

FROM THE WILL TO POWER TO THE POWER OF WEAKNESS:
TOWARD A POST-CHRISTENDOM EVANGELISM

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Introduction

In this article, I engage with the late modern or postmodern critique of metanarratives or Grand Stories. The Christian gospel is one such Grand Story that has been subjected to thoroughgoing critique in our day. In a post-Christendom culture, many have dismissed the Christian Grand Story without even hearing it. It is dismissed merely on the basis of the culture-wide conviction that there is no Grand Story that is true for everybody, and that people who believe that they have a Grand Story that is true for everybody are misguided at best and manipulative, judgmental, intolerant, and oppressive at worst.

I want to take a fresh look at the postmodern critique of all metanarratives,¹ with the goal of gaining insight into the basis of the critique and with the hope of gaining insight into how better to communicate the Christian Grand Story in our post-Christendom culture. It is my conviction that many evangelicals have not really understood the critique and its basis, and therefore have not responded to it substantively. As a Christian professor and an apologist for years on secular campuses, I am committed to hearing

1. I use the term “postmodern” in this paper in the way that Francois Lyotard used it in his book *The Postmodern Condition*. I could also use “late modern” or “hypermodern” as terms describing the natural result of the breakdown of the modernist project that was based on the confidence and dependency on rationality as an effective means to gain universal truth, on complete objectivity as a real and attainable goal in human pursuits, on hyper-individualism that disregards cultural and social influences in the production of truth, and on evolutionary progress as the defining principle of Western history.

deeply the critique of seekers and skeptics in our post-Christendom culture, and responding in hopefully comprehensible and compelling ways to that critique. My goal is not to adopt a post-modern worldview but rather to speak plausibly and even persuasively into it.

At the heart of this paper is the goal of recovering a more biblically-rooted vision of evangelism, of communicating the good news. Paul the apostle communicated the gospel and planted the church in a pre-Christendom world, and he understood that the fundamental dynamic of an evangelism that could gain purchase and bear fruit was captured in the words of the Holy Spirit to him in the midst of profound feelings of vulnerability, weakness, and suffering, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).² This convergence of our weakness with God’s power is at the heart of a decolonized and decolonizing post-Christendom evangelism, pursued out of weakness and vulnerability rather than from a position of social power. Paul’s litany of his own suffering and weakness in advancing the gospel, as listed in 2 Cor 4:7–12, is what might be called the Pauline model of apostolic witness: Treasures of God’s power and authority wrapped up and shining through in profound human vulnerability, weakness, suffering, persecution, and death. As Paul says in 1 Cor 2:3–4, “I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling . . . with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” I suggest that this model of profound human vulnerability, coupled with the genuine presence of Christ, is possibly the most important key to witness in post-Christendom contexts. The communication of the Christian metanarrative into post-Christendom contexts must come with profound humility, vulnerability, suffering, and weakness, or else it will be received and interpreted as a power play, a dominance extending activity that lacks moral plausibility in our contemporary world.

2. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

Approach

My method in this article is to practice the discipline of enlarged thinking, or double vision in relation to the postmodern critique of metanarratives. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf challenges us to practice this “enlarged thinking” as we respond to our critics and even our adversaries. Our model is God, who, in the atonement, practiced self-giving love toward the enemy with the goal of embrace. God made room in God’s very identity for God’s enemy, hostile humanity. God made room for hostile humanity by becoming one of us, even identifying with us in our sinfulness.³ God’s goal was to take us into God’s very being.

God is also our model in that God did not become less of who God is in this radical identification, but only more fully and deeply who God is as holy love. We, too, as we listen much more deeply to our critic and adversary, are not aiming to become our adversary, or lose our identity, but rather to fulfill and express our identity. In his unpacking of enlarged thinking, Volf was clearer about the embrace, the listening and being changed by our adversary. He was not always as clear and cogent about the sense in which exclusion still operates in any healthy identity, in which we maintain, deepen, and ultimately fulfill that identity. This tension between listening deeply and being changed by the incisive postmodern critique of Grand Stories and their potentially-destructive social impact on the one hand, and even more deeply embracing and boldly proclaiming our unique Christian Grand Story on the other hand is the tension this paper will make explicit.

Volf calls enlarged thinking “double vision.” Double vision is making space in ourselves for the other, and then letting their perspectives correct ours, sometimes finding in their voices the silenced voices of our own tradition. If we make space for the other, even the enemy, as God made space, unlike God, we will find our own sinfulness and error in ways we never expected. The steps of double vision include:

1. Step outside ourselves
2. Enter their social world

3. See Matt 3:13–15; 2 Cor 5:21.

3. Take them into our inner world
4. Repeat the process⁴

You may notice that these steps do not adequately identify but seem only to assume the ways in which we hold onto what we bring into the encounter, including our traditions, stories, and sense of identity. My goal is to emphasize each side of the encounter when we experience the critique of others. We are changed in our very identity by that encounter. But we also hold on to what we have received and have already become. We practice embrace but not without solid boundaries based on our roots.

We are living in the same tension Paul lived in as an apostle sent to a radically new culture, Gentile culture. At times Paul emphasizes what we hold onto, as in Gal 1:8, when he says, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.” At other times, Paul emphasizes how very fluid we need to be in order to embody the gospel in a different culture. “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” Often evangelical Christians have summed up this tension by saying that we are to hold onto the old, old message, the never changing gospel. But we are to communicate that message in ever changing and newly contextualized ways. As we shall see in the paper, this formulation of the tension is not adequate and often not even accurate given how culturally connected to Christendom contexts of social power and dominance that these formulations have often been.

So, what is the postmodern critique of metanarratives or Grand Stories? What can we learn from that critique? How does what we learn affect the message we communicate, the model of life we propose, and the methods through which our communication takes place? These questions provide a framework for the rest of the paper. First, this paper explores the postmodern critique of grand stories, owing up to ways that critique has been valid and sometimes incisively so about Christendom tendencies to communicate and propagate Christian faith for the purpose of extending a self-

4. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 252.

centered will to power. Second, I turn to a project of reclaiming the gold of the Christian grand narrative without the dross of a self-centered will to power at its heart. Finally, I suggest specific applications for how we might proceed in formulating and communicating the Christian metanarrative in a post-Christendom world in which God's power and our weakness, vulnerability, and suffering become intertwined.

