, we are caught in a hermeneutical⁵ circle, or spiral here – the more we marinate in scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to reform our worldview, the better we will understand the Bible and the more our worldview can be reformed to become truer to scripture ... and so it ought to go on throughout life. Nor are we just individuals here, but growing in fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit and with other Christians (see **B.5** and the expanded discussion in section **D Part 3**).

B.10 Our faith commitment – our *worldview*– is encapsulated in a *story*. Hence a very practical way of assessing whether our *worldview* is Biblical is to consider whether it faithfully reflects the Bible *story*. As we improve our grasp of the Bible story we ought to find that our understanding of the divisive issues is also changing, possibly in significant and unanticipated ways.

B.11 My task in this paper is therefore,

- To explain how worldview stories work in our lives (Section **C**).
- Consider what the Bible story is (Sections **D** and **E**). We find that the Bible tells one story, but that one story is told through many story themes. In the **Prologue**, we maintained that there is a central, or *Core* theme. In Section **D** we begin an exploration of this core theme through a focus on the Author of the story, God Himself. God is revealed as a personal God so the Bible tells a fundamentally PERSONAL story. Furthermore the personal God is revealed as a God who is love, so the Bible Story is a LOVE Story. This leads us to two key questions 'How can God know about love?', and 'What kind of love is the love of God?'
- The theme of the Bible's *Core* story follows from all we have learnt of the nature of the God of the Bible (in Section **D**) In Section **E** we trace and explore, through the Scriptures, the theme that reveals that the world was created for God's Family. God created people that through the incarnation of

⁵ 'hermeneutical' is the technical term meaning 'concerning interpretation'.

God the Son, as one of them in all of their God-given humanity, not only might sin be dealt with, but that they might be adopted into God's Family as the Bride of God the Son and live with the Trinity (the Triune God) in the New Creation forever!!.

- Then, in Section **F** we will consider the two main candidates for the core STORY that have been put forward during Christian history and modify or replace them in the light of our discussion in **D** and **E**.
- Finally, having grasped the nature of the Bible's core *story*, we can then proceed to explore its significance for the many divisive issues of Biblical Interpretation that have divided us. We will not do so in any detail in this paper, but defer the task to other ,,
- ... papers that will seek to build on the foundation laid here.

C The Importance of Story

C.1 The reality is that as human beings we are all,

... profoundly shaped, in our deepest being, by the narratives [stories] in which we live. Our individual identities are the product of our stories. Our emotions, far from simply "welling up untutored", are in fact social constructs learned through our narratives, whether true or fictive. It is our stories that communicate to us our communities' values and structures. But by the same token, stories are not just "cultural transmitters of a culture's beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. They can criticize the dominant culture by "unwriting" the dominant narratives: in this sense narrative and prophetic discourse can be one and the same" (Nussbaum, *Narrative*). (Watts 2015: 32)

[For Martha Nussbaum on narrative see Nussbaum 1997 and Worth 2008]

C.2 Rikk Watts challenges us to regularly tell the Bible Story to one another and challenge one another with its implications:

"So rarely do we relate it to one another that it is swamped by the constant stream of counter-narratives of other citizenships, whether nationalist (why being Canadian, American, Australian, Chinese, [British] *etc.* is best) or modernist metanarrative (why progress, science, education, unbridled capitalism lead to life!)." (Watts 2015: 32)

He continues:

"Without this story being firmly embedded in us, we will constantly find ourselves living against the grain, *not* of our culture – we find that all too easy to slip into – *but* of the *gospel*. And all this for the simple reason that we know our cultural narratives far better and deeper than we do God's narrative as expressed in the Scriptures. It is, it seems to me, *imperative* that we choose this day whose narrative we will live in and by. And having made that decision,

we need to let go all those other competing stories and bed this one down deep, deep into our souls.” (Watts 2015:32)

So, bearing in mind how stories function in our lives and understanding, let us pass to the next step in the task set for this paper (in **B.11**): **Section D**, ‘What is the Bible Story?’

D What is the Bible Story?

D Part 1: The Bible Tells One Story

D.1 The literature that we now know as the Christian Bible was written in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) by around forty different authors, of diverse backgrounds, on three different continents, over a period of more than 1500 years. The sheer quantity and variety of the Biblical material forces upon us the need to see – grasp and understand – the Bible as a whole, so that we might be confident that the applications we bring to our lives today are legitimate and valid. Obviously, orthodox Christians have begun that task with the assumption that the Bible does indeed present a consistent, unitary story (see **B.2**). At first, this could only be a faith assumption, but the pursuance of the task has uncovered abundant evidence for its truth. It is very remarkable indeed that the Bible is found to tell one *story*, with a clear beginning, middle, and end ⁶. But when we seek to grasp the Biblical story as a whole – *i.e.* in ways that the Bible itself warrants – we find that there are many ways of doing so.

D.2 The Bible is NOT an ‘ordinary’ book! There are many themes (see **Prologue**) that are worked out consistently, but expansively, through the scriptures and each provides a way of grasping the Bible whole.⁷ All these themes have their strengths and weaknesses; all present opportunities to enlarge our understanding and threats to restrict it. To grasp Scripture in its fullness, we need them all.

D.3 That immediately poses another question: is there a *Core* storyline, a core *story*? Is there a central, cardinal, primary, or fundamental storyline, or plot, that grounds (incorporates, integrates) all the diversity of individual themes? Put another way, is there a theme or story, that stands above all the other themes and stories and that provides the ultimate, or deepest context for the understanding of them all?

D.4 As Christians we believe that the fundamental story told by the Bible is the Gospel of Jesus, so an alternative question to “What is the Bible Story?” would be “What is the Gospel?” For either question we have to make a decision about where to begin. As Goheen notes (2018:42), the starting point impacts the content of the

⁶ See, *e.g.* Gurtner & Gladd, 2013 and the literature cited and referenced therein; also Jones, 2013.

⁷ See Jones 2020. Jones 2013 has a summary of several of these themes and references to the literature where they are examined in detail.

answer. As regards the Gospel story, Goheen notes that Greg Gilbert “starts with (a rather selective reading of) *Romans* 1-4” (Gilbert, 2010), Scot McKnight begins with *1 Corinthians* 15:1-9 (McKnight, 2016) and Lesslie Newbigin begins with Jesus’ first announcement, at the outset of his public ministry, about the kingdom of God (*Mark* 1:14-15) (e.g. Newbigin 1977: 67)⁸ That was Jesus, so doesn’t that settle the question? Actually no. Of all he could say, Jesus will have chosen the wisest short summary for the hearers in their time and place, given their current understanding. But we now have the Biblical revelation as a whole, so the question for us is well put by Goheen (2018: 43):

The end of human history is what gives meaning to the creation and to human life. To be human is to live in some story that gives life meaning. The problem is that, while we are in the middle of history, it is impossible for us to know the End – that is, unless the one who rules history reveals it to us.

