

“Who Made, Who Marr’d, and Who has Ransomed Man:  
Worldview and the Work of William Cowper”

**Introduction**

*“My share of duties, decently fulfilled.”  
William Cowper, The Task, Book VI, Line 1001*

In a poem titled “Tirocinium: Or, A Review of Schools,”<sup>1</sup> William Cowper (1731-1800) wrote out a description of the proper order for the teaching of children that includes these memorable words:

**(1)** Lipping our syllables, we scramble next  
Through moral narrative, or sacred text;  
And learn with wonder how this world began,  
Who made, who marr’d, and who has ransomed man.

— Tirocinium, Or A Reivew of Schools, Lines 125-28

In referring poetically to the when and why of adolescent learning about the creation of world and humankind, the fall of the same into sin, and to Christian redemption, Cowper encapsulates the core content of a biblical worldview, highlighting “Points,” he says in the next line, “which unless the scripture made them plain/The wisest heads might agitate in vain.”

Throughout the body of his work, William Cowper — a leading versifier of the 18<sup>th</sup> century evangelical revival and perhaps the most widely read English poet from the late 1700s to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century — shows consistent interest in the big questions and is resolute in his conviction that human reason apart from divine inspiration is simply incapable of answering them. As he writes in the second book of his best known blank verse poem *The Task*,

**(2)** Whence is man?  
Why form’d at all? and wherefore as he is?  
Where must he find his Maker? with what rites  
Adore him? Will he hear, accept, and bless?  
Or does he sit regardless of his works?  
Has man within him an immortal seed?

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<sup>1</sup> Tirocinium, according to *Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary*, means “the state of a recruit, rawness, inexperience.”

Or does the tomb take all? If he survive  
His ashes, where? and in what weal or woe?  
Knots worthy of solution, which alone  
A Deity could solve

— “The Task,” Book II, The Time-Piece, Lines 512-21

For Cowper, of course, not just any old deity could untie these knots, solve these problems, or answer these questions. Only the Trinitarian God of the Bible could adequately handle these deepest of all human dilemmas. After noting the inability of the learned to respond successfully to them — “Their answers, vague/And all at random, fabulous and dark” (Lines 522-23) — he makes a bold assertion about the epistemic sufficiency of the Scriptures alone:

**(3)** ‘Tis Revelation satisfies all doubts,  
Explains all mysteries, except her own,  
And so illuminates the path of life  
That fools discover it, and stray no more

— “The Task,” Book II, The Time-Piece, Lines 527-30.

William Cowper, despite his rather odd and troubled life, wrote some of the most magnificent Christian poetry of his transitional Wesleyan and Enlightenment age. Though we have overlooked him in recent years, his versification contains great theological and spiritual treasures, many things worthy, both old and new. In reading him, as I have for the past year or so, I have stumbled upon a thinker and writer in whom I have found great spoil. His thoughts and words rarely fail to illuminate and inspire me. Typically I could hardly wait to get to the next sentence or stanza to grasp the gold, silver and other precious textual metals that awaited me there.

One of the reasons why I have enjoyed Cowper and for my high expectations has to do with the larger context within which he sets his verse. He offers his poetic insights, not only to instruct through pleasure in a neo-classical vein, that is, both to delight and to teach, but offers them in the framework of a Christianity conceived as a comprehensive philosophy of life. The central notions of creation, fall, and redemption at the heart of a biblical vision constitute the circumference of much of his poetry, and much of his poetry is illustrative of these pillar points of the biblical story. As a champion of a reformed Methodist

faith (a la John Newton and George Whitfield) and its accompanying Christian humanism, therefore, I contend that William Cowper is the forgotten poet laureate of a biblical worldview. Though in his personal life Cowper was in many ways a “broken vessel,”<sup>2</sup> or as he called himself, “a stricken deer,” (“The Task,” Book III, The Garden, Line 108), his contributions are multiple and rich — literarily and artistically, and theologically and spiritually. Neither the Church nor the academy, especially the Christian academy, can afford to lose him. In this presentation, therefore, I hope to make a case for a recovery of Cowper by showcasing an ample portion of his work.

Behind this attempt at salvaging a lost poet, however, is a larger concern. That larger concern is about the kind of Christian worldview that animated much of Cowper’s work so powerfully. Along with other observers, it appears to me that this worldview has been lost in many ways on Christian consciousness and in the life of the Church. We don’t know our own biblical story very well, and if we hear it at all, we hear it in the form of fragmented plotlessness, in a religiously compartmentalized context with a primary concern for what is practical rather than what is true. In short, I submit that the Church has lost her worldview, especially in its irreducible narrative components. Or if this storied biblical vision of life has not been lost entirely, at least it has been lost partially and is sadly amputated. Consequently, the Church’s diminished body of faith is much less powerful and certainly less beautiful.