The Postmodern Critique of Grand Stories

The Will to Power

I find much that is prophetic, helpful, and biblical in the postmodern critique of Grand Stories and the ways that those Grand Stories were developed and then functioned within history. At heart, as Volf reminds us, postmodernism is a program against exclusion.⁵

Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein were probably the two most influential shapers of the foundations of the postmodern critique of Grand Stories. Nietzsche was the philosopher of power. The postmodern critique about truth and its function in supporting and legitimizing power is rooted in Nietzsche's reflection on the will to power. Nietzsche celebrated the will to power, finding it at the heart of all human reality. In his classic, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche proclaims through Zarathustra: "The will itself, the will to power, the unexhausted, procreative will of life is the good, the very heart of life."⁶ Zarathustra goes on: "Hear then my word, and test whether I have crawled into the very heart of life and into the very roots of its heart. Where I found the living, there I found the will to power; and even in the will of those who serve, I found the will to be master."⁷ Rather than despairing at human self-interest and the hidden will to power, Nietzsche exalts it. His hero is the Superman, or Overman (*Übermensch*), who overcomes Man by creating his own reality and values according to his own taste and by his own strength of will. The poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley comes to mind:

5. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.

6. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 226.

7. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 226.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul . . .

I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.⁸

(Though, differentiating the two, Henley's hero had bloodied but unbowed head, a picture of noble suffering, and Nietzsche's hero would more likely have had bloodied and overbearing hands.) Nietzsche despises the Christian faith and all Grand Stories that hide this will to power under the guise of virtue and democracy and equality and repression of the passions. To him, all such Grand Values are driven by the envy and jealousy of small men to bring all men down to their level: "Socrates and Plato are both symptoms of degeneration. Value judgments about life are never true, because those who judge are always an interested party, even a bone of contention."⁹

Nietzsche critiqued Christian faith for its repressive, leveling, hidden will to power by small men over great men.¹⁰ But he also critiqued the Grand Stories of emancipation and democracy. In prescient ways, he saw the end result of the whole Enlightenment project of the rational and empirical search for truth. Underneath the search for truth is always the agenda of self-interest. No truth is not also an expression of this self-interest. The rational faculty incorporates this pervasive presence of self-interest, and so undermines its very foundational claims to objectivity and neutrality. There is no objective truth, and there is no way to get from "is" to "ought," from empirical observation to ethical values. In the search for truth was the inescapable and overwhelming expression

8. Henley, "Invictus."

9. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 474.

10. I use the gendered noun "men" in this section because Nietzsche did.

of the will to power. In a fallen world, there is no truth that is not also distorted self-serving power.

Even logic itself is now suspect. Logic can equally well be used to reject slavery and other forms of injustice, or instead to support and legitimize slavery and other forms of injustice. Logic is thus often used in the expression of this self-serving will to power. Thus, Nietzsche paved the way for Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault and others who saw this self-serving will to power as the driving force behind all Grand Stories. Francois Lyotard first defined postmodern: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."¹¹ This incredulity first emerges out of being honest and analytical about the results in history of all Grand Stories at one point or another:

In the West, we tell our story as a story of reason, enlightenment and civilization, contrasting it with the story of brutality and barbarity of backward and primitive cultures. But is the story true? It makes us feel superior and it justifies our colonial spirit. But in light of slavery, the Holocaust, and the extermination of Native races in America, how can we think it true? Our technology and bureaucracy have given us more sophisticated, large scale, and removed forms of brutality, but probably also far more effective forms of brutality. Savages do not have the potential for genocide as more modern societies do.¹²

You can also look at the Grand Story of Marxism that resulted in the authoritarian and even totalitarian bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. Or you can look at the Christian Grand Story, the story that supported the Crusades, or the Inquisition, or the Church's silence in Germany during the Holocaust, or the Church's history with slavery, or her attitudes toward women, or her contemporary battles with Muslims. The Christian Grand Story has been oppressive, as have all metanarratives to one degree or another, from the perspective of postmodern critics. And there is more than a grain of truth in their critique.

What Christians face from people in a post-Christendom culture when they claim that Jesus is the only way, is what all representatives of Grand, totalizing Stories face, when they seek to

11. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

12. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 59.

persuade other people that their way is the only right way. We face skepticism, distrust, and the conviction that behind this Grand Story lies the hidden agenda of the self-serving will to power. And that skepticism and distrust is not without basis. Even in the competitive, adversarial, and politicized ways we respond to the distrust of others, we can often demonstrate our own hidden drive for control, power, and dominance, and so reinforce the very distrust we had hoped to disarm. We Christians too often strive to synthesize the cross (truth) and the sword (coercive power) and the dollar (material power) in the service of self, at least ever since Constantine, whether we pursue that synthesis in our rhetoric, our economics, our racial theories, our military pursuits, or our religion.

Our Christian Grand Story has too often failed to separate the cross, the sword, and the dollar. Marva Dawn asks us a very haunting question about our “unchanging message.” She explores the role of larger forces, heavenly and earthly, in their influence over even the shape and content of our “unchanging message”: “How have the very powers themselves conspired to leave us with a gospel and ethic that perpetuates their control?”¹³ In other words, what gets left out of our “unchanging message” so that the gospel no longer leads us to freedom from an unholy marriage between the cross and the sword and the dollar? Why has our Christian Grand Story so easily been used to support slavery, silence in the face of genocide, holy war against infidels, abusive relations of power between men and women, and between Caucasians and People of Color, and unjust economic relations? We must adequately grapple with how adaptable and useful Christians have made the Christian Grand Story to all kinds of injustice and to self-serving expressions of the Christian will to power. Otherwise, our plausibility, credibility, and even moral standing as advocates of a Grand Story that we believe to be true for everyone will be looked upon as oppressive, narrow, judgmental, and socially destructive. And not without good reason.

