



God Is The Hero Of The Story

[Bryan Chapell \(https://www.preaching.com/contributors/bryan-chapell/\)](https://www.preaching.com/contributors/bryan-chapell/)

I am grateful for the observation of New York City Pastor Tim Keller that when we preach the message of redemption from all the scriptures, we speak with particular power for a post-modern generation because of its appetite for story. That appetite is not always whetted by Biblical perspectives, but that does not mean that there is no proper application of story in biblical exposition.

The Bible is itself three-quarters narrative. The Holy Spirit does not seem averse to using the structures of story to speak to us; and following the leading of the Spirit is never a bad idea. One of the ways that we follow that lead, says Keller, is by expounding the grace of God in all the Scriptures. When we do so there is always an implicit story: God always comes to the rescue. When we preach grace from all the Scriptures, our consistent story is God is the hero of the text!

My concern for consistently applying the story of the Gospel to Scriptural exposition had an intensely personal beginning. The inadequacies of my preaching were torturing me and I wondered whether I should leave the ministry. I could not discern what was wrong. Church members complimented my messages, but their own lives were consistently plagued by depression, addictions, and anger with each other. I had to question, "If I am such a good preacher, then why are the people I serve doing so badly." Ultimately I determined a central reason for their despair, their escapist compulsions, and their judgmental impatience with one another was a pattern of thought I was encouraging.

Week after week I told the imperfect people in my church to "do better." When God's people only hear the imperatives of the Word, they are forced to conclude that their holiness is a product of their efforts. What I needed to learn was that the cure was not preaching less of Scripture, but more. In particular, I needed to learn to preach each text in its redemptive context.

No Scripture is so limited in purpose as only to give us moral instruction or lifestyle correction. Paul says, even the law itself functions as our "schoolmaster to lead us to Christ" (Gal. 3:24). Jesus also says that all the Scriptures the Jews searched "testify of me" (John 5:39). His story underlies and gives proper contour and context to every text. This does not mean that every text mentions Him (or should be made to do so), but rather our Savior's words teach that every Scripture stands in some relation to Him as part of God's revelation of His redemptive purpose. Really to expound a text, therefore, requires us to place it in its redemptive context.

I was not doing this because I had gotten the story wrong of what preaching really is. My thought was constrained by the context of my own narrative and background that indicated the Bible is mainly intended to correct human misbehavior or misunderstanding. According to this story my primary job was to tell people what they should do behaviorally or know doctrinally. In

essence, I was heaping upon people ever greater obligations of doing and knowing while missing the story line that all of Scripture is about the revelation of God's redeeming work in behalf of a fallen people. I am not saying that moral performance and doctrinal correctness are unimportant, but us getting ourselves straight is not Scripture's ultimate aim. Resting upon and responding to the One who alone makes us whole is Scripture's ultimate aim.

I am grateful – eternally grateful – for the early writings of Sidney Greidanus, who began to help me understand this way of looking at the text; and for the providence of God that had me simultaneously in grad school at a time that narrative theory was being vigorously explored for its communication power. My goal herey is to relate to you how these lines of thought may coincide to help us see how story principles apply to Gospel exposition.

One way to consider how we may preach the Bible's story line in all that it communicates is by considering the insight of Kenneth Burke, perhaps the 20th Century's greatest speech theorist. Burke helped us see that all persuasion must have certain narrative contours in order for communication to occur. To help us see the narrative dimensions of all communication Burke provided us with his pentad, a simple anatomy of story elements that he would later call his five children: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. The play and interplay (or ratio) of these children not only reveal the nature of story in general, but also help us understand how to expound the truth of Scripture in a way that stays true to the story line the Bible wishes to tell.

ACT

By revealing the holy nature of the God who provides redemption and the finite nature of humanity that requires redemption, the law and the prophets point to the necessity of a Redeemer and prepare the human heart to seek Him. Because of the great disproportion between our best works and God's righteousness, we are always and forever incapable of the righteousness that would reconcile us to a holy God – our acts are insufficient. Our best works are judged but "filthy rags" in the Old Testament (Isaiah 64:6), and the Savior echoes, "When we have done all that we should do, we are still unworthy servants" (Luke 17:10). Thus, in context the text is never about moral instruction – our acts – alone, but always about our dependence on the Savior to be and do what his Word requires. Someone must act on our behalf, and all Scripture in various ways is revealing the need for God to act for us.