As Richard Hays has powerfully argued, we have to read the Bible *backwards* (Hays, 2014); in other words the right place to start is with the full New Testament revelation of God’s purpose in creating the universe and humanity.

D Part 2: The Bible’s One Story is a Love Story – the Story of a Personal God Who is Love

D.5 A crucial aspect of that purpose is revealed through the very nature of God himself. Indeed it is that revelation that will tell us the kind of story we must expect.

In the Bible Story – and pre-eminently in Jesus – God is revealed to us as a *person*. At the very least, to know a person we must come into a personal relationship with them. Only then will we be able to understand, their story as the personal story it is – know it not just superficially, but intimately. If the Bible story is to be knowable and tellable at all, then it must be known and told as God’s *personal* story.

D.6 The Bible tells us that above all else God is a *loving* God, indeed that God *is* love (*1 John* 4:7,8,16). The very nature of love is that there must be an “other” to love. Somehow in the very being of the one God of the Bible there must be a complexity that explains the origin of love and allows its expression.

D.7 Both present-day Jews and Muslims maintain the unity, oneness of God, implying that God is a singularity and – against the teaching of some ancient Jews and of orthodox Christians – not a duality, and certainly not a trinity! Muslims refer to verses in the *Qur’an*, such as Sura **112**:1-4 (entitled *Al-Ikhlās*, Purity of Faith):

“Say: He is Allah, The One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, Nor is He begotten; And there is none Like unto Him.”
(‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, 1999: 1925).

⁸ Actually Jesus repeats –and thereby affirms – the message of John the Baptist – *Matthew* 3:1-2 with *4:17* and *Mark* 1:15.

Similarly the Jews refer to the *Shema* (*Deuteronomy* 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD (YHWH) our God the LORD (YHWH) is one (Hebrew, *echad*).” Jesus affirms the *Shema* in *Mark* 12:29, but the use of *echad* in the *Shema* and the citing of this verse in the teaching of Jesus, does not confirm singularity.

D.8 God (Hebrew, *Elohim*) is a grammatical plural and is used with plural pronouns.⁹ Of course, grammatical plurals are not proof of plurality of nature, but in cases like these they are certainly suggestive. More to the point is the usage of the key term *echad* itself. For example, we have *Genesis* 2:24. – “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become **one flesh**.” The Hebrew reads, “They shall be flesh *echad*”. Hence man+wife, consisting of **two beings**, become ONE, thereby expanding our understanding of *echad*.¹⁰

D.9 Jesus claimed that his life fulfilled the Scriptures (e.g. *Matthew* 26:53-56; *Luke* 4:18-21; *John* 17:12) and this was affirmed by his disciples who wrote the Gospels (e.g. *Matthew* 1:22; 2:15,18,23; 4:15-16; 8:16-17; 12:16-18; 21:4-5; 26:55-56; 27:8-10). Furthermore Jesus claimed that all the Scriptures bear witness to him (*Luke* 24:27,44, *John* 5:39,46 – see **B.4**). The Gospels are also united in affirming that Jesus is not just the promised messiah, but God himself – *Yahweh* – come to save his people (see, e.g. Hays 2014, Watts 2015, for references and discussion). Similarly the Holy Spirit is identified with both the Father and the Son; after Christ’s ascension, the Spirit becomes ‘God with us’ (for references and discussion, see, e.g. Chester 2005, esp. 54-55; Bates 2015, Chester & Woodrow 2013, Kapic, 2018, Reeves 2012, Sanders 2010, 2016, 2017, 2019, Tinker 2019). Hence any focus on Jesus requires an understanding of the three-personal nature of the one God.

D Part 3: What Kind of Love is the Love of God?

D.10 The key Biblical passage here is *1 John* 4:7-21 (see Wright 2011b: 157-161):

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ...
¹⁶. ... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.”

Tom Wright comments:

The Christian faith grows directly out of, and must directly express, the belief that in Jesus the Messiah the one true God has revealed himself to be – love incarnate. And those who hold this faith, and embrace it as the means of their

⁹ See e.g. *Genesis* 1:26-27, 3:22, 11:7, *Isaiah* 6:8, and *Isaiah* 41:21-23. In *Ecclesiastes* 12:1 ‘Creator’ is plural, as is ‘Maker’ in *Job* 35:10, *Psalms* 149:2 and *Isaiah* 54:5.

¹⁰ Another example may be found in the Hebrew text of *Exodus* 26:6, which reads, “Then make fifty gold clasps and use them to fasten the curtains *together*, so that the tabernacle is *a unit*.” But the word *together* is literally “a woman to her sister”. And the words “a unit” are just the one word “*echad*”!

own hope and life, must themselves reveal the self-same fact before the watching world. Love incarnate must be the badge that the Christian community wears, the sign not only of who they are but of who their God is.
(Wright 2011:158)

People won't really know who God is until they see that love revealed in the lives of Christians. Love is that important.

The Bible is God's story, so fundamentally it is a love story and God's love is the key to understanding the whole story.

In his ground-breaking book on the Trinity, Mathew Bates (2015) shows that the reading practices of the NT and early Christian authors reveal a Trinity characterised by "mutual esteem, voiced praise, collaborative strategizing and self-sacrificial love" (Bates 2015:40). This leads on to the next part of our exploration.

D.11 So what does the Bible mean by 'love'? The Bible is quite clear that love is "the highest virtue, the greatest quality, the most Jesus-like characteristic you can imagine" (Wright 2004b: 171). When all that is temporary has passed away, love is the greatest thing ¹¹ that remains for ever (*1 Corinthians* 13: 13).

Please note that not all of the Scriptures recorded below will actually mention 'love', but they are included here because they reveal different aspects of what true Godly love demands.

⁵"I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing **love** to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments." (*Exodus* 20:5-6; also 34:6-7; *Deuteronomy* 5:9-10; 7:9-10)

¹²If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep His covenant of **love** with you, as he swore to your ancestors. ¹³He will **love** you and bless you, and increase your numbers. ...

¹⁴You will be blessed more than any other people ..."