How does this self-serving will to power operate in our Grand Stories? Is a self-serving will to power inherent in every Grand Story, or is that self-serving will to power merely the way we

13. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, 9.

misuse Grand Stories? As a committed Christian, I believe our Grand Story to be ultimately liberating and not oppressive. But I am also convinced that the human tendency toward the self-centered will to power, pleasure, and fame have distorted our knowledge and language about the good news of God. Michel Foucault addresses the ways these distortions can operate within a society or community by insightfully exploring the links between knowledge and power:

In any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body, and those relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, and implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse. That discourse is that society's truth. I would say that we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need in order to function.¹⁴

A society produces the truth, or discourse, that it needs in order to function and reinforce its power relations. This reality helps illuminate how good church people in Bible-believing, Southern, predominately-white church, denominations could generate and then circulate "truths" about African American people as inferior and then stories from Sacred Writ like the story of the "curse of Ham" that legitimized enslaving "inferior people to civilize and reform them" in a destructive system of dehumanization and control for 150 years.¹⁵

A further implication is that when societies polarize around different versions of truth and knowledge, as is happening right now in American society, the production of knowledge and discourse in such a divided society will create nearly incommensurable mental and conversational worlds. Two or more versions of reality circulate using language and terms in two very contrasting ways, producing a culture war in which communication and understanding between the two worlds so created is nearly impossible. Often the driving force behind the creation of these alternate language worlds is a self-centered will to power. Christendom societies

14. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 93.

15. See Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 21–50; Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*.

have too often reflected these dynamics well. We have produced the “truth” that justified our maintenance and enforcement of our social and political power. This dynamic is one of the roots of both colonialism in the past and Christian nationalism up through today.

So first, postmodern critics have come to grips from an historical perspective with how pervasively Grand Stories have been used to achieve and legitimize dominance and injustice out of self-interest. But postmodern thinkers have taken their critique to an even more fundamental level. Postmodern thinkers have grappled with the nature of language itself. The conclusion? Self-serving bias does not just operate in the ways we use language, it operates in the ways we create language. Let us unpack how some thinkers have come to that conclusion.

The Will to Power in the Creation of Language

Jacques Derrida is certainly one of the most brilliant and influential advocates of the critique of the nature of language. Derrida shows how language itself is inherently unjust and self-serving. Then he proposes a method, called deconstruction, for overcoming the very exclusion and injustice that language itself fosters. As I have talked with evangelical Christians, I have found widespread misunderstanding and misconstrual of Derrida’s basic program against exclusion. Derrida, like other postmodern thinkers, is battling for awareness about the self-serving will to power, and the ways that self-serving will to power is integrated into the very nature of language creation and usage.

Derrida suggests that all language systems have been built around polar or binary opposites.¹⁶ God/devil, Christian/pagan, civilized/barbarian, good/evil, man/woman, Christian/Muslim, white/colored, rational/insane, rich/poor, proletariat/bourgeoisie, strong/weak and many other binary opposites lie at the heart of our most common Western Grand Stories and the languages used to express those stories. Those language terms have no meaning outside of the whole system of thinking and of worldview that lies

16. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 3–30.

behind those terms. And in each Grand Story, and in each corresponding system of language games, one term or group is preferred and the other is marginalized. The postmodern critique arises out of this experience of oppression and marginalization for the less valued term or group.

Some who analyze race issues have embraced these insights from Derrida. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw is one of those who has suggested that in the arena of race, similar dichotomies have come to dominate the discourse and the racial imagination of many Americans. She cites the following examples in which good values and characteristics have become associated with people of a white racial background and bad characteristics have become associated (in the discourse and the imagination) with Black people:¹⁷

Historical Oppositional Dualities

White Images	Black Images
Industrious	Lazy
Intelligent	Unintelligent
Moral	Immoral
Knowledgeable	Ignorant
Enabling Culture	Disabling culture
Law-abiding	Criminal
Responsible	Shiftless
Virtuous	Lascivious

Derrida wants to overcome the inherent injustice rooted in the nature of language itself. Derrida spares no one in his critique, whether Christian, Marxist, humanist, or postmodern.

Derrida's method is also worth considering. Derrida recognized that texts are full of tension. Language is often used in ways that reinforce the dominance of one term or group over other terms or groups. But Derrida also recognized that such simple readings of texts often ignore crucial tensions that actually undo some of the very dominance that the text is seemingly trying to promote.

17. Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 103–25.

So Derrida de-centers the central term in a text, with the goal of setting language free from its dominance/suppression dynamics. At the same time, deconstruction carried to its logical conclusion erases meaning inherent in texts—which is not something biblical Christians committed to the authority of Scripture can embrace.

So, the goal of postmodern critique is to overcome and subvert relations of dominance that have been destructive. These relationships of dominance are subverted in different ways by different thinkers. But always the goal is subverting relations of power and dominance. At the heart of the effort is the commitment to let the “Other” speak, influence, and be central. In the end, it is not the reversal of power, but a new way to pursue discourse. We pursue discourse through the dialogue between opposites. The Other is now a valued partner in dialogue and discourse. The Other is neither vilified nor exoticized. What can we learn here? We can learn from the postmodern questions, insights, and critique, but we as Christ followers will reject the postmodern solution. In the end, the postmodern deconstruction project leaves us with a world in fragments, bereft of meaning or purpose or ways to cooperate and collaborate and converse and make of the world a better human community. No new justice rooted in any reality beyond the community or self has emerged, but only a billion little atoms of individual and communal justice bouncing endlessly and fruitlessly against one another. All that is left is Nietzsche’s Dionysian ethic—the ethic of instinct and passion, the “is” with no “ought” to channel it. The one with the most power wins.

I want to make a final framing and balancing comment to avoid confusion: The will to power, pleasure, and fame are not in and of themselves ethically bad or evil. They are natural human instincts or desires. It is when they become self-centered drives that damage other people and other communities that they become distorted and dehumanizing. The most profound ethical commands Jesus gave were to love God with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Biblically, healthy self-love—the self-love that is the basis for measuring love of neighbor—includes our drive for agency (power), well-being (pleasure), and significance and recognition (fame). The problem, then, is disordered love of self at the center that distorts these

drives and makes them destructive in the lives and communities of others. The essence of sin is not “doing bad things” but, in the words of the Anglican confession of sin to God, “we have not loved you with our whole hearts and we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves.”¹⁸ The heart of sin is a lack of love. And as Augustine understood so well, idolatry is disordered love, often putting ourselves at the center.¹⁹ We either love God inordinately or, lacking love for God, we love ourselves inordinately.

