

EMBRACING
EXILE

*Living Faithfully as God's
Unique People in the World*

T. SCOTT DANIELS



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O F K A N S A S C I T Y

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3

THIS IS MY STORY

The New Testament is not a text to be analyzed so much as a set of scripts for forming a company of performers, a movement that will be Christianity.

—Terrence Tilley, *The Disciples' Jesus*



I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”

—Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*



By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

—Heb. 11:3, NRSV



Philosophers have begun to recognize the need all people have for a story that makes sense out of life. In fact, it may be impossible to live life without a story.

A life story or narrative (what also might be called a *worldview*) is necessary in order to answer several important life questions: Where am I or what kind of world is this? Who am I or what does it mean to be a person? What time is it or what is the nature of the world right now? What's the problem? And if there is a problem, what's the solution?

One of the ways to think about the increasing sense of exile that many Christians feel is to think about it as a loss or marginalization of the biblical story as the primary shared cultural story (what might be called a *metanarrative*).

Let's go back to Constantine in AD 325. After he made Christianity the favored religion in Rome, the story of the Christian faith increasingly shaped the imagination of people throughout the Roman Empire, even if some people weren't devoted to Christ. For a millennium or more in the West the biblical story shaped the way most people thought about marriage, politics, nature, work, and even death. Even if a person never attended a church service, it is highly likely that the Christian story had so saturated the culture that it informed the way that person interpreted the world. People married one another shaped by the imagination of God's covenant with his people. Monarchs ruled nations with authority people believed had been ordained by God. The laws of nature were a reflection of the will of the Creator. Work was viewed as an opportunity to fulfill the purposes and gifts given to each person by divine providence. And one's future after death was determined by the judgments of the holy and righteous God.

Even if a person decided to live in rejection of that “Christian story,” it was still the dominant cultural narrative of faith that defined that person’s rebellion.

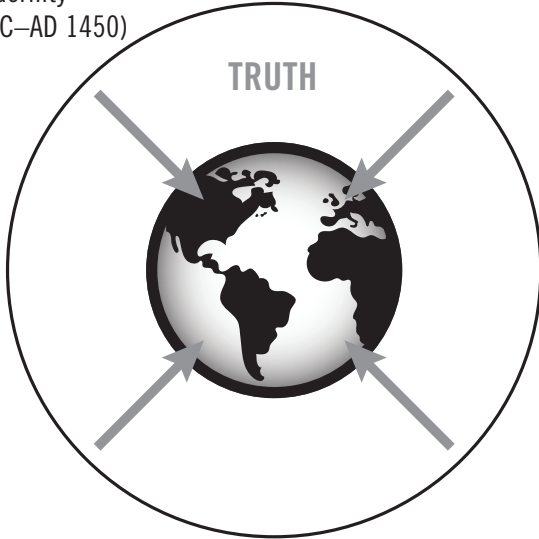
Sometime in the early seventeenth century things began to change. I blame (or credit) the invention of the telescope (1608) added to the earlier invention of the printing press (1440). With the telescope Galileo and other astronomers began to more accurately chart the movement of the heavenly bodies. Earlier, Copernicus (d. 1543) had hypothesized that the long-held assumption (and teaching of the church) that the universe revolves around the earth was false. Now, Galileo, supporting Copernicus, validated through observation that the universe is not geocentric but heliocentric. Humankind is not actually seated in the center of all things, but we are instead floating around on the third rock from the sun!

On the list of potential things for the church to be wrong about, the location of the earth in the universe is pretty big. In fear and frustration, there was an attempt made by the religious authorities to force Galileo to recant. But in a world with printing presses, secrets are hard to keep.

It is a gross oversimplification, but in some sense what historians have labeled the Renaissance and the Enlightenment occurred in response to the realization that if the dominant cultural story of faith has been wrong about the location of the earth, what else is that story wrong about?