(*Deuteronomy* 7:12-14; cf. *1 Kings* 8:23; *Nehemiah* 1:5; 9:32; *Daniel* 9:4)

In *Psalms*, the writers constantly describe God's love as 'unfailing' or 'enduring forever', e.g.:

¹⁰Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing **love** surrounds the one who trusts in Him." (*Psalms* 32:10)

¹¹One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard: "Power belongs to You, God, ¹²And with you, Lord, is unfailing **love**."
(*Psalms* 62:11-12; cf. *2 Timothy* 1:7)

For the LORD is good and His **love** endures forever (*Psalms* 100:5)

¹¹ Not the only thing. *1 Corinthians* 13:13 also affirms that *faith* and *hope* are eternal (see **H.3**)

D.12 In *1 Corinthians* 13: 4-7, Paul describes what love really is. At the heart of that peerless description is the simple statement that love “is not self-seeking” (*1 Corinthians* 13: 5) and that is what is emphasised and re-emphasised through the New Testament as the pattern set by the Lord Jesus himself:

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²He called a little child to Him, and placed the child among them. ³And He said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. ⁶If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. ... ¹⁰See that you not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father in heaven. ... ¹⁴ ... your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.”

(*Matthew* 18:1,3-6,10,14; see also *Mark* 9:36-37 and *Luke* 9:46-48)

¹Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples: ... ⁸[Unlike the teachers of the law and the Pharisees] “you are not to be called ‘Rabbi’, for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹And do not call anyone on earth ‘father’, for you have one Father, and He is in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

(*Matthew* 23:1,8-12; also *Luke* 14:11)

³⁵[Jesus to His disciples] “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

(*Mark* 9:35)

[Occasion when James and John asked to be recognized as the greatest of the disciples] ⁴²Jesus called them [disciples] together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

(*Mark* 10: 42-45; also *Matthew* 20: 25-28)

²⁴A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

(*Luke* 22: 24-27)

¹It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having **loved** His own who were in the world, He **loved** them to the end. ... ⁴[Jesus] got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. ⁵After that,

he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel ... ¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (*John 13: 1-17*)

³⁴"A new command I give you: **Love** one another. As I have **loved** you, so you must **love** one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you **love** one another." (*John 13: 34-35*)

²³"Anyone who **loves** me will obey my teaching. My Father will **love** them and we will come to them and make our home with them." (*John 14:23*)

⁹"As the Father has **loved** Me, so have I **loved** you. Now remain in My **love**. ¹⁰If you keep My commands, you will remain in My **love**, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in His **love**. ¹¹I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: **Love** each other as I have **loved** you. ¹³ Greater **love** has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from My Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in My name the Father will give you. ¹⁷This is My command: **Love** each other." (*John 15: 9-17*)

D.13 The apostle Paul constantly affirms the pattern set by the Lord:

⁹**Love** must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in **love**. Honour one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. (*Romans 12: 9-13*)

⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to **love** one another, for whoever **loves** others has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery", "You shall not murder", "You shall not steal", "You shall not covet", and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "**Love** your neighbour as yourself." ¹⁰**Love** does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore **love** is the fulfilment of the law. (*Romans 13: 8-10*)

¹We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ²Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up. ³For even Christ did not please himself. ... ⁵May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶so that with one mind and one voice you may

glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy." (Romans 15: 1-9)

²⁴No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. ... ³²Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – ³³even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. ^{11:1}Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Corinthians 10: 24, 32-33, 11: 1)

⁴**Love** is patient, **love** is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶**Love** does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸**Love** never fails. ¹³And now these three remain: faith, hope and **love**. But the greatest of these is **love**¹². (1 Corinthians 13: 4-8,13)

⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8: 9)

⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through **love**. ¹³You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in **love**. ¹⁴For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "**Love** your neighbour as yourself." (Galatians 5: 6,13-14)

²¹Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²⁵Husbands, **love** your wives, just as Christ **loved** the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸In the same way, husbands ought to **love** their wives as their own bodies. He who **loves** his wife **loves** himself. ²⁹After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – ³⁰for we are members of his body. ³¹"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³²This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³However, each one of you also must **love** his wife as he **loves** himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5: 21, 25-33; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:1-5)

⁹Now about your **love** for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to **love** each other. ¹⁰And in fact, you do **love** all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, ... (1 Thessalonians 4: 9-10)

³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value

¹² See Section D11, footnote 11.

others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
Being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death,—
even death on a cross!

(*Philippians 2: 3-8*)

Tom Wright (2004a: 103) rightly comments on the Philippians passage that, “As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.”

D.14 The other apostles and NT writers likewise affirm Jesus' teaching on **love**:

¹Keep on **loving** one another as brothers and sisters. ²Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. (*Hebrews 13: 1-2*)

²²Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere **love** for each other, **love** one another deeply, from the heart.” (*1 Peter 1: 22*)

⁸Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, **love** one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called, so that you may inherit a blessing. (*1 Peter 3: 8-9*)

¹To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder ... ²Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

⁵In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because,

“God opposes the proud,
but shows favour to the humble.” [*Proverbs 3: 34*]

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (*1 Peter 5: 1-7*)

¹¹For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should **love** one another. ¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life, because we **love** each other. Anyone who does not **love** remains in death. ¹⁶This is how we know what **love** is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the **love** of God be in that person. ¹⁸Dear children, let us not **love** with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

(1 John 3: 11-17; cf 2: 7-11; 4: 7-21)

⁵I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we **love** one another. ⁶And this is **love**: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in **love**.

(2 John: 5-6)

From these passages we can conclude that **love** – the pattern of love revealed in the life and providence of God – is self-denying and self-giving.

D Part 4: The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

D.15 The Trinity is not some esoteric philosophical idea that we can happily dispense with; rather it affirms the great truth that in the Godhead, relationships of love and communication are eternally present and that those relationships are expressed in concern for one another, in always doing what is good for each other, in giving themselves for each other (Barwick 2012). We can now understand why the great Christian scholar of the Trinity – Fred R. Sanders – insists that “the gospel is Trinitarian, and the Trinity is the gospel. Christian salvation comes from the Trinity, happens through the Trinity, and brings us home to the Trinity.” (Sanders 2017:15). Consequently, a truly Christian worldview must be focused on the Triune God and on the Triune God’s purposes.’

With this understanding of God as a trinity of self-denying, self-giving love, we are now in a position to understand the fundamental reason for God’s creation of human beings.