Furthermore, to the extent that God has called the Church to be the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3: 15), her recent shortcomings in perceiving and proclaiming her narrative-based conceptual scheme in its magnificent fullness — theologically, metaphysically, epistemically, ethically and aesthetically — has had significant implications in determining the worldview and narrative fortunes of both the world and the academy as well. In other words, our cultures and our colleges have vested interests in the Church’s epistemic and pedagogical stewardship of the biblical story and its intrinsic outlook on life. Given the

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<sup>2</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 457

Church's modern and hypermodern failure in this regard, it is not surprising that our society and its schools have followed suit in this significant deficit. Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson, for example, in a classic article in *First Things* has pointed out how the world lost its story because of the overriding forces of modernity. And religious historians George Marsden and James Tunstead Burtchaell have also documented this same loss of a Christian account of things in our leading research and church-related educational institutions.<sup>3</sup> The results of this abdication in the church, the world, and the academy have been deleterious, to put it rather mildly.

It appears to me, therefore, that a recovery of biblical Christianity as a comprehensive, holistic worldview and way of life, grounded in the canonical narratives of creation, fall, and redemption, ought to be one of our top priorities today. "For too long," writes Robert Wilken in an article on "The Church's Way of Speaking," "Christianity has relinquished its role as teacher to society. Instead of inspiring the culture, it capitulates to the ethos of the world. The Church must rediscover herself, learn to savor her speech, delight in telling her stories, and confidently pass on what she has received."<sup>4</sup>

Working the angles of the Church's pivotal stories and their vast implications is what I shall attempt to do in the remainder of this presentation. And I will do this with help from the work of William Cowper for whom God and his stories were the key to favor and understanding the world aright:

Yet seek him, in his favour life is found,  
All bliss beside — a shadow or a sound:  
Then heav'n, eclips'd so long, and this dull earth,  
Shall seem to start into second birth....

— "Retirement," Lines 353-56.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* (October 1993). Reprinted in *The New Religious Humanists: A Reader*, ed. and intro. Gregory Wolfe (New York: The Free Press, 1997), pp. 135-49. George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief* (New York: Oxford, 1994). James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, "The Church's Way of Speaking," *First Things* 155 (Aug-Sept, 2005), pp. 27-31. Also available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0508/articles/wilken.html>. Accessed March 18, 2006.

## The Notion of a Worldview

Before I go any further, however, I would like to take a moment to attempt to rehabilitate the old, worn out notion of “worldview.” At least for some, and perhaps for some of you, it is, indeed, an old and worn out notion, and its usage is thought to be problematic for several theoretical and practical reasons. Nonetheless, in reflecting somewhat seriously on this term, I have sought to baptize it in the waters of Scripture to see what I might come up by way of a fresh definition or description. In this attempt, I emphasize the biblical teaching about the centrality of the “heart” in human life as a key to understanding the idea of “worldview.” The heart, said St. Augustine almost two millennia ago, is “where I am what I am.” More recently but similarly, theologian Gordon Spykman has stated, “the *imago Dei* embraces our entire selfhood in all its variegated functions centered and unified in the heart.” Likewise, Karl Barth has also affirmed that “the heart is not merely *a* but *the* reality of man, both wholly of soul and wholly of body.”<sup>5</sup>

These theological claims about the heart” as the core of the human person are strongly supported in Scripture. Both the Old and New Testaments teach in a thousand or so uses (855 OT; 150 NT) that the “heart” is the central seat and source of the intellect, affections, will, and spirituality. It is the inner place and space where we think, feel, choose and worship. Thus Proverbs 4: 23 and 27: 19 state respectively that “from the heart flow the springs of life,” and that “the heart of man reflects man.”

Jesus adds to this perspective, teaching in Matthew 6: 21 that what a person values most as his or her treasure in life — a presumed *summum bonum* — resides in the heart, “for where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.” In Luke 6: 43-45, He also affirms that from the heart flow all our deeds and words, for “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil.” Likewise, the apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians that “the eyes of

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 227; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Harold Knight, J. K. S. Reid, R. H. Fuller (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), III/2, p. 436.

their hearts,” or their deepest way of perceiving things would be enlightened so that they might understand the magnitude of their callings in Christ (Eph. 1: 18). Thus, in the Scriptures in general, for Jesus and Paul in particular, the heart is the cornerstone of the human person, “the radiating center that suffuses all of man.”<sup>6</sup>

On this basis I propose that the heart and its content creates and constitutes what we commonly refer to as a “worldview.” Biblically speaking, I believe, life proceeds “kardiopically,” out of a vision of the embodied heart. The heart of the matter of worldview is that worldview is a matter of the heart with its embedded ideas about God, the universe, our world, and ourselves. It consists of the heart’s animating affections, its life-determining choices, and its essential faith. For according to its specific dispositions, the heart apprehends the world and dictates a course of life within it, whether true or false, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. In its biblical nature as a “kardiopic,” therefore, worldview is an existential concept, an intellectual, affective, practical and religious notion, one essential to human identity as the image and likeness of God.