Prior to the Enlightenment, we might think of the story that shaped the average person’s thoughts in the following way:

Premodernity
(400 BC–AD 1450)

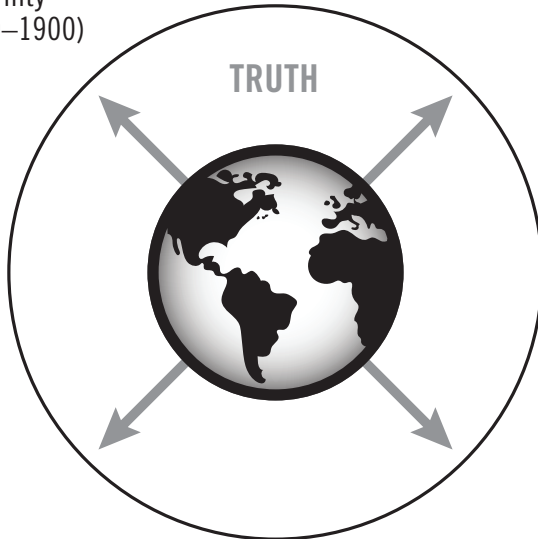


For the pre-Enlightenment or premodern mind, everything that is seen around us is or was formed by forces outside of what we see or experience materially. This was not just true for the Christian story. In the pre-Constantinian era most cultures had metanarratives about various deities and how all that exists is a reflection of their creative work. Even Plato reasoned that everything that is seen in the material world is simply a reflection of the forms or ideas that exist in the “spiritual” realm of pure being. For Plato, concepts such as justice and love are known in the material world (or the realm of becoming) because they are reflections of the form or ideas of justice and love in the realm of being. For Plato, and for the Christian story, in order to understand what is happening

in the visible world, one must have a good understanding of the invisible world.

What happened during the Enlightenment—in a period sometimes called *modernity*—was that although most people did not doubt that there were forces beyond the material world that shaped the visible world, they began to seriously wonder if people knew clearly the true nature of those forces. To quote from the *X-Files*, people knew the “truth is out there.”¹ They just weren’t convinced that the Truth (with a capital *T*) was fully known. Scientists and philosophers began to throw off their previous assumptions, got rid of the old stories, and tried to start over with a blank slate to discover the mind of God. The quest for truth in the modern period looks more like this:

Modernity
(1450–1900)



An interesting thing happened as scholars and scientists stopped reasoning from the outside in and started working from the inside out. Small things that were viewed as the building blocks of the world became more interesting than the big things. What the world had assumed about God and heaven seemed much less interesting—and far less certain—than what people were discovering about atoms and matter. By the time the Enlightenment was in full swing, theologians had been mostly displaced in universities. The high-paid faculty members were now the physicists. Martin Luther's picture on the college brochure was replaced with Albert Einstein's.

Let me be the first to say that a lot of wonderful things happened when “modern” people started throwing off everything they assumed to be true during the “premodern” period. Huge leaps forward were made (and continue to be made) in science, technology, and medicine. Many monarchies and other forms of oppressive governments were replaced with developing systems of democracy. Pursuing reason unencumbered by previously held assumptions has done some tremendous things for the world.

One area, however, where freedom from the older stories, narratives, and assumptions was not as life giving was ethics. But for a while no one really noticed. Because the imaginations of most Western cultures were so deeply shaped by centuries of Christianity, it took awhile for people to notice things were changing. For example, many of the founding fathers of America were openly deistic. Although leaders such as Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton rejected the biblical accounts of miracles and seriously doubted that God interacts daily in the world, they still hung on to God's order and much of the Bible's sense of moral law.

But eventually things did begin to change. It may seem strange in a book about living biblically to discuss one of the world's most famous atheists, but let me share two stories from the wild and crazy philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to illustrate where things started to come unhinged.

Nietzsche (1844–1900) began to recognize that although the intellectual world had largely thrown off the religious narratives that had formed a millennium of Western culture, the moral codes of that tradition still shaped the imaginations and the lifestyles of most people. In his view, the old moral narratives had been pushed aside but they still were telling people what to do. He saw this as an attempt by the leaders in the culture to manipulate people, and so he called it a “will to power.”