E The World was Created for God’s Family

E Part 1: The Incarnation is about more than Salvation from Sin

E.1 Time and again the Bible tells us that the Incarnation was planned from the beginning, even from before creation (*Matthew 25:34*, *Ephesians 1:4-5*; *1 Peter 1:20*; *Revelation 13:8*, *17:8*). The incarnation of Jesus – his conception, birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension – was always the focal point of world history, always far more than just the solution to the problem of sin.

E.2 A key passage is *Romans 8: 18-30*, especially verse 29:

[²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.] ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. (*Romans 8:28-29*)

Of the translations that I know, the one that I believe renders this verse best is that of William Barclay (WB):

[²⁸We know that through the work of the Spirit all the different events of life are being made to work for good, for those who keep on loving God, those whom his purpose has called.] ²⁹For long ago, before they ever came into being, God both knew them and marked them out to become like the pattern of his Son, for it is his purpose that his Son should be the first and eldest of a great family.

E.3 Another way (see Section **D.4**) in which the Bible is no 'ordinary' book is that for understanding we have to read it *backwards* – *i.e.* from the end – in order to understand it fully when we read it from the beginning.

At the beginning of creation, God and humans, heaven and earth, material and spiritual were separate, but when we read the whole Bible story in the light of its end goal, its final fulfilment, then this is the understanding we are given:

“[God] made known to us the mystery of His will ... *to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*”
(*Ephesians 1:9-10 NIV*, emphasis added; *cf Colossians 1:20*)

Heaven and earth will be united (*Revelation 21*). Christ, as a human, is now in heaven – humanity is represented in the Godhead (*Romans 8:29, 2 Peter 1:4*)!

“² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”
(*1 John 3:2*).

E Part 2: Matthew, Luke, and Paul on God's Family

E.4 In Christ, God entered the story of humanity, that we might be brought into His story. God participated in His creation, so that humanity might participate in God and the whole creation come to declare His glory
(*Habakkuk 2:14, Romans 8:18-30; Revelation 21:11, 23*).

E.5 We will be united with Christ in a way that that can only be represented as marriage (*Revelation 19:9; 22:17*). Jesus astonished his listeners – and us – when he rebuked the Sadducees concerning marriage:

“[You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God, *Matthew 22:29*.] ³⁴The people of this age marry and are given in marriage.
³⁵But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in

the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage ³⁶and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection.”

(*Luke 20:34-36 NIV, cf. Matthew 22:29-30, Mark 12:24-25*)

We will be the bride of Christ; we will be part of the Family of God.

God created the world for Marriage and Family

God created humans as gendered persons who would unite in a one-flesh union as one man, one woman, in covenant marriage, the two becoming one, *so that the world would have a category for understanding the relationship between Christ and the church.* (Hamilton 2010: 268)

E.6 Matthew’s Title for his Gospel

¹The Book of the one begotten by Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (*Matthew 1:1, author’s translation.*)

Almost all modern English versions of the New Testament¹³ seriously mistranslate this verse as referring to the following genealogy of the *ancestors* of Jesus. It is very difficult to understand why translators have followed each other in so translating this verse, when the phrase in question occurs as a title in 14 other passages in the Bible from *Genesis* to *Ruth* and *1Chronicles*¹⁴ and always refers to the *offspring* or *descendants* of the one(s) named in the title. Matthew clearly knows his Scriptures well (our Old Testament – see Jones 2020, Section L.5 and fn 90) and so we ought to conclude that Matthew will certainly know what this regularly repeated title means! By using this title in *Mathew 1:1*, he introduces the core story of the New Testament (and of the whole Bible, as shown in this paper) that God the Father created human beings that they might become the bride of God the Son, Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus is presented as the last Adam, the second man, the heavenly man¹⁵ and the church of the redeemed is presented as the bride, begotten by Jesus, conformed to his image, empowered by God the Holy Spirit, sharing God’s very nature.¹⁶

[For further detailed discussion on *Matthew 1:1*, see Jones 2020.]

E.7 Matthew on God’s Family

In a previous paper (Jones 2020, section L.8-L.13), I referred to Adam Pohlman’s paper (Pohlman 2016) in which Pohlman argues from the literary structure of Matthew’s Gospel, and from his [Pohlman’s] discussion of the occurrences of the phrase ‘Son of God’, that Matthew was not primarily emphasizing that Christ was

¹³ Thus is true of all the modern English NT versions I have checked.

¹⁴ *Genesis 2:4;5:1;6:9;10:1;11:10;11:27;25:12;25:19;36:1;36:9;37:2; Numbers 3:1;Ruth 4:18; 1 Chronicles 1:29.*

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:45-49.

¹⁶ *John 1;12-13; Romans 8:9,29; 2 Peter 1:4; 1John 3:2 and Revelation 21:9.*

divine (though he clearly believed that). Rather Pohlman argues that Matthew was showing that, as the Son of God, Jesus was modelling the true image of God as a human person, that Adam, Abraham, David and Israel had failed to do. Pohlman's case was impressive, but clearly not conclusive, as it failed to persuade the scholars I surveyed (Jones 2020, sections **L.6-L.12**) To Pohlman's arguments I added the evidence from the true meaning of Mathew's title (*Matthew* 1:1), of which Pohlman was unaware.

E.8 Matthew on God as 'Father'

To all of this I can now further add evidence from the references in the Gospels to God as 'Father'

In all the Gospel's it is recorded that God was Jesus' Father, but only in *Matthew* is Jesus recorded as equally referring to God as *His disciples'* 'Father'¹⁷ In this regard *Matthew* stands out from the other gospels, and especially from *John*. *Matthew's* 22 references to God as His disciples' 'Father' more than trebles the references (total of only 7) in all the other Gospels put together. *Mathew* is laying the ground for the New Testament teaching that "The Son of God became the Son of Man that the sons of men might become the sons of God." (Hughes and Partridge 2012: 1237).

E.9 Matthew on Mission, Church and Marriage

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who records Christ's Great Commission to go and disciple all nations (*Matthew* 28:18-20). He is also the only one to refer to the church (*Matthew* 16:18; 18:17; cf *Ephesians* 2:20 and *1 Corinthians* 6:1-6 – see, especial Pawson 2017:499-500).