Thankfully, the disingenuous visions of life that take root in our oft-wayward hearts are subject to transformation by the grace of God. The vehicles of grace, when coupled with the work of the Holy Spirit, are the stories that comprise God’s word, make Him and His creation known, and disclose His ways of truth, goodness and beauty to his people and the whole world. It is the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption, the sublime stories of “who made, who marr’d and who has ransomed man” that are at the heart of a biblical worldview ... and William Cowper’s poetry.

### **Creation**

*“He who does not know what the world is does not know where he is.  
And he who does not know for what purpose the world exists,  
does not know who he is, nor what the world is.”  
Marcus Aurelius, Meditations*

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World*, quoted in Kristen Michaelis, “Woman and the Salvation of the World: Reflections on the Thought of Paul Evdokimov,” unpublished paper, April 2005.

A biblical worldview, and indeed, the Church's all-embracing story, begins where the Bible itself begins — in the beginning with God and creation in Genesis 1-2. The Apostles' Creed, one the most noted summaries of Christian belief ever articulated, follows this starting point with its famous, opening assertion: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth!" St. Augustine's Christian philosophy of history expressed in his greatest work *The City of God* grounds the whole human drama that redounds to the glory of God in the very good world He originally made. Likewise, John Calvin opens *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a discussion in part one of "The Knowledge of God the Creator" before presenting his understanding of "The Knowledge of God the Redeemer" in part two. More recently, Francis Schaeffer has plainly written, "Christianity as a system does not begin with Christ as Savior, but with the infinite-personal God who created the world in the beginning and who made man significant in the flow of history."<sup>7</sup>

I emphasize creation as the starting point because where and how you start determines where and how you proceed, and ultimately, where and how you finish. First things influence middle and last things. The biblical paradigm ranges from the beginning to the middle to the end, from creation to the cross to the consummation.

Creation, as that which is deeply impacted by both sin and salvation, is the foundation of a biblical worldview and the church's story. To put it in theological language, protology, soteriology, and eschatology are all of a single piece.

To get to specifics, we must understand how Genesis 1-2 reveals to us our location, identity and purposes as human beings. Why something is here rather than nothing at all, and why that which exists is the way that it is and not different are the two most profound philosophical questions of all. Happily, they are answered by these two opening chapters of the Bible. Indeed, Genesis 1-2 make it clear that God created the universe and specifically prepared the earth to be a delightful habitation for us as human beings where we could live and

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<sup>7</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972), p. 97.

flourish. The creation account opens with the majestic declaration in Genesis 1:1 that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” In verse 2, our attention is rifled immediately to our planet. At this early stage, our future home was formless, empty, and dark. Despite this initial chaos, God’s Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters in anticipation of shaping it into an orderly cosmos.

And that is exactly what happens in the six days of creation detailed in verses 3-31. On the first three days (vv. 3-13), God formed that which was formless by creating light, the skies, the seas, the dry land, vegetation, plants and fruit trees, declaring each successive thing He made to be good. Then on the second three days of creation (vv. 14-25), he filled that which was now formed, but empty by making the sun, moon and stars, fish and birds, cattle, creeping things, and the beasts of the earth.

At the summit of His creative work, God made us — human beings, both male and female, as His image and likeness. He blessed and commissioned us to be fruitful and multiply so that we might fill and rule the earth, to cultivate and keep it. Such are God’s permanent spiritual, social and cultural purposes for our lives, spelled out clearly in the “creation decree” and “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1: 26-28.

Thus, God the Creator first made the realms of reality and then populated them with their respective rulers. He also provided abundant food for us and the animals in the form of a vegetarian diet of green plants and fruit-bearing trees (vv. 29-30). At the conclusion of this sixth day, God observed the totality of His creation and declared it to be wholly and unambiguously good. Each part of his handiwork was “good” independently. But as a collection of parts, it was truly excellent and utterly beautiful in its sheer being.

This first *chronological* account of creation is wrapped up in Genesis 2: 1-3 with a word about the holiness of the seventh day. By then, God had completed his creative work and rested, not because he was tired, but because he was finished. Consequently, God blessed and sanctified the seventh day as a day of rest because on it he ceased from his labors.

The rest of Genesis 2, as a *topical* account of creation, focuses specifically on the origin of the man and his horticultural work, the Garden of Eden and its topography and rivers, the creation of animals and the woman, and the establishment of the institution of marriage.