In the rest of this article, I want to learn what I can from the postmodern critique of Grand Stories and respond to that critique in a way that makes me more deeply and effectively a Christ follower and communicator of the Christian Grand Story.

A Humble Attempt to Reconsider, Recover, and Rejuvenate the Christian Grand Story in Post-Christendom Culture

Here are some crucial questions that the postmodern critique of Grand Stories as expressions of the self-serving will to power presses upon us. How do we more deeply divorce the cross (truth) from the sword (political power) and the dollar (economic power) so that they are not married together in ways that express a self-centered will to power rather than an other-centered offer of forgiveness and freedom? How do we better discern and repent of the unintended injustice in the ways we understand, live, tell, and invite others into the Christian Grand Story? I have suggested the fundamental shift is from a focus on our own social power to a focus on the power of our vulnerability and weakness and suffering in community.

Jesus and Post-Christendom Culture

Jesus believed deeply in truth that was a person and in a true Grand Story. But Jesus radically critiqued the versions of that Grand Story that he encountered in his day and in his culture. I want to suggest that Jesus can be both the model and the message for our renewed and redemptive Christian Grand Story. Jesus had a lot to

18. *Book of Common Prayer*.

19. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* I.27.28.

say about Israel's self-serving bias. Israel had come to the point where her very language, institutions, worldview, symbols, and religion were all in cooperation to maintain the dominance and centrality of Israel, and especially male religious Israel, as God's people, and as the eventual winners in the game of history. Jesus confronted every aspect of this ethnocentric, religiously-clothed worldview of Jewish dominance. For religious Jewish men, all others, Gentile, women, the sick, the poor, the lame, the blind, and the sinner, were marginalized, excluded, or devalued. Jesus de-centered Israel but did not devalue Israel. Jesus claimed to fulfill Israel's history and Law and Temple, but also pronounced judgment on the ways idolatry and the will to protect the social power of religious Jewish men had distorted the message and model of Israel to the nations.

The challenge for the Church today is discerning whether or not (and in what degree) we have become like Israel in seeing ourselves at the center, in having a worldview in which we win at the game of history, in which some of us win far more than others of us, and in which all those who are not like us are excluded, dehumanized or devalued. The challenge for us is to pursue Jesus's prophetic ministry of de-centering the Church and the church's version of the Christian Grand Story, in order to enthrone God back in the center, where God actually always ultimately is. In other words, we human beings inevitably use Grand Stories to replace God with ourselves, including our cultural practices, our politics, our economics, our ethnic background and skin color, and our version of Christian faith at the center of our own world, with sometimes explicit and other times implicit claims that it ought to be the center of everyone else's world. Our version of the Christian Grand Story inevitably gets co-opted some by our self-centered will to power. This assertion restates the doctrine of sin in more postmodern terms, but nevertheless in often very accurate terms, long ago hinted at by Isaiah, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have all turned to our own way" (Isa 53:6). Our version of the Christian Grand Story inevitably becomes distorted, and needs continual correction, renewal, and reformation.

I want to suggest that Jesus becomes the de-centering center for our faith and for our continual pursuit of correcting, renewing,

and reforming our version of the Christian Grand Story. Jesus becomes first the critic of our message, model, and methods, and then the catalyst for a corrected, renewed, and reformed message, model, and methods. I am not suggesting that there is no ultimate version of the truth, of the Grand Story of history. But only God can tell the story straight. Since God is the pre-eminent and ultimate subject of the Story, and since God alone is free from the distortions of self-absorbed self-interest, only God can comprehend and communicate that Story without a distorting self-serving will to power. But we are not left therefore in a sea of inescapable relativism. Rather we are called to a continual process of expressing within our cultures the closest approximation of the Christian Grand Story as God has revealed it in Scripture and to the degree that we are able. But we always know that we can never express that Grand Story free from the distorting impact of self-serving bias and the will to power.

And so we must continually subject our message, character, and methods to Jesus. We must return again and again to the Gospels, and to Jesus, not only as our advocate, but also as our critic. Jesus will relate to us just as Jesus related to Israel, radically loving us and radically critiquing us. Again and again, we will discover in and through Jesus the ways we have enthroned ourselves and our own bias and will to power at the center. And so we will be led to repentance and reformation again and again, not only in our character and methods, but even in the way we formulate our message. It is safe to say that the rise of Christian nationalism in the US context is one more version of this “will to power” and “self at the center” of the white evangelical church in America.

Here is just one outstanding example from history. Martin Luther corrected the Catholic Church in some very profound, needed, and powerful ways. The Catholic Church, through its system of indulgences, had replaced God at the center. The church now could dispense forgiveness, a place in heaven, and also raise money and insure its power, all at the same time. Luther critiqued that whole self-serving system and its expression of the will to power, even if not in those terms. Jesus would have done no less. Here cross, sword, and dollar were all intertwined in an oppressive Grand Story that justified corruption and violence.

Luther battled that whole system by recovering the message of God's grace expressed through justification by faith alone through Christ alone. But this powerful and profound message of grace became a new instrument to position the church and the church's ideas at the center instead of God at the center. Grace became the key criterion of who was in and who was out, and in this way, grace became an instrument of exclusion and political warfare. In that sense, the way of the cross was divorced from the message of the cross. So the church could preach the cross, and exclude—often even violently—all those who did not agree. Some followers of Luther then became judgmental, self-righteous, violent, and exclusionary, all in the name of grace!

Jesus decenters an exclusive emphasis on grace that can become weaponized against others. Jesus can never be read in the Gospels as someone who made a fundamental dichotomy between grace and works. Certainly, he rejected the legalism of the Pharisees as a basis for who was in and who was out. But equally, he suggested that the way we treat the poor, and especially those poor who confess Jesus as Lord, will determine how God ultimately judges us. If we received the poor, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison, we will be with God forever. If we do not, the grace of God has not become effectual in our lives. Matthew 25 (and for that matter the Epistle of James) have never been favorite passages for the descendants of Luther, especially if those descendants have replaced God with their message of grace and, in often subtle ways, with themselves at the center. For Paul, grace always flowed into works. We love because we first have been loved. Grace is prior and preeminent. But grace without works is an illusion, a presumption. As we decenter from our ideas and center on Jesus, our message, character, and methods are renewed. Jesus will always de-center, correct, renew, and reform our version of Jesus and his message and our drive to put ourselves and our culture and our version and vision of church at the center.