When Jesus was asked why, in contrast to *John's* disciples, His disciples did not fast, he replied by referring to himself as a **bridegroom** and to his disciples as the **wedding** guests (*Matthew* 9:15,15) – "How can the guests of the **bridegroom** mourn [fast] while he is with them?" This is also recorded in *Mark* (2:19-20) and *Luke* (5:34-35). *Matthew* record's Jesus' teaching about *marriage* at the Resurrection (*Matthew*

¹⁷ In the references below, a verse means one occurrence of the Greek *patér*, 'father'. If 'Father' occurs 2 or 3 times in the verse, then the verse is repeated. For example, *Matthew* 11:27,27,27 means *Matthew* 11:27 contains 3 occurrences of (the Greek word) 'Father'.

Mathew has 44 references to God as Father, 22 as Father of Jesus (7:21;10:32,33;11:25,26,27,27,27; 12:5;15:13; 16:17,27;18:10,19,35;20:23;24:36;25:34;26:29,39,42,53), but also 22 as Father of the disciples (5:16,45,48;6:1,4,6,6,8,9,14,15,18,18,26,32;7:11;10:20,29;13:43;18:14;23:9;24:36;28:19). *Matthew* 24:36 is taken to refer to both Jesus and His disciples.

Mark has 4 references to God as Father, 3 as Father of Jesus (8:38;13:32;14:36) but only 1 as Father of the disciples (11:25).

Luke has 17 references to God as Father, 12 as Father of Jesus (2:49;9:26;10:21,21,22,22,22; 22:29,42;23:34,46;24:49) and only 5 as Father of the disciples (6:36;11:2,13;12:30,32)

John as 121 references to God as Father, 120 as Father of Jesus (1:14,18;2:16;3:35;4:21,23,23; 5:17,18,19,20,21,22,23,23,26,30,36,36,37,43,45;6:27,32,37,44,45,46,46,57,65; 8:16,18,19,19,19,27,28,29,38,41,42,49,54;10:15,15,17,18,25,29,29,30,32,36,37,38;11:41; 12:26,27,28,29,30;13:1,3;14:2,6,7,8,9,9,10,10,10,11,11,12,13,16,20,21,23,24,26,28,28,31,31; 15:1,8,9,10,15,16,23,24,26,26;16:3,10,15,16,17,23,25,26,27,28,28,32;17:1,3,11,21,24,25; 18:11;20:17,17,21), but only 1 as Father of His disciples (20:17 – see Section **E14** end).

22:23-32), though again this is also found in *Mark* (12:18-27) and *Luke* (20:27-40). But it is only Matthew who records a parable about a King’s *wedding* banquet for his son (*Matthew* 22:1-14) and only Mathew records the parable of the ten virgins waiting to meet the **bridegroom** and join him in the *wedding* banquet (*Matthew* 25:1-13). As I wrote in Jones 2020 (Section L14) “Reading backwards from *Revelation* 19:7-19, 21:9ff and 22:17, the reader can hardly miss the connection!”

For more on *Matthew*, see Jones 2020, sections L3-L14.

E.10 Luke on God’s Family

[When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary, a virgin, that she would conceive and give birth to a son, Mary asked “How will this be?”] ³⁵The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”
(*Luke* 1:35)

²³Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, ²⁴the son of Matthat, ... ³⁸the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, *the son of God.*”
(*Luke* 3:23-24,38, emphasis added)

“Many Christians skip over the genealogy of Christ because they find it dull and uninteresting. But how wonderfully it underlines the truth that, when Christ came to save, He did not just come *near* to the human race, He came *into* it. The Son of God became the Son of Man, that the sons of men might become the sons of God.”
(Hughes & Partridge, 2012:1237)

E.11 Paul on God’s Family

²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. .. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. ...

^{4:4}But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba*, Father.” ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child, and since you are His child, God has made you also an heir.
(*Galatians* 3:26-29, 4:4-7)

²⁵ ...Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ... ²⁹ ... no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – ³⁰for we are members of his body. ... ³²This is a profound mystery – I am talking about Christ and the church.
(*Ephesians* 5:25-27, 29,30,32)

E Part 3: *Hebrews and 2 Peter on God's Family*

E.12 Listen to *Hebrews*:

¹⁰In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ¹²He says,

‘I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
In the assembly I will sing your praises.’ [*Psalm 22:22*]

¹³And again,

‘I will put my trust in him’ [*Isaiah 8:17*]

And again he says,

‘Here am I, and the children God has given me.’ [*Isaiah 8:18*]

¹⁴Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way,” (*Hebrews 2:10-17*)

E.13 Hear Peter's amazing words:

³His Divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them *you may participate in the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (*2 Peter 1:3-4*, emphasis added)

E Part 4: *John's Gospel on God's Family*

E.14 Reflect, slowly and worshipfully, on the wonderful promises in John's Gospel:

¹²[Of Jesus] to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – ¹³children born not by natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (*John 1:12-13; cf.: Romans 8:14; Galatians 3:26*)

¹On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ²and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, “They have no more wine.” ⁴“Woman, why do you involve me?” [literally “What (is that) to me and to you?”] Jesus replied. “My hour has not yet come.” ⁵His mother said to the

servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ... ¹¹What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him. [Immediately after this account, John records Jesus' visit to Jerusalem where he clears the Temple courts. The Jews ask for a sign to prove his authority for doing so, and Jesus replies] ¹⁹ "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ... ²¹ the temple He had spoken of was His body. ²²After He was raised from the dead, His disciples recalled what He had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.
(John 2:1-5,11,19,21-22)

Tom Wright writes that John's gospel "is planned as a kind of treasure hunt, with careful and sometimes cryptic clues laid out for us to follow. ... The word he uses for 'clue' is 'sign' (verse 11). He is setting up a series of signposts to take us through his story." (Wright 2004:21). The mention of 'the third day' should draw our minds to the day of Jesus' resurrection, a connection confirmed by the following account (vv 19-22 above). The wedding then point us to the "great heavenly [wedding] feast in store for God's people (See *Revelation 21.2*)" (Wright 2004:22), a link confirmed by Jesus' conversation with His mother, Mary. His 'hour' that has not yet come, refers, generally, to his crucifixion and resurrection, but surely, specifically, as the necessary path to His end-time wedding. I imagine Jesus replying to His mother with a twinkle in His eye, "What is that to us; it's not My wedding!" and so encouraging the woman, who knows His compassion for people in need, to expect Him to deal with it. John has chosen an illuminating event as his first gospel signpost!