In response he invited people to imagine a great fire-breathing dragon from which people were living in fear. Scales cover the dragon, and on each scale are written two words: “Thou shalt!” This dragon is Nietzsche’s representation of the old moral (primarily Christian) story still telling people what they shall and shall not do. He then imagined humankind as having the power to overcome the dragon, for in the hand of every person is a sword inscribed with two other words: “I will!” The duty of thoughtful people, argued Nietzsche, is to find every possible way to overcome the moral system’s attempts to will its power. Every “overcomer” (whom Nietzsche labeled *übermensch* or “superhuman”) should slay the dragon of “Thou shalt!” with the sword of “I will!”² Sociologists often refer to those “Thou shalts” as *social constructions*.

I know that sounds strange. But think about the various ways over the last century culture has celebrated, become fascinated

with, and has been deeply shaped by cultural figures who took on and destroyed (or deconstructed) various social constructions.

Some of those overcomers have done wonderful things. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is rightly celebrated as one who deconstructed many of the social constructions of racism in America. The dragon of racism was covered in scales that said, “Thou shalt sit at the back of the bus.” “Thou shalt not have an equal vote.” “Thou shalt be segregated from the white population.” And “Thou shalt not receive the same opportunities to flourish and succeed.” Dr. King rightly invited people to join him in forms of peaceful protest and take up the sword of “I will” and slay that dragon of oppression.

But there have been many other social constructions and social norms that have been deconstructed by various people across the last century that have probably not been so good for the culture. Let me give you some basic examples from the last century:

- The increased use and acceptance of profanity.
- The proliferation of pornography and sexual imagery.
- The viewing of increasingly graphic depictions of violence.
- The acceptance of unmarried cohabitation, sexual promiscuity, and the redefinition of marriage.

In each of these cases it would be easy to list cultural movements or cultural icons that drew attention to the lines of social construction in a particular area and then proceeded either to eliminate those lines or to find ways to move them. Let me give you an example of someone who took the sword of “I will” in order to slay the dragon of “Thou shalt” in the use of profanity. The late comedian George Carlin became well known for a stand-up routine he called “7 Words You Can’t Say on TV.” Over a six-

minute period Carlin not only continuously repeated the seven words banned by the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) as too profane for television but in doing so also proceeded to demonstrate how somewhat arbitrary he thought the choice to ban those seven particular words was. In a very Nietzschean way, only six minutes were needed for Carlin to deconstruct the ban on those seven words as a “will to power” by people in control of the broadcasting system.

What the FCC had declared profane, George Carlin proclaimed humorous.

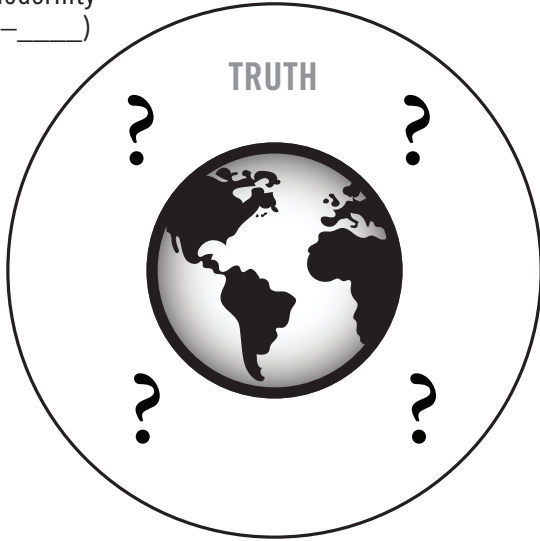
What the Victorian era had defined as “proper,” Hugh Hefner decreed as repressive.

What the Motion Picture Association determined to be too graphic, Martin Scorsese deemed to be art.

And what the history of Western civilization had historically defined as marriage was ruled to be no more than an unjust limitation of civil rights by a portion of the religious population.