A similar analysis applies to evangelical formulations of the message about Jesus, and the methods through which we communicate that message. We, as evangelicals, have emphasized a message of the death of Jesus to pay the price for sins. The goal of salvation is the forgiveness of our sins, so that we can be in relation

to God, starting now and going on forever. We will be in heaven. Jesus is the de-centering center for our message and methods as evangelicals. Jesus died and dealt with sin. But Jesus also proclaimed the kingdom or rule of God. The dichotomy between what we believe and how we live and are transformed is an insupportable dichotomy, at least in relation to the message and model and methods of Jesus. Salvation was not just about God's wonderful plan for my own individual life, but even more about God's purpose and plan to redeem and recreate the entire world and cosmos, and to reconcile people, nations and even the larger forces, heavenly and earthly, that keep our world enslaved. Versions that imply that we can "pray a prayer" and be "in" but not be changed are not so very new ways to put ourselves at the center. Cheap grace is no grace at all.

As we continually pursue Jesus as our de-centering center, we will incorporate the true insights of the postmodern (and multi-ethnic) critique of our Grand Stories. But we will not just live in the critique and the deconstruction of our version of Jesus and our ways of living like and talking about Jesus. We will, above all, continually experience the correction, renewal, and reformation of our message, character, and methods. Our primary experience will be of reconstruction and resurrection, not deconstruction. In other words, we invite Jesus and the whole story of Jesus to continually de-center and reform our conceptions of Jesus and our versions of the heart of his story. If we tell the story of Jesus as a story of the forgiveness of sins but not the changing of lives and nations, then our version needs to be corrected and reformed. If our version is mainly about personal piety and not about serving the poor and feeding the hungry, then our version needs to be corrected and reformed. We continually return to the Grand Story of Jesus, and let that story correct and reform our version. Might we need a similar decentering today in the ways we are centering the message on the kingdom of God without fully embracing the character of that kingdom or rule of God as God-initiated and cruciform or cross shaped in character? Without such biblical balance and fullness, a kingdom of God theology can transmute into a triumphalistic human-centered social change campaign.

At the heart of this continual process of renewal through decentering ourselves and our formulations is the embrace of the eschatological lens of the New Testament. Jesus enfleshed and fulfilled the rule of God within history in a way that was unique. The incarnation of God in human flesh, Jesus's proclamation and demonstration through healing and exorcism of the fulfilled rule of God as at hand, the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, then the gift of the Spirit, and the eventual return of Jesus must all be understood as "end times" events that can only be understood as God's entering human history in the middle with God's inauguration of what God had promised to do at the end. In Jesus, God judges sin, Satan, and death, God inaugurates the new risen humanity, women and men and the young and the old and people of every ethnic group and nation all dream dreams and see visions and speak truth, God's Spirit collects a harvest from the ends of the earth among all the nations, humanity is judged, and God establishes God's rule finally and fully in the return of Jesus.²⁰ All these were events at the end of the age. We have a foretaste of God's rule, a down payment in the person of the Holy Spirit, and an experience of the Body of Christ as agent and instrument, pointer, and foretaste to that ultimate reality of God's rule fulfilled on earth as in heaven.²¹ The foretaste and pointer toward God's rule is nevertheless always provisional, incomplete, flawed, and limited. All human expression of it, whether among families, churches, justice movements, nations, or renewal movements, are radically compromised by the presence of sin, of this self-centered will to power, pleasure, and fame. Our hope in the future ultimate fulfillment of God's rule relativizes and limits our claims for any present expression. When we can fully embrace a humility about our identity and identifications and ideas, never making them absolute, ultimate, or superior, we will ever be in that posture of receiving critique and renewal from the Scriptures and from our

20. For an initial discussion of these events seen through an eschatological lens, see Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 116–30. For a much more full-orbed discussion, see Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 280–338.

21. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 128–30.

friends and foes in ways that decenter us from ourselves and lead us back in the direction toward Jesus and the cruciform kingdom of God.

What, then, does evangelism look like practically in the context of relationships with seekers and skeptics today, in light of the postmodern critique about power that echoes the biblical critique of our tendency to always put ourselves at the center? To that question, I want now to turn. This last part of the article will be suggestive, not comprehensive.

Practical Applications for a Post-Christendom Evangelism

Evangelism as Conversations rather than Sales

I want to draw out the implications in relation to a paradigm for evangelism that I have been developing and using on many campuses and also with many churches. The paradigm might be called “evangelism as conversations on a journey.” It is an explicit shift from the paradigm that dominated much of twentieth-century evangelism, which might be called, “evangelism as closing the deal on a sales call.” I have become convinced that this basic paradigm of evangelism as the practice of individuals seeking to make the close on a sales call permeates the evangelical consciousness, at least up until recently, when it comes to thinking about and pursuing evangelism. It is a paradigm that emphasizes our strength and social power and the superiority of our product and our answers rather than our weakness and our vulnerability and our suffering. There are those who embrace that sales metaphor and constantly update their methods of “winning friends and influencing people.” And there are those who reject evangelism altogether in their reaction to this reduced form of sharing the good news. Either way, it centers ourselves as gospel proclaimers and sales people. It teaches us to “win” with the gospel through wise and persuasive methods, minimizing our weakness, vulnerability, and lack of social power. I believe this sales-oriented paradigm emerges out of capitalistic and postmodern performative culture, in which persuasion has become merely sales, focusing on the recipient as the consumer and performativity as the key measure.

Whoever recruits the most contributors and attenders gets the most influence and status.

This paradigm then can be an approach that reinforces the post-modern conclusion that since all truth is merely the expression of the self-serving will to power, then have at it! Express that will to power by “selling” your product to as many people on earth as you can. The one who dies with the biggest consumer base wins! Of course, that conclusion would lead to an unjust caricature of many leaders who developed simple and effective ways to share good news to be used by everyday people in all their spheres of relationship.