²⁴"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."
(John 12:24-25)

³²"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ... ³⁵ ... "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. ³⁶Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light." ... ⁴⁴"Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. ⁴⁵The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me. ⁴⁶I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness."
(John 12:32,35-36,44-46;cf. John 1:4-9)

¹ ... Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. ... ⁸ ... Jesus answered [to Peter] "Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me." ... ¹⁰ ... "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."
(John 13:1,8,10)

¹⁵"If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever –¹⁷the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day

you will realize I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”
(*John 14:15-20*)

²³“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (*John 14:23*)

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ... ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (*John 15:1,4-5*)

⁷“But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”
(*John 16:7*)

¹¹“I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.” (*John 17:11*)

¹⁴“I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.” (*John 17:14-16*)

²⁰“My prayer is not for them [disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – ²³I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. ²⁵Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” (*John 17:20-26*)

¹⁷[The resurrected Jesus outside the tomb, to Mary Magdalene] “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers [*Matthew 28:10, Mark 3:31-35*] and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (*John 20:17*)

E Part 5: Old Testament Scriptures on God's Family

E.15 As Richard Hays has powerfully argued, we have to read the Bible *backwards* (Hays, 2014 – see **D.4**); in other words the only place to start is with the full New Testament revelation of God's purpose in creating the universe and humanity. When we do so, we find the themes of the Trinity (Triune God) and of God's purpose to enlarge the Family of God are there from the very beginning of *Genesis*, the first

book of the Bible.

In *Genesis* chapter 1, creation occurs in response to the word of God (1:3,6,9,11,14,20,24,26) and the response to the first word was light. John (*John* 1:1-5) tells that God the Son, Jesus Christ was the Word and that,

³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

(*John* 1:3-5, cf *Romans* 11:33-36, *2 Corinthians* 4:6, *Colossians* 1:15-17, *Hebrews* 1:1-3)

In *Genesis* 1, the plants and animals are created after their various *kinds* (Hebrew *miyn*) vv 11, 12, 21, 24, 25), but humans are created in *the image of the triune God* (vv 26-27), *i.e.*, that they might be adopted into the family of God. In other words, in the Biblical worldview there is no human *kind*, no *mankind*; humans are *Godkind*, created to become children of God (*John* 1:13), members of *God's* family (*Romans* 8:29; *Hebrews* 2:10-18.) Interestingly, it can be noted that in *Genesis* 8:19 the Hebrew *mishpaha* 'family' (strictly means clan, extended family) parallels *miyn* 'kind' in *Genesis* 7:14.

In *Genesis* 2:4, humans are described as 'those begotten of the heavens and the earth', *i.e.* those who are the beneficiaries of all of God's promises and purposes concerning His earthly and heavenly creation (see Jones 2020).

In *Genesis* 2:18, after the creation of the first man, God says "It is not good for the man to be alone." The significance of this verse is often missed. Why did God think it was not good? Surely because in his triune Godhood, God was not alone, and wanted humans to experience that community, first, analogously in human marriage and community in the first earthly creation and then fully in the new creation, where the heavenly and the earthly have become united.

E.16 What is written of God's purposes for Israel and for King David, prefigures Jesus Christ in whom alone were those purposes fully and completely accomplished.

[The LORD tells Moses to say to Pharaoh] ²²"This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, ²³and I told you "Let my son go, so he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son." (*Exodus* 4:22-23)

"I [the LORD] will be his [Solomon's] father, and he will be my son."

(*2 Samuel* 7:14)

He [David] will call out to me [the LORD] 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior,' And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth. (*Psalms* 89:26-27, *Hebrews* 1:5)

[See also *Isaiah* 8:18 in **E.12**]

⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, *Mighty God*,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6, emphasis added)

⁵I [YHWH, v1] will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. ⁶I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. (Isaiah 43:5-7)

¹¹This is what the LORD says – the Holy One of Israel, and Its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give orders about the work of my hands? (Isaiah 45:11)

¹⁰Yet it was the LORD’s will to crush him [the suffering servant, Jesus] and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. (Isaiah 53:10)

[The LORD speaking] ¹When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hosea 11:1, Matthew 2:15)

E Part 6: Conclusion: The World was created for God’s Family

E.17 In Christ, God entered the story of humanity, that we might be brought into His story. God participated in His creation, that humanity might participate in God, as the begotten bride of His Son, so that the whole creation will come to declare the glory of God.

F A Brief Survey of Other Key Presuppositions

F.1 A focus on Jesus entails a number of other key presuppositions (for detailed discussion see Gregory Beale (2012:95ff;)) (numbering continued from no (5) in **B.5**)

- (6) **Both the Old and New Testament Scriptures presuppose corporate solidarity or representation.**
- (7) **Christ as the Messiah is viewed as representing the true Israel of the Old Testament and the true Israel – the church – in the New Testament** (see, e.g., *Isaiah 49:3-6* with *Luke 2:32*; *Acts 13:47* and *26:23*).
- (8) **History is unified by God’s wise and sovereign plan so that the earlier parts of Scripture are designed to correspond and point to the later parts** (see, e.g. *Matthew 5:17*; *11:13*; *13:16-17*).
- (9) **The age of eschatological (end-times) fulfilment has come in Christ** (see, e.g. *Mark 1:15*; *Acts 2:17*; *1 Corinthians 10:11*; *Galatians 4:4*; *1 Timothy 4:1*; *2 Timothy 3:1*; *Hebrews 1:2*; *9:26*; *1 Peter 1:20*; *2 Peter 3:3*; *1 John 2:18*; *Jude 18*).

- (10) Thus the later parts of Biblical history function as the broader context for interpreting the earlier parts (see, e.g. 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).
- (11) Thus Christ is the goal toward which the Old Testament pointed and is the end-time centre of redemptive history. This is the key to interpreting the Old Testament and its promises (see, e.g. 2 Corinthians 1:20; Matthew 5:17; 13:11, 16-17; Luke 24:25-27, 32, 44-45; John 5:39; 20:9; Romans 10:4).

F.2 Hence the core storyline must direct our focus to the three-personal (triune) God as revealed in Christ and its components must evince all the particularity of God's personal narrative and of his particular plan and purposes for us, his human creatures.

F.3 The core storyline will be known and remembered through a *sound bite* (aphorism) – a simple, pithy summary that the average person can readily remember. That sound bite must represent the core story concisely and succinctly. Hamilton (2010 – see **E Part 2**) suggested: “God made the World for Marriage”, but I would modify that to “God created the World for Marriage and Family”

Now we are ready to consider and evaluate the two main candidates for the Bible's core Storyline that have been put forward during Christian history.

G What have been the other Main Candidates for the Bible's Core Storyline?