SCENE

Christ-centered exposition of Scripture does not require us to reveal Jesus by mysterious alchemies of allegory or typology, but rather identifies how every text functions in furthering our understanding of who Christ is, what the Father sent Him to do, and why. The goal is not to make Jesus magically appear from every detail of Hebrew narrative or every metaphor of

Hebrew poetry – such practices have led to allegorical errors – but rather to show where every text stands in relation to the person and/or work of Christ whose grace achieves our salvation. No text occurs in isolation from the big story. Since the proclamation and promise of Genesis 3:15, there has always been a salvation scene upon which the commands and teaching of Scripture are overlaid even as they further explicate the features of the scene.

One approach to signaling the redemptive scenery upon which biblical texts are laid is demonstrating how a passage predicts, prepares for, reflects or results from the person and/or work of Christ. This approach seeks to identify how the passage furthers our understanding of what Christ will do or has done in redemptive history. These four categories of redemptive/historical explanation are not, should not be, rigidly categorized. Other classifications also function well in relating the many varieties of Scripture passages to the person and work of Christ. The goal is not to determine a master metaphor or universal scene that will provide a proper niche for all passages. Such inflexible categorizing of texts typically limits the implications of the Bible's own rich variety of metaphors that are used to relate redemptive truth (e.g., kingdom, family, Sabbath, tree).

As long as we observe the text through spectacles whose lenses focus how the Holy Spirit is 1) revealing the nature of God that provides redemption and/or 2) the nature of humanity that requires redemption, we will interpret as Christ did when He showed His disciples how all Scripture spoke of Him (Luke 24:27). Asking these two questions (i.e., using these two lenses) maintains faithful exposition and demonstrates that redemptive interpretation does not require the preacher to expand every text's scene from Genesis to Revelation in every sermon to show a text's redemptive context.

While there is nothing wrong with such macro-interpretations, it is also possible – and often more fruitful – to expound the doctrinal statements or relational interactions in the immediate text that reveal some dimension of God's grace. The relational interactions can include how God acts toward His people (e.g., providing strength for weakness, pardon for sin, provision in want, faithfulness in response to unfaithfulness) or how an individual representing God provides for others (e.g., David's care for Mephibosheth, Solomon's wisdom recorded for others less wise). The scene can be narrow as well as broad and still adequately reveal the contours of grace.

AGENT

In essence, redemptive exposition requires that we identify an aspect of our fallen condition the Holy Spirit addresses in the passage He inspired for our edification, and then show God's way out of the human dilemma. Such a pattern not only exposes the human predicament that

requires God's relief, it forces the preacher to focus on a divine solution. He is alone is the agent of our deliverance. Thus, His glory is always the apex purpose of the sermon. The vaunting of any human agent and puffing of human pride vanish in such preaching, not because the imperatives of the law are minimized but because God is always the hero of the text. He enables our righteousness, pardons our unrighteousness, and provides for our weakness. Thus, he remains the central agent of our exposition even if other characters are on the scene.

AGENCY

This consistent preaching of the dimensions of the grace of God does not render superfluous the commands of the law, but rather gives them new power by providing both our biblical motivation and enablement to honor them. Motivation and enablement are the agency (or, means) by which we do what God requires. Redemptive preaching supplies this agency by highlighting the redemptive work of God. Such preaching refuses to define grace as the world does – a license to do as I please. Redemptive preaching defines grace as does the Bible: a mercy so overwhelming that it compels us to do what pleases God. Thus, the agency that is the motivating power for obedience is evident in Christ's words, "If you love me you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). The agency for fulfilling God's purposes in our lives is revelation and recognition of the grace of God that instills the love that compels the obedience he requires.

PURPOSE

Because redemptive interpretation of Scripture leads to sermons marked by consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ, hearts in which the Spirit dwells are continually filled with more cause to love God. This filling becomes the primary purpose for preaching when we recognize that hearts in which the Spirit dwells are most able and willing to obey God when they are captivated by love for the Savior. For the believer there is no greater spiritual motivation than grace-stimulated love – not fear, or guilt, or gain.

Burning love for God fueled by consistent preaching of grace makes the Christian want to walk with God and follow the commands that please Him. This is why the Apostle Paul could say the grace of God teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions (see Titus 2:12). The Bible ultimate purpose for our lives – to be holy because God is holy – is the product of a compelling love for the Savior that flows from embracing the grace that has saved us from His just wrath for our sin.