Does the paradigm shift I am proposing mean we only talk about journey and not about decision or closure? No. We do have a direction on the journey (toward Jesus), and a destination (to become like Jesus in full union with God). And on the journey, there are crucial turning points (including repentance and faith) and mile markers (including baptism and public identification with Christ and his community). Nevertheless, moving out of the sales paradigm helps us transcend the dangers of “bounded set” thinking, in which we know who is in and who is out, and we reduce salvation to a consumer or at least instrumental transaction, taking out all its mystery as an encounter between people and the Holy Spirit. And it moves us out of the tendency to frame everything in terms of winning.

Does the paradigm shift I am proposing devalue persuasive speech? No. But persuasive speech now fits into a different framework, less susceptible to perceiving persuasive speech as merely advertising and marketing and powering up on people, however subtly. I also want to recognize that many people who have pursued evangelism in these last few decades would claim the biblical book of Acts as their source, and not a Western consumer-oriented paradigm of sales. I do not want merely to draw a caricature of evangelism as sales that is not true to the best examples of twentieth-century evangelistic methods and message. I am just recognizing that contemporary Christians, seekers, and skeptics all need a fresh paradigm in order to re-engage in witness. I also realize that the corrective I am proposing will need its own corrective at some point in the future.

Evangelism as Incorporation into a Conversational Community

Interestingly, on a partially different basis, I find myself pursuing a similar model that Brad Kallenberg pursued in his book, *Live to Tell*.²² He compares evangelism to teaching a foreign language, because he takes seriously Wittgenstein's insights into the nature of language. We only understand words, and phrases like "the word God," by seeing how that phrase is used in the context of communities and their praxis.²³ Words and propositions only make sense in light of the larger Story and worldview, and what those words do in their context. Evangelism is not just about "passing on words," but rather about incorporating people into a whole language system, community, and worldview. So, I, too, am pursuing a "conversational communities" paradigm for evangelism. What are the characteristics and practices of a conversational-communities approach? Elsewhere I have unpacked some of the key axes of this transformation of evangelism in post-Christendom contexts, including:

- Identifying comes before Influencing²⁴
- Experiencing comes before Explaining²⁵
- Belonging comes before Believing²⁶
- Contributing (as an essential part of belonging) comes before Committing²⁷
- Communicating in Image and Sign come before communicating in Words²⁸
- Individual and communal narratives of Identity come before metanarratives of Identity
- Vulnerability comes before Verbal Proclamation²⁹

22. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*.

23. Wittgenstein, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, 97–98.

24. Richardson, *You Found Me*, 97–98.

25. Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box*, 45–47.

26. Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box*, 47–50.

27. Seversen, *Not Done Yet*, 92–105.

28. Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box*, 50–51.

29. Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 22–24.

Here I want to focus on just a few of these implications for an evangelism from the position of vulnerability and social powerlessness within conversational communities.

Practices of Conversational Communities

First, in starting spiritual conversations, do not assume social power and leverage. Instead, assume the need to restore trust. Assume mistrust on the part of seekers and skeptics, identify and validate the mistrust where you can, and then seek healing for the hurt that often lies behind mistrust. I am discovering how easy it is these days to engage people in spiritual conversation. People are very spiritually interested, but they are also very leery of anyone who thinks they know the truth and think that everybody else is wrong. A term often used in our cultural conversations for narrow, doctrinaire, judgmental people is the term fundamentalist. In recent conversations, I have noticed that the term “fundamentalist” has a very specific meaning in people’s minds today. To many, fundamentalists have two discerning characteristics: Fundamentalists are people who think they are right and everybody else is wrong; and fundamentalists go around imposing their views assertively, aggressively, and even disrespectfully on others. Fundamentalists can be Christian, Islamic, or atheistic. Frankly, I am just as turned off by the stereotype of fundamentalists as seekers and skeptics are. I am not interested in imposing my views on others, nor having others impose their views on me. And I do not think I am right and everybody else is wrong. I do not have such a dichotomizing nor arrogant mental worldview. I personally do not want to be buttonholed, forced to hear a message I am not interested in, treated like somebody’s project, told my opinions and convictions are all wrong, and challenged to join an organization I have never found to be very relevant to my life. Why do I think that I need to do those things *to* seekers and skeptics in the name of Christ? In evangelism, we are to love others as ourselves, just as in every area of life. And the aggressive expression of social power and intellectual arrogance is exactly what people resist and are repelled by.

I therefore can fully identify with and champion the mistrust many people feel toward “absolutists.” Of course, I may also want to ask if the person has ever really encountered any of these

narrow, judgmental, aggressive, disrespectful people personally. I have found that many people in our culture carry a caricature of fundamentalists that may not be rooted in their own experience but rather in the stereotypes common in the media and in the ways secular critics have told the story of our religious past. My point, though, remains the same. I am finding that starting spiritual conversations is like falling off a log these days. I just need to express some genuine sense of interest in spiritual things, self-deprecation about my own ability to know it all, and also a genuine sense of mistrust or lack of comfortability with “organized religion” and people that think they have all the answers.

Recently, I have had very engaging conversations with five different people who are alienated from the church and from traditional expressions of Christian faith. In each case, I shared some event or experience or project I was working on about how to communicate faith to people who are spiritually interested but turned off by organized religion and by people who think they have all the answers. How do I authentically also keep my commitment to the Christian Grand Story and to Truth? I express positively my commitment to Jesus and the uniqueness of Jesus. For instance, I share that Jesus uniquely in history was God, not giving us a ladder to climb to get to God and become spiritual. Instead, in Jesus, God climbed down the ladder to get us. Then I ask if they need a ladder to climb, or if they need God to climb down the ladder to them. When people ask if I have the immoral and irresponsible belief that only Christians go to heaven and everybody else goes to hell, I tell them, “No!” I do not know what God will do with people who never heard of Jesus. And I do not know what God will do with people who saw only scandal and hypocrisy in the “Christian” people and churches they encountered. I do have a sense that God may hold us who represented Jesus more accountable than those who were pushed away from Jesus.