For a century now there have been dead dragons everywhere. Again, not all of this has been bad. Some dragons—like socially constructed forms of racism and sexism—needed to die; they deserved to be deconstructed. But in this new period that some philosophers have called *postmodernity* every metanarrative, every story that held the moral life together and gave meaning to people’s actions, has likely been deconstructed by someone. If we were to illustrate this postmodern mind-set, it might look something like this:

Postmodernity
(1900—_____)



In modernity, the older stories, the dominant metanarratives, were thrown off as people pursued the truth they were convinced was out there. In postmodernity, a level of uncertainty seeped into the hearts of many people causing them to wonder if there is indeed anything called truth that a person might discover. If it is indeed the case that truth is not out there, then the only alternative is for moral truth to be whatever the individual thinks it ought to be. Not surprisingly *Oxford English Dictionary*'s word of the year for 2016 was *post-truth*. The fear for many philosophers is that in a postmodern world “truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with.”³

Although Nietzsche found the slaying of social constructions and defeating various “wills to power” quite invigorating, there is

another side to him that I would like to point out. In his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche imagines a kind of postmodern prophet who goes from town to town declaring the death of God. “‘Whither is God [?]’ [the madman] cried. ‘I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?’”⁴ But no one in the town listens or pays attention to this seemingly crazy prophet because they are too busy being entertained to notice.

When Nietzsche—in his atheism—proclaimed the death of God, he did not mean that God was once alive but has now expired in old age. What he meant is that the story of a God who formed all things and gave meaning to creation is no longer the story that shapes the culture. For Nietzsche, when the Enlightenment eliminated the metanarrative of faith, it essentially killed the idea of God. But now this is no longer a message of good news inviting people to go slay all of the dragons of “Thou shalt.” It is rather a message of despair that the “earth has been unchained from the sun.” In the end for Nietzsche, once God is dead, life has no more meaning. Without God there is no more certainty or hope about the future. When the only meaning life has is the meaning an individual creates, it ceases to have any real or lasting significance. When the story that gave people meaning and purpose—the story of God—is gone, all that remains is a kind of hopeless despair.

I have taken you on this odd journey to come back to this simple point. People can’t live without a story. Nietzsche, by the way, is not without a story. His story, like the story for many in this post-modern era, is that there is no story (which oddly is still a kind of story). But as I’ve tried to demonstrate, believing there is no overarching story can be exciting because it gives a person the freedom

to write his or her own story. However, if there is no larger story into which our individual stories fit, life ends up quite empty and our self-written stories end up looking and feeling quite shallow.

Where Do People without a Story Go?

There are alternatives to living without a story. As the Christian story began to decline in influence, other stories emerged to vie for people's devotion.

There is the *success story*, in which life is about accumulating wealth, power, and pleasurable experiences. This story's primary slogan is, "Whoever dies with the most toys wins!"

A lot of people have lived into the *nation story*. In the nation story people find their primary identity within a certain culture, race, or language. The things that matter most in that story are the wealth, power, expansion, and stability of one's nation. That story has been quite persuasive over the last couple of centuries. Many people have lived and died embracing that story.

The *humanist story* has also become quite pervasive. This story's plot says that the point of life is to keep helping humanity become better. There is much to admire in this story. But in the end when the humanity story isn't part of a larger narrative of meaning, it, too, usually ends up in some form of Nietzschean despair.

Another possibility is that people *live out many stories at once*. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is convinced that most people live out their morality today using fragments from a number of different narratives.

While I was in seminary, my wife, Debbie, worked at Warner Bros. and many of our friends were connected to the television and film industry. Two of our dear friends—I'll call them Doug and

Rachel—were television writers and close friends with Debbie. In addition to work, Debbie and Rachel were both pregnant at the same time. We would often go to dinner and talk Hollywood and baby furniture. Neither Doug nor Rachel professed to be Christian, but we nevertheless grew to become good friends.

One night at dinner Debbie and the two friends were talking about people who were getting advanced at the studio. In particular they were unhappy about a person who had the reputation for being quite deceitful and ruthless and who had just been given a significant promotion. In the midst of their complaining Doug commented, “I wish that I could lie and backstab people. I’m sure I would be much more successful today if I could be more ruthless, but I just can’t.”