When grace is properly perceived, the law is not trashed; it is treasured. The standards that honor God we want to honor because we love Him. In grace-based preaching the rules do not change; the reasons do. We serve God because we love Him, not in order to make Him love

us. After all, how could production of more filthy rags make God love us? He releases us from the performance treadmill that promises to provide holiness through human effort, but the effect on the heart is love that is more constrained to please Him. God's overwhelming and unconditional mercy ensures that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1), but rather than promoting license, this kindness leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4). We want to turn from the sin that grieves the One we love (Eph. 4:30).

To this point, I have identified how each of Kenneth Burke's children may function separately in the Gospel story, but it is important to note that they don't have to play in separate rooms. In fact, the distinguishing contours of any story are developed according to the interplay, or ratios, of the children in the pentad.

PENTAD RATIOS

The primary message of preaching that stimulates such loving obedience is the cross. Contemporary theologians sometimes wince at such statements because they seem to slight other acts of redemption: the Resurrection, Second Coming, and other key redemptive events. We certainly have no right to minimize or ignore these acts. Thus, we move to another concept of Kenneth Burke: stories are not simply individual components of the pentad, but rather take their particular shape from the varying ratios of the pentad in the narrative.

So, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he certainly spoke of the Resurrection, Second Coming and other redemptive events, but he also said that he resolved to preach nothing among them but Christ crucified. In so saying, Paul not only indicated a greater ratio being given to the work of the cross in the large story contextualizing his writings, he also reflected a profound understanding of humanity (1 Cor. 2:2). Focus on the Gospel story's primary agents reaches for the human will with profound poignancy. The Father's gift of his Son stirs the heart at its deepest level to make it tender toward God, receptive of His Word and zealous for His will.

The old preaching imperative, "make much of the blood," reflects great wisdom about human motivation. The cross stimulates love for God, the Resurrection zeal for his purposes, and the Second Coming perseverance in his cause. All are necessary, but God's mercy toward the undeserving – as it unfolds through Scripture and culminates in the Cross – is still the agency that best programs the heart to receive and employ all the other truths of the Gospel.

Christ's victory on the cross acts as the redemptive agency to provide freedom from both the guilt and power of sin. The apostle Paul reminds us that because Jesus resides in us, we possess the resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:19-23; Gal. 2:20). John adds, "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). This is more than a

promise that Jesus will add to our strength or aid our resolve. Because we are in union with Christ, all of the merits of His righteousness have become ours and His Spirit now enables us to resist the sin that He reveals to us.

In the classic terms of systematic theology, once we were not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*) but now we are able not to sin (*posse non peccare*). Christ, the agent of our redemption, has by his actions on the cross, provided the agency of our power. Enough of our sin nature persists (because there is a proper ratio between our present power and our heavenly status) that we will not be perfect until we are with Jesus in eternal glory (*non posse peccare*), but even now we are freed from Satan's lie that we cannot change. Sin has no more dominion over us. We can make progress against the besetting sins of our lives because we are alive in Christ.

PENTAD LAYERS

Understanding pentad elements can be present in varying ratios enables us to understand how the Gospel message can be presented with various emphases or layers without contradiction or confusion. For example, in our present context (or scene) our union with Christ (the agent of our salvation) enables the Apostle to set another scene that itself should inform the agency and purpose that we emphasize in our preaching. Our union with Christ is so determinative of our future status that the Apostle Paul says we are already seated in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Through the agency of our union with Christ, His scene is ours though we exist in this scene of our present existence (Gal. 2:20).

Though we are acting now with the power of Christ's Spirit to overcome sin in our lives, God has already reckoned us holy by the agency of his grace embraced through our faith. This positional sanctification (provided by the scene and agency of our union with Christ) gives us the foundation for our progressive sanctification, the purpose that God intends for those who are being renewed in His image until He comes. Future grace awaits us in glory but we already possess its status through the certainty of the promises of God and the guarantee of the Spirit in us (2 Cor. 5:5). Though we are still acting out the implications of our salvation, the scene has already been set by our union with Christ so as to provide the agency for God's purpose of making us a holy people.

PENTAD PRIORITIES

Hatred of sin, freedom from past guilt, possession of Christ's righteousness and power, and assurance of future grace combine to equip the Christian for the holy race God calls us to run. However, it is important to remember that all of these truths rest on the person (Agent) and work

(Act) of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). No sentence in Scripture more underscores the need for Christ-centered preaching.