G Part 1: Creation → Fall → Redemption → Consummation (CFRC)

G.1 From the time of Augustine, the **Creation → Fall** (into Sin) → **Redemption** (salvation through the Flood, Exodus, return from exile, and finally and fully through Christ) → **Consummation** storyline [**CFRC**] has commonly been considered the core of the Christian Story.

For many everyday purposes **CFRC** is indeed a very helpful summary of that Story. If we use the image of spectacles, then:

“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)

This is, indeed, a very helpful key to Christian thinking about every area of life and every kind of work and profession. It is therefore one I use regularly with school and college teachers to help them develop Christian perspectives on their subject teaching.

G.2 But in the light of our preceding discussion we are forced to conclude that, while **CFRC** puts down important markers on the timeline of the Biblical story, it does not fulfil the requirements of the *core* theme of the Bible Story. Now this is a very important matter. Although, as noted in **G.3** below (second point), **CFRC** has *not* significantly influenced the daily practice of many Christians, it *has* shaped the way we understand and present the gospel. Nearly all Christian evangelists tell the Bible story chronologically, something like this (see, e.g., Green 2011: 63-64):

God created everything, including the first human beings. Everything was very good and God wanted humans to live in fellowship with Him and follow the way of living for which He had created them. But Adam and Eve rebelled against God and disobeyed His command. They were filled with shame, the curse of death was upon them, and they were banished from God's presence. The terrible effects of sin were passed on to all their children and descendants.

But God still loved His people very much and longed to restore communion with them. He sent prophets to show people the way they should live and to explain his plan to save them from the judgment they deserved. He asked them to sacrifice animals as a temporary covering for sin. He promised that he would send a king, the Messiah, who would be born of a virgin, teach and heal the people and die as the perfect sacrifice for sin.

God Himself came as His Son, Jesus, to fulfil all the promises. Jesus brought astonishing teaching and performed amazing miracles. He gave up his own life for us all, dying a terrible and shameful death. But after three days he rose to life again, having gained victory over sin and death. He returned to His Father in heaven.

From heaven God has sent the Holy Spirit to all those who have become his followers. The Spirit has given his people a new heart that they might follow His straight Way and enjoy living close to Him.

One day, Jesus will come again to Earth as Judge. Those who belong to Jesus will live with Him for ever.

G.3 As familiar as that story is, it does not come close to capturing the heart of the real Bible story:

1. The Bible Story does not start with *Creation*. It is fundamental to the Biblical Story that something was there before creation: that God himself was *eternally* present – present as Trinity, as one God whose unity must be understood communally as three persons in the most intimate, self-denying and self-giving fellowship (see especially Bates 2015).
2. The **CFRC** storyline consists only of generic big ideas. By not directing our focus first to God himself and to the particularity of his personal narrative and of his particular plan and purposes, it doesn't evoke the vitality and vibrancy of the real story. It has the feel of something intellectual produced by academics for academics. Arguably that is a major part of the reason it doesn't appear to

have influenced the daily practice of many Christians.

3. **CFRC** invites the category error of seeing Islam as “a kind of Arabic form of Judeo-Christianity” or “a cousinly Abrahamic faith” (Ashenden 2019A). “It’s nothing of the kind.” (Ashenden *ibid*). In reality Islam is radically different from Christianity; its worldview is more akin to that of Hinduism or Buddhism (Section **D.7**. See Richardson 2016:49, 55,115 & Appendix, pages 295-309)
4. **CFRC** rightly allows Judaism to be classified as a cousinly Abrahamic faith, but it doesn’t reveal the significant worldview differences from Christianity (see, e.g. Sections **D7 – D9**).
5. **CFRC** does not clarify that God’s purposes concern not just individual humans, but the whole creation and all of history.
6. **CFRC** tends to place the emphasis on sin in its personal and moral dimensions, not adequately recognising the universal and cosmic dimensions of sin, nor dealing satisfactorily with the ‘powers and authorities’ (*Colossians* 2:15 NIV).
7. **CFRC** can make it seem as though the incarnation of Jesus Christ was not the essential purpose of the whole story from the beginning, but rather a backup plan to deal with the problem of sin.
8. Furthermore **CFRC** suggests that God’s salvation plan goes awry; in fact, that it repeatedly fails – fails with Adam and Eve and their descendants, fails with Noah and his descendants, fails with Abraham’s line and the nation of Israel – until Jesus is sent as God’s ‘Plan B’ – sent as the divine/human king to put the plan back on track.
9. There are many aspects of the developing Bible story (such as human marriage) that do not make good sense in the **CFRC** framework as it stands.
10. **CFRC** does not provide a basis for a distinctively *Biblical* critique of the dominant secular worldviews.

G.4 Of course the **CFRC** story can be told in a much richer way that mitigates these shortcomings – by building into **CFRC** appropriate elements from other thematic storylines – but that simply confirms that **CFRC** cannot stand alone as *the* core theme.

G Part 2: Creation → Incarnation → Re-Creation (CIR)

G.5 With the wisdom of hindsight, we can now begin to understand why the storyline favoured by the early church and the apostolic church fathers was not **CFRC**, but a threefold **Creation → Incarnation → Re-Creation** storyline (**CIR**) (see Webber 2008a, 2008b; also Boersma 2011, Boersma & Levering 2013, Meyendorff

1979, Louth 2013). **CFRC** is importantly valid as a key Biblical theme, but the shorter **CIR** takes us closer to the real heart of God’s story.

G.6 **CIR** is better, but in the light of the considerations discussed in section **G.3**, I would suggest that it is still inadequate. The second term – *Incarnation* – does indeed focus our attention directly onto the heart of the Bible Story, but – as already noted in relation to **CFRC** above – the Bible story does not start with *Creation* but with God, and doesn’t end with *Re-Creation*, for God’s story is on-going. In any event *Creation* and *Re-Creation* remain too generic and vague, failing to evoke any adequate specification as to who this God is and what his creation purposes are. The soundbite storyline does indeed require reference to *Creation, Fall, Redemption* and *Consummation/New Creation*, but with a personal specificity in relation to God that evokes the true heart of the Bible Story.

G Part 3: Towards a better understanding of the Bible’s Core Story

G.7 So where should we begin? With *God*? We are then back with a familiar problem. Francis Schaeffer (1990 [1972]:286) claimed that “no word is as meaningless as is the word *god*.” Certainly it means many different things to people in the world today. So how can we expand it to evoke who God really is? For the reasons given above (**D Part 2**) I suggest *God of Love* or *God who is Love*. Of course, standing alone, *Love* is another word that faces the death of a thousand differing meanings, so it must be understood in line with the scriptures noted in **D Part 3** as eternal self-giving, self-sacrificing love. In the storyline it will stand associated with *Incarnation* and other terms to evoke the rich content of the Bible story. All this is summarised in **Section H**.

