

Chpt 4 Us vs Them : The Grand Narrative

Let's look at the footnotes of chpt 4 in Fitch's book

A whole slew of theologians, post-1960s, began pushing against the Enlightenment heritage view of the Bible as a piece of historical literature subject to the standards of historical-critical science. See, for instance:

- Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980);
- Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Fessio SJ and John Riches, vol. 1,
- Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); and
- Kevin Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005),

Which are all pushing this agenda to see the Bible as Grand Drama, as the Story that we have been invited into. This diminishes neither the historicity of the text nor its authority within the church. Instead, it relativizes the authority of external sources upon the text (such as historical-critical methodology) and enhances the historical authority of the text as carried within the church.

Fitch, David E.. *The Church of Us vs. Them* (p. 191). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Narrative Theology

I was introduced to narrative theology through the work of NT Wright in his 1989 lecture which had been published in 1991, taught to my friend Danielle in christian college, and handed to me in 2004. It would transform my mind, my heart, my faith, and my ministry. Ultimately it would lead me seminary in 2008 and on to right my master thesis with Randy Woodley in 2010 which propelled me to do a PhD and co-author a book with Randy in 2019. That is a 30 year journey of an idea.

Wright asked a series of questions including, "how can a narrative be authoritative?" and "how did God exercise authority in the narrative?"

"That, in fact, is (I believe) one of the reasons why God has given us so much story, so much narrative in scripture. Story authority, as Jesus knew only too well, is the authority that really works. Throw a rule book at people's head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go away. Tell them a story, though, and you invite them to come into a different world; you invite them to share a world-view or better still a 'God-view'. That, actually, is what the parables are all about. They offer, as all genuine Christian story-telling the does, a world-view which, as someone comes into it and finds how compelling it is, quietly shatters the world-view that they were in already. Stories determine how people see themselves and how they

see the world. Stories determine how they experience God, and the world, and themselves, and others. Great revolutionary movements have told stories about the past and present and future.”

The powerful framing metaphor that Wright provides goes like this:

Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost.

The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.*⁵

Consider the result. The first four acts, existing as they did, would be the undoubted ‘authority’ for the task in hand. That is, anyone could properly object to the new improvisation on the grounds that this or that character was now behaving inconsistently, or that this or that sub-plot or theme, adumbrated earlier, had not reached its proper resolution. This ‘authority’ of the first four acts would not consist in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both *innovation* and *consistency*.

This model could and perhaps should be adapted further; it offers in fact quite a range of possibilities. Among the detailed moves available within this model, which I shall explore and pursue elsewhere, is the possibility of seeing the five acts as follows:

- (1) Creation;
- (2) Fall;
- (3) Israel;
- (4) Jesus.

The New Testament would then form the first scene in the fifth act, giving hints as well (Rom 8; 1 Cor 15; parts of the Apocalypse) of how the play is supposed to end. The church would then live under the ‘authority’ of the extant story, being required to offer something between an improvisation and an actual performance of the final act.

Make sure that you log these 4 acts because they are going to come up again – and eventually be challenged – later in this conversation.

In the Global Dictionary of Theology, the entry for 'Narrative Theology' has helpful pointers. "human beings sift and organize the Legion of sensory data that surrounds them according to narratives that place objects, actions and sequences into rational in meaningful order. Such knowledge is thus not derived from random collection of "facts" but only in light of inherited narratives frameworks passed down through meaningful stories."

The critical matter for (Karl) Barth was not whether the narratives could be proved historically inherent or scientifically verified, but rather how the stories function themselves to span the gap between the believer and scriptures alternate authority who lives and moves through these narratives.

Because the truth of scripture is ordered to its narrative, (Hans) Frei argued that modern emphasis upon pure reason for universal religious experience has led to a damaging eclipse of the biblical narrative and thus the theology that rests upon it.

Now, back to Fitch's footnotes:

This account is influenced by Michael Gorman's compelling commentary on the book of Revelation, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). In it he describes how there is no final battle of Armageddon in the book of Revelation (142). Rather, it is by the sword that comes from Christ's (the Lamb's) mouth, through the persuasion of the Word, that victory shall come (155). Gorman describes how Jesus is present as one walking in and among his churches, symbolized via the lampstands (83). Jesus as Lamb rules patiently until all have been given time to repent and come in.