In the midst of their conversation, Rachel looked at me and said, “Scott, as a pastor and an ethicist, this conversation about the underside of the ‘industry’ has to be driving you crazy.”

“No,” I responded. “It is actually quite interesting. But I do have a question for you, Doug. Earlier you said you would be much more successful if you could cheat, lie, and backstab your way to the top. If that’s the case, I’m curious why you don’t do just that? Why don’t you cheat your way to the top?”

He looked at me with a great deal of exasperation. “I can’t believe my one pastor friend, and the only person I know getting a doctorate in ethics, would ask me that kind of question!”

“Wait,” I replied. “I know why I can’t do those things. I have a whole bunch of reasons why I wouldn’t cheat my way to success. But you don’t share any of my faith convictions. I know why I couldn’t do it. I’m just curious to know why you can’t do it.”

My question ruined the rest of dinner for Doug. I could see him wrestling with the problem all the way through dessert. Just as we were about to leave, Doug interjected, “All right, Daniels! I know why I can’t cheat and backstab. My grandmother was a very good Catholic. And every time I’m in a situation where I am tempted to lie or cheat, it’s like the ghost of my grandmother pops up on my shoulder and whispers, ‘Doug . . . don’t do that.’”

On the way home Debbie laughed and remarked, “It was funny to watch you catch Doug with that question tonight. Isn’t it interesting that he feels like much of his moral compass comes from his grandmother’s Catholic faith?”

“Yes,” I replied. “But the question I didn’t have the heart to ask was, ‘What will be the reason their new child will give someday for not cheating his or her way to the top?’”

The point of the story is not that Doug and Rachel are bad people. They are actually very fine people. But my sense is that the story that shapes and informs their moral life—like most people—is a complicated patchwork of religious fragments, citizenship fragments, success fragments, humanism fragments, and lots of other pieces. But it is very hard to live well out of a fragmented story. And it is very difficult to pass on a fragmented story that will guide the next generation. People living in exile have to have a coherent and cohesive story.

A Storied People

In a world without a coherent story, the church exists as a people who not only tell but also live into and out of a truthful story. The people of God in exile know that what they need is to come each

week to submit their lives to the authority of the Scriptures' story and to be formed again and again to live out that story in the world.

I love the eleventh chapter of Hebrews—the “by faith” chapter. The beauty of this chapter is certainly found in the recounting of the great lives of trust lived out by our ancestors in the faith. But I also love the way the chapter begins. “By faith *we* understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (v. 3, NRSV). The emphasis on the word *we* is mine. By faith the church (the “we” in this text) understands and accepts this story of God as true and beautiful and good. Not everyone has embraced God’s great story. In fact the majority of the culture around the church may be living out of very different stories than the story of faith. But this is our story. It is the church’s story. “By faith *we* understand . . .”

To be a storied people is to live the story. I love an illustration given by Bishop N. T. Wright in a paper he presented on the authority of the Scriptures. He writes,

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

What a beautiful picture of what it means to be a storied people. For Wright, the first four acts of the divine drama are “(1) Creation,” “(2) Fall,” “(3) Israel,” “(4) Jesus,” and the missing fifth act is the church.⁶ His powerful illustration invites the church to so immerse itself in God’s saving story in acts 1 through 4 that the faithful then know how to live authentically in ways that carry the great story forward.

If I could make one adjustment to Wright’s illustration, it would be that I think the Scriptures point in hazy yet profound ways to what the great sixth act—we might call it eschaton or eternity—will look like. The storied people of the church dwell so fully in the first four acts, and their imaginations have been so shaped by the story of Christ’s resurrection power and the Spirit’s healing of creation, that now in act 5 the church lives as faithful witnesses to God’s great story.

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.*⁷

Questions for Discussion

- If you could summarize the story you think most people in the culture live out in their daily lives, how would you describe that story?
- What do you think about the idea that most people live out of fragments or pieces of many stories at once?
- What story fragments do you think sneak into and perhaps corrupt the church's ability to live God's story faithfully?
- What do you think of N. T. Wright's Shakespeare example? How might thinking of the nature of the Scriptures in this way shape the way the church reads Scripture?

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