But I do believe that Jesus is the mystery at the heart of the universe that explains all the other mysteries. And I do believe that Jesus is uniquely the way and the gate and the path to God. I do believe in a God who is God for all people, and in Jesus as the unique and full revealing of that God in human history. And I do believe that people who choose to live alone without God and

without hope in this life are choosing to live without God in the next. Through it all, I have come to the conviction that what people are concerned about is not that we affirm some general commitment to relativism, but that we will not judge, exclude, devalue, and even abuse people who think differently than we do. I can remain fully committed to the uniqueness of Jesus as the only way to the Father, but simultaneously break the stereotypes people have about many who hold such convictions. So my goal is to help us recover boldness and clarity in expressing our faith. Many Christians never get past the mistrust they run into when they start to share their faith with others. I am suggesting we can see the mistrust as an opportunity for witness and ministry rather than an insurmountable barrier to witness and ministry. If we combine our confidence in God and God's presence with our sense of our own vulnerability and limits.

Second, as relationships progress, be aware of the power dynamics in those relationships, and seek to change those dynamics when you can. Let me give an example. My family took a vacation to Colorado last summer. We had asked a family to look after our two cats, a dog, and a hamster. They had cheerfully agreed. On the day before we left, we found out that our cat had diabetes and needed shots twice a day. We went to the family that had agreed to watch our animals, told them the situation, and gave them the option to get out of their commitment. They wanted to look after the animals anyway. We returned eight days later deeply grateful and in their debt. Shooting up a cat twice a day is just not the way to have a good time, no matter how you approach it! We were very thankful to this couple. We took them out to a wonderful restaurant for an evening of dining and conversation to express our gratitude. I will never forget the conversation. The man was a police commander, and he and I spent an hour in intense and profound spiritual conversation. He saw his work as a calling, and he believed in God, but could not connect to the organized church. As we shared our stories, we were both challenged and deepened in our spiritual journey with and toward Jesus. That conversation was one of the more powerful and profound conversations I have had in the last few years. He later committed his life to Christ. Later, I reflected on why this man had so opened up to sharing his

journey and convictions, and to influencing me and being influenced by me. I realized that the power dynamics in our relationship had positioned me as the vulnerable and grateful recipient of his caring and competency, all because of a diabetic cat.

That experience stimulated me to think about my paradigm of evangelism. I have long believed that I need to care for others and earn the right to be heard. I realized that night that it is sometimes even more powerful, especially in a post-Christendom culture that is very mistrustful about agendas and power and persuasion, to be on the receiving end and in the position of powerlessness. It is sometimes much more trust building for me to ask for help than to always be trying to give help. Asking for advice and insight can be more important than always trying to get in the position of giving advice and insight. It is sometimes far more meaningful for me to share my struggles and weaknesses and failures as a Christ follower with a seeker and skeptic than to share my victories. Do I hear Paul reporting God's still small voice to him in a moment of weakness and vulnerability? "My strength is made perfect in your weakness." The much-quoted step in evangelism of practicing "care evangelism" might be better re-stated: We practice "mutual care evangelism," asking for help as often as we seek to give help. We embrace our vulnerabilities, suffering, and struggles, and find that it is in these postures through which Jesus's power and light shines forth most. Again, the paradigm of evangelism as conversations on a journey is helpful. In the paradigm of evangelism as sales, I have a product that the other person needs, and I am seeking to close the deal on their "purchase" of the product. I come from the power position in the sales model. In the conversations on a journey model, we are more on an equal footing. Which leads us to the next implication.

Third, as you share about Jesus and tell the Story of Jesus, let Jesus continually correct and challenge your seeking and skeptical conversation partner, but let Jesus also continually challenge and correct you. The reality is that we are all seekers somewhere along the journey. There are crucial moments and turning points in that journey, and we will need to emphasize those turning points. But we also accept that the ground on which we all stand is much more level than we had at first thought. We are then free to challenge

people boldly with the story and claims of Jesus on their lives, and yet simultaneously be challenged deeply by Jesus through them. It was the found, the righteous, the healthy, and the rich that Jesus constantly seemed to be confronting and challenging when he walked the earth, and presumably still confronts through the Holy Spirit. Often in spiritual conversations with seekers and skeptics, we might find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of learning more and being challenged more than our seeking or skeptical friend. I recently learned this again very deeply through a friendship with a man who has given his life to Christ very recently, but has taught and is teaching me far more than I ever taught him, and is demonstrating a life of prayer and sacrificing for others, both before his conversion and after, that inspires and is changing me. I have also found in my conversations with others that when I talk about the ways in which Jesus upset my views about Jesus, took me down a peg or three, helped me realize my religious wrong turns, people are very engaged. Whenever I share about how Jesus rocked my neat little religious world, people love it and lean in.

I have also been approaching differently the task of training Christians to learn to share their story with seeking and skeptical friends. As I teach people to share their story with seekers and skeptics, I have been teaching them to focus on how Jesus has rocked their world, and how Jesus came into the center of their lives, sometimes replacing even their conceptions of Jesus. I encourage them to focus on their times of struggle, pain, and weakness, and the way God encountered them *in* their weakness, not so as to eradicate weakness but so as to show up in the midst of their weakness and show God's reality. I encourage people to learn to share all such "God showing up in my weakness and pain" stories, not just the first one that led to initial commitment to Christ.

Fourth, cultivate conversational *communities of grace and peace* to which people can belong before they have to believe, contribute before they have committed, and in which people can be invited into whole life transformation and not just belief modification and assent. In other words, become aware of the community dynamics that exclude others and that keep the power and the priorities focused almost solely on believers. Above all, people today will explore faith issues and discover spiritual truth in the

context of winsome communities to which people can belong before they have to believe. And belonging includes contributing gifts and time and talent. Most churches are not set up well to be conversational communities where people can enter in, feel welcomed, explore their spiritual commitments and interests, be able to contribute in some way, and try on Christian identity.³⁰

Pre-Christendom environments and the corresponding missionary efforts can give us clues about the way forward in post-Christendom contexts, as churches and Christians in both pre- and post-Christendom contexts communicate faith in a situation of relative powerlessness and vulnerability. The missionary efforts outside the Roman empire, starting in Ireland, and then moving through Iona in Scotland to Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Germany are very instructive. Often in those contexts, missionary brothers and sisters founded abbeys and created conversational communities to which people could belong and contribute before they believed and committed. George Hunter documented some of these kinds of missionary ventures in his “Celtic Way of Evangelism.”³¹