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The "word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12 NRSV). The sword, though it divides, is not violent. It does not kill or make enemies via coercion. It divides truth from untruth. Michael Gorman shows this to be true in the book of Revelation. Gorman points out that the sword of the Word in Revelation 19:11–16, 21, comes from the mouth of Jesus. It is a sword of persuasion not violence. And because Jesus, the rider, is still "clothed in a robe dipped in blood" (v. 13 NRSV), he bears the marks of suffering that is of spoken and lived witness, God's way of working in the world. The sword therefore "signifies the effective word of God's judgment . . . that needs no literal sword, and which a literal sword could never accomplish." The battles of Revelation signify the reality of God's defeat of evil, but actual physical war is not the means of that defeat. Indeed, the battle of Armageddon never comes. Gorman therefore suggests that Christ's "only weapon is the 'sword' of his word." Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 153–55.

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McKnight challenges the classic Reformed organization of the Story, à la Vanhoozer, that reads Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation (CFRC) as the primary parts of the narrative. McKnight argues that CFRC is actually a side story to what he labels the ABA story,

which goes like this: Plan A was Adam, Abraham, and Samuel, through whom God reveals himself reigning as king. But Israel wants a king, so God makes a concession in 1 Sam. 8 and offers a king; this is Plan B. The Israelite kings fail, and so Plan A is revised and the kingship takes on the form of the coming of the Son as messiah. See McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 32–38. For McKnight, the dominant theme of God’s reigning and bringing his rule over the world is the dominant Story/Grand Drama rather than the redemption of a sin-corrupted creation (i.e., CFRC), which is only part of the story. These two respective emphases in church history reflect the theology/histories of the Reformed versus Anabaptist churches. Elsewhere McKnight renames the three parts of the story Theocracy, Monarchy, and Christocracy. See *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 69, 70. The irony is that, at the time of this writing, McKnight and Vanhoozer are part of the same church.

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The best exposition of this way of reading the Old Testament, especially in regard to accounts of genocide and horrific holy wars, is Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), vol. 1, part 2.

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Willie James Jennings and J. Kameron Carter show how, in the history of Christianity, it was the idea that the church replaced Israel as the means by which God would bring salvation to the world that made possible a melding of racism with Euro-white Christianity. Jennings argues that when the Christian’s identity and history in Israel are forgotten, Christianity becomes abstracted into an ahistorical “belief system”—in other words, an ideology. This phenomenon, known as supersessionism, becomes “the womb in which whiteness will mature.” Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 36. Strangely, via the Reformation, the gospel morphed into a concept (forensic atonement) that was cast over against Judaism (and “the law”). Separated then from Israel, Christians could now locate their identity differently, no longer as a people grafted into Israel but now as a people fully within European white identity.

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Europe was now the place God had chosen to reveal himself. According to Jennings, “Here was a process of discerning Christian identity that, because it had jettisoned Israel from its calculus of the formation of Christian life, created a conceptual vacuum that was filled by the European” (*Christian Imagination*, 33). In Carter’s words, “[The West’s] accomplishment [supersessionism] was one in which . . . Christians no longer had to interpret their existence within another story—Israel’s. Rather, its accomplishment was to make Israel’s story a moment within

understanding the story of Western civilization as the story of white accomplishment.” J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2008), 261. A big and necessary component to what I am arguing here is that if the Bible is to be God’s Grand Drama that opens space beyond enemies, it must maintain the integrity of the entire Bible, Hebrew and Greek testaments together. It must maintain the integrity of the whole Story. Here the original vision of the church can be sustained, as a people of all tribes and nations grafted onto the one people of God, an extension of Israel, an absorbing of all people into one unified people of God (Gal. 3:26). In each diaspora town and village we are able not to coerce a people to become us on our terms but instead to enter as exiles, seeking the welfare of the city on its own terms, by which its people become a new expression of the nations of God in Israel as fulfilled in Christ.

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