H The Bible’s Core Story

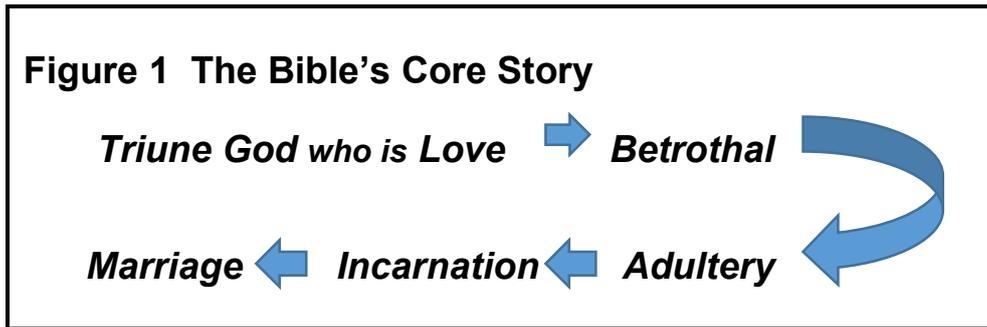
H.1 The Biblical story doesn’t begin with creation, but with the Triune God of Love, and it doesn’t finish with *Re-Creation*, but with the *Wedding* of the Lamb (*Revelation* 19: 7,9; 21: 2,9; 22: 17). So, at present, I think the core Story can best be represented as:

**Triune God who is Love → Creation → Betrothal → Adultery → Incarnation
→ Redemption → Re-creation → Marriage**

Or, more simply:

Triune God who is Love → Betrothal → Adultery → Incarnation → Marriage

(see **Figure 1**)



These terms are meant to map onto those of the dominant **CFRC** (it is not wrong!) but with a personal specificity in relation to God that evokes the true heart of the Bible Story.

Rather than create another series of letters as a summary of this core STORY, I would recommend we just use **God Made the World for Marriage and Family**

H.2 **First** of all (*Triune God who is Love*), it puts the Biblical God first and elucidates his true nature. **Secondly** (*Betrothal*), it refers to all that God created for his Son and his bride-to-be (humanity) as their inheritance and to manifest His glory, the glory of God’s family-to-be. **Thirdly** (*Adultery*) it refers to the sin and rebellion that marred the betrothal and appeared to render the marriage impossible. The Bible constantly describes Humanity’s rebellion and sin as adultery or whoredom (see Ortlund, 1996, for a detailed survey) and refers to God’s never ceasing wooing of the bride to be in preparation of His Son becoming a human. **Fourthly** (*Incarnation*) the incarnation of the Son as a human was not an afterthought just to deal with the problem of sin (necessary as that now was) but that humans might truly become part of God’s family. **Finally** (*Marriage*) the redeemed and purified bride marries the Son and they (the whole family of God) rule over His new creation kingdom for ever.

H.3 Until the time comes, we have no way of understanding what this all means. Contrary to the teaching of false religions, we are not God, and will never become God, but we are promised that in the New Creation, we will know the Triune God of Love intimately and enjoy real family fellowship with God for ever.

The affirmation of *1 Corinthians* 13:13 that *hope* remains forever, is a wonderful promise that, in God’s new creation, there will always be new things to look forward to.

In the here and now we should be a community in which the Biblical Big Story is visibly experienced, in which the gifts, ministries and fruit of the Holy Spirit are present. That’s when mission really happens.

And never forget:

²³Let not the wise boast of their wisdom, or the strong boast of their strength, or the rich boast of their riches; ²⁴but let him the one who boasts boast about this,

that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

¶Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

J Conclusion

J.1 My hope is twofold. *Firstly*, that the core Bible STORY will excite and inspire ordinary Christians – and Christian scholars! – in a way that **CFRC** has failed to do, and, *secondly*, that those who accept it as the core theme of the Bible will find that it fruitfully transforms their understanding of the many crucial issues that divide Christians.

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Scriptures

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Arthur Jones holds a doctorate in biology (1972) for a thesis exploring alternatives to materialistic evolution [aka Darwinism] in the field of origins. Until he retired in 2018, he was (from 1976) a Chartered Biologist (CBiol), a member of the *Royal Society of Biology* (MRSB). Between 1972 and 2002 he was mostly a secondary school and college science teacher in England, or in South Asia (India and Nepal). From 1995-97, he was a part-time lecturer in science and religion in the Faculty of Continuing Education, *Birkbeck College, University of London* and from 1996-97 in the Department for Continuing Education, *University of Bristol*. From 2000 to 2013 he wrote and taught worldview-based courses for Christian professionals accredited by three more UK universities (*University of Wales, Lampeter, University of Wales, Bangor*, and *York St Johns*), at both graduate and postgraduate levels. From 1990-1998 he was a Research Consultant for Curriculum Development to the *Christian Schools' Trust* and authored *Science in Faith: A Christian Perspective on Teaching Science* (CST, December 1998). He also authored *No Home & Alone: A School Programme on Homelessness* (Global Concern, 1999), and *Is Creationism a Science Stopper?*, a chapter in John Ashton (ed), *In Six Days: Why 50 Scientists Choose to Believe in Creation* (New Holland, 1999). His last paid employment was as Tutor with *Responsibility for Co-ordination and Development of the Foundation Degree in Evangelism*, Mission Based Training, *Church Army*, Sheffield. He is a Covenanted Evangelist with *Church Army*. In Education he was a member of the *Movement for Christian Democracy's Education Policy Group* from 1991 to 1997. After several changes of sponsoring organizations, this group became the *Education Commission* of the *UK Evangelical Alliance*, of which Arthur was a founding member in 2013. From 2004-2011 he was a Trustee (and Company Director) of the *Association of Christian Teachers* (ACT, <http://www.christian-teachers.org.uk/>), and was the Chair from 2007-2011. Currently he is a member of the Scientific Panel of *Truth in Science* (TiS, <https://www.truthinscience.org.uk/>) and a trustee of the *Manchester Centre for the Study of Christianity and Islam* (MCSCI, <http://www.mcsci.org.uk/>) based at the *Manchester Nazarene Theological College* (NTC, <https://nazarene.ac.uk/>).

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