When we lack power, and when the people we are trying to engage and with whom we want to communicate do not have the background and experience to even understand what the words we use about God’s love and Christ’s life and sacrifice and rising mean, we must “proclaim” through providing community that teaches people what the words mean and help people act their way into faith. The early Christian missionary communities did just that, providing a context for people to taste and see, and then come to understand Christian faith and identity and what it looked like and what it meant. They gardened and ate with the brothers or sisters, and then experienced the prayer of the community. There were boundaries too. Eucharist and baptism and leadership were for the committed. But the learners, the catechumens, could help and could see and could try on Christian identity as they participated. The way of the sword was not available to these Christian communities. Only the way of the cross, of suffering service, of

30. Seversen, *Not Done Yet*, 25.

31. Hunter, “The Celtic Way for Evangelizing Today,” 15–30.

openness and love toward the other. The social powerlessness allows for a spiritual power encounter in which the moral goodness, beauty, depth, and efficacy shine through.³² These winsome conversational communities have only become that much more urgent for reaching and developing emerging adults in post-Christendom contexts. Emerging adults aged 18–29 are experiencing a period of identity construction and choice, and need to be able to try on Christian identity before committing to Christian identity.³³

Fifth and finally, embrace and practice hospitality toward the Other—the different, the people not like you.³⁴ Love those neighbors as yourself. Our greatest need today is not better methods and more creative messaging, though these are still needed. Rather, the greatest need is living a quality of life that is compelling. What we need is love, an unselfconscious Other-focused saintliness of life. Those qualities will never go out of style or fail to speak to every generation, and especially our post-Christendom generations. How does our community enfold the Other, the seeker, the skeptic, the ones who come to our community who are not the norm in our community? And how do we embrace the Other while maintaining our identity and values? The Other can include economic, racial, ethnic, religious, and social Others. How does our community embody its case for faith and case for Jesus? How do we deal with power, with the underdog, with issues of justice, exclusion, and embrace? How do we let the Other influence us even in our identity? How do we make space for the Other, including the adversary and critic, with the goal of embrace? People today are attuned deeply to these questions.

As we become conversational communities that embrace our Others, we will once again discover that witness is not a lost and dying dimension of the Church. It is our lifeblood, and God is at work in our day in mighty and transforming ways. It is not a time to become apologetic in our living, enacting, and telling the Christian Grand Story of Jesus. We may look back and realize the

32. Bryan Stone says something similar in Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 12.

33. Seversen, *Not Done Yet*.

34. Pohl, *Making Room*.

opportunity has never been greater or better for living like Jesus and speaking about Jesus. In every culture, post-Christendom culture included, living like Jesus and speaking about Jesus have always been ultimately effectual in history. As Jesus has it, “I will build my church, and not all the gates of hell will prevail against it” (Matt 16:18; paraphrased). Not even death will halt the reach and impact of the gospel through a loving and humble and suffering church.

Practically, then, when I teach and train churches in witness, I am asking people to consider the conversational communities that make up their church or Christian group. Then I encourage them to consider where seekers and skeptics can find relevant and challenging conversation for their stage in the journey. Where can seekers and skeptics connect before they have to commit, belong before they have to believe, and converse about the questions, concerns, values, and beliefs that will guide their lives? What is their entry point into Christian community and Christian conversation?

I am finding that churches and Christian groups begin to get very creative and energized as they pursue the goal of developing conversational community for each stage of the spiritual journey. In many ways, Alpha, seeker small groups, and the recovery movement are all models of conversational communities designed for earlier stages of the spiritual journey. There are many more possible structures for good and challenging conversations, including movie discussions, book clubs, special seeker and skeptic-oriented sermon series, small groups for both believers and the skeptical to talk about Jesus, forums on current issues, involvement in justice and service projects, and so many more. I think, also, the ways we deal with the survivors of sexual abuse and racial bias affect profoundly our witness today. Too often we have protected our institutions and reputations instead of being vulnerable about our mistakes, empathetic to the survivors of sexual abuse and racial discrimination, and then willing to lay down power and prerogatives and put the process of redress, healing, and justice in the hands of those who have been hurt and crushed. When we embrace our own weakness, vulnerability, and blind spots, and yield power to those who have suffered, we will see witness shine forth.

God's power and presence will fill jars of clay and shine out all the brighter for our honesty and authenticity. Recently, I watched a church leadership team live out these practices as a conversational community very beautifully, bringing great healing to survivors of a particularly horrendous situation of abuse at the hands of a leader in the church. The witness of this church shone in the midst of the darkness.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the postmodern critique of Grand Stories, owning up to ways that critique has been valid—and sometimes incisively so—about Christendom tendencies to communicate and propagate Christian faith for the purpose of pursuing a self-centered will to power. Signs of church leaders pursuing and expressing a self-centered will toward power while naively claiming the moral and intellectual high ground of absolute truth are especially prominent and problematic in times of social change when the church is losing social power—times like now. Second, I turned to a project of reclaiming the gold of the Christian grand narrative without the dross of a self-centered will to power at its heart. I explored the principle of letting Jesus decenter our politics, practices, and even theological constructs, pointing out ways that the eschatological lens of New Testament fulfillment can give us humility about our limited expressions of truth and ethics within history and within cultures. Finally, I suggested specific applications for how we might proceed in formulating and communicating the Christian metanarrative in a post-Christendom world in which God's power and our weakness, vulnerability, and suffering become intertwined and essential. In particular, I looked at the characteristics of conversational communities of faith that have learned to discern their own self-centered tendencies to pursue the will to power and then, alternatively, I enjoined an embrace of vulnerability, weakness, and suffering combined with a dependence and focus on the presence of Christ as the way forward.

May God give us wisdom as we hear the postmodern, post-Christendom, and multi-ethnic critique of the ways in which we understand and communicate our Grand Story. And may God

deepen and strengthen our identity as Christ followers who are on the way to the cross carrying the marks of vulnerability together with the marks of spiritual authority in communicating the Christian Grand Story of Jesus in our post-Christendom culture.

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