A message full of imperatives (e.g., Be like ... a commendable Bible character, Be good ... by adopting these moral behaviors, Be disciplined ... by diligence in these practices) but devoid of grace is antithetical to the Gospel. These "Be messages" are not wrong in themselves, but by themselves they are spiritually deadly because they imply that our path to God is made by our works. They indicate the proper actions (obedience) and proper agents (us) but they fail to give proper ratio to the chief agent (Christ) and his agency (provision of grace to do as he requires).

We must always remember the Gospel scene: in our fallen world even our best works deserve God's reproof unless they are sanctified by Christ (Is. 64:6; Luke 17:10). God delights in our good works only when they are presented in Christ (Rom. 12:1). This means even if we do not mention Jesus by name in the explanation of a text, we must show where the text stands in relation to His grace in order to provide hope that the obligations of the text will be fulfilled. Just as the necessity of a Christ-focus in all preaching is indicated by Jesus words, "Apart from me you can do nothing," so also the power of such a focus is indicated in Paul's words, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

Texts mined for imperatives outside the context of the grace principles that enable obedience deprive listeners of the means to do what they are required to do. Grace principles are on the scene (because God is always driving us to dependence on Him) and to ignore the elements of this scene is to deprive God's people of the agency of their motivation and enablement.

NOT ARBITRARY

At this point, you are probably noting that the pentad ratios of narrative can be applied to preaching in numerous ways. I conclude not by trying to define or exhaust all the ratios, but rather to indicate the ratios are not simply arbitrary. Just because not all the elements of the ratios require equal weight or categorization does not mean that the story of Scripture is up for grabs or has no normative elements.

The Bible does not allow merely arbitrary ratios of act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. Jesus is the agent of our salvation. Our acts are not the agency of our redemption. God is never off the scene. His glory is always our highest purpose. If we do not feel the weight of these ratios, then we cannot tell the story of the Gospel and cannot preach its truths even if we say many true things about isolated texts.

Not Mutually Exclusive, But Always Inclusive

This means that not only is there a Gospel ratio always operative in the pentad of a biblical message, but also the pentad is always present in all its elements. For there to be communication and persuasion, there must always be act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. But here's the freedom and beauty of our preaching: the elements only vary in ratio; they do not exclude one another. We can, for example, note that a text's main focus is on action (i.e., imperative). Our error in expounding this text is not in emphasizing the imperative action, but in removing the imperative from its scene or purpose. We would err if we failed to see the imperative in the context of the story in which the commanded action has a role.

Thus, an expository sermon properly focuses on what the text focuses on. Still, the exposition fails to communicate the Bible's message if the material of the text does not find its context in the larger story. Thus, the pentad comes to our aid by enabling us to make sure that we have not neglected key story elements. Have we emphasized action – even human action? Fine and good. But the story will remain incomplete if there is not accompanying exposition of Gospel act, scene, agent, agency and purpose.

The necessity of the Gospel pentad in all preaching that is true to the Bible's story leads to a basic question that all must answer to affirm that they are preaching the message of Scripture: "Do I preach grace – has the story of God's provision in some way or ratio made its way into my message?" Is it possible that your sermon is so devoid of the Gospel story or its critical elements, that the message would be perfectly acceptable in a synagogue or mosque? If you are only encouraging better moral behavior that any major religion would find acceptable, what distinguishes your story from theirs?

The answer to these questions should remind us that the way we remain true to God's purpose of making His people more like His Son is not through preaching any less of Scripture, but rather through preaching more. Do not stop preaching until all the children of the Gospel pentad have come out to play. For when we "suffer the children" – all the children of the Gospel story – to come into our messages, then the people to whom we preach will delight in their Savior and His joy will be their strength.

Bryan Chapell is President of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, MO. He is a Contributing Editor of Preaching.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Bryan Chapell \(https://www.preaching.com/contributors/bryan-chapell/\)](https://www.preaching.com/contributors/bryan-chapell/)

Bryan Chapell is the senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Peoria, Illinois. He is also the host of a daily half-hour radio Bible teaching program, Unlimited Grace, and the founder and chairman of Unlimited Grace Media (unlimitedgrace.com). Bryan previously served as the president of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. He is the author of a number of books, including Holiness by Grace, and is a contributor to Faithful Endurance: The Joy of Shepherding People for a Lifetime.

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