Despite the abundance of the man's surroundings, the only thing that was not good was his loneliness (v. 18). To meet the need for companionship, after creating the animals and disclosing their social insufficiency, God made a woman from the side of the man. Like the father of a bride, he presented her to him, prompting perhaps the first palindromic greeting, "Madam, I'm Adam!"

This initial male/female encounter certainly inspired the man to speak lyrically like a love poet for the very first time. "This is now bone of my bones/And flesh of my flesh," said he. "She shall be called Woman/Because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 3: 23).

God as the *ex nihilo* and *per verbum* Creator, then, is the explanation of the *origin and existence* of the universe, and of its *nature and structure* as well. We live in a created, cosmonomic, and socionomic universe, that is, in a world made and ordered by God's laws and norms, physically, socio-culturally, and morally. God is the wise and intelligent designer, the infinite basis and final reference point for all things.

It is unsurprising, then, given this intensely religious view of reality, that everything God made was for His glory and our good. Shalom was the divine intent for our world and our race. This should trigger within us a response of worship, praise, and thanksgiving for this our earthly home which is rooted in God's endless knowledge and power, and derived from His extravagant love. As the sweet psalmist of Israel cries out from the depths of his heart, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth" (Psa. 8: 1).

As a regenerate Christian with a renewed mind, William Cowper unhesitatingly acknowledged and lauded the hand of the Creator as he saw it clearly and cogently manifested in His handiwork.

**(4)** The mind indeed, enlightened from above,  
Views him in all; ascribes to the grand cause  
The grand effect; acknowledges with joy

His manner, and with rapture tastes his style.

— “The Task,” Book III, The Garden, Lines 225-28

Indeed, with converted spiritual sight, we are able to affirm with Cowper that this world and all it contains is God’s whose love planned, built and upholds it all!

He looks abroad into the varied field  
Of nature, and, though poor perhaps, compared  
With those whose mansions glitter in his sight,  
Calls the delightful scenery all his own.  
His are the mountains, and the valleys his.  
And all the resplendent rivers. His to enjoy  
With a propriety that none can feel,  
But who, with filial confidence inspired,  
Can lift to heaven an unpresumptuous eye,  
And smiling say—“My Father made them all!”

— “The Task,” Book V, The Winter Morning Walk,  
Lines 738-47.

Indeed, with redeemed faculties of apprehension, Cowper notes that we can see a fresh glory in creation, discerning

in all things, what, with stupid gaze  
Of ignorance, till then she overlook’d—  
A ray of heav’nly light, gilding all forms  
Terrestrial in the vast and the minute;  
The unambiguous footsteps of the God  
Who gives its luster to an insect’s wing,  
And wheels his throne upon the rolling worlds.

— “The Task,” Book V, The Winter Morning Walk,  
Lines 808-14.

With his hearty sacramental perspective on all things created, we are not surprised that Cowper was bucolic in temperament and a poetic champion of rural life. “God made the country,” he asserts at the conclusion of the first book of “The Task” (The Sofa, Line 749), the pastoral setting for him being the source of all that is good. But, as he continues, “man made the town,” which, in his estimation was nothing but positively corrupting. Furthermore, given Cowper’s given his robust theology of creation, neither are we shocked to learn that he was a lover of gardens and an avid gardener, imitating, I suppose in some ways, the first man and his vocation in Eden (See Book III, The Garden).

Nor are we taken aback that, along with this, he intensely enjoyed and was an outspoken defender of “Domestic happiness,” which in his view, was the “only bliss of Paradise that has surviv’d the fall!” (The Garden, Lines 41-2). Finally, we should not be astonished, since he traces all creatures back to their good Creator, to discover that Cowper was an astute observer and apologist on behalf of the animal kingdom, recognizing that we are only “carnivorous, through sin” (The Winter Walk at Noon, Line 457), and avowing that he would not include on his list of friends, even if he was sophisticated, “the man who needlessly sets foot upon a worm” (The Winter Walk at Noon, Lines 560-63).

To be sure, Cowper saw a quiet, reflective life in a country home with a garden in the company of animals as the ideal setting for the cultivation of piety and virtue. But I also think that his rustic, if not romantic, approach to life, which his poetry celebrates in exquisite detail, was grounded in his persistent Christian love for creation. This natural affection, as he says, is something that God implanted in the hearts of all people since the beginning of time:

**(5)** ‘Tis born with all: the love of Nature’s works  
Is an ingredient in the compound man,  
Infus’d at the creation of the kind.  
And, though th’ Almighty Maker has throughout  
Discriminated each from each, by strokes  
And touches of his hand, with so much art  
Diversified, that two were never found  
Twins at all points—yet this obtains in all,  
That all discern a beauty in his works,  
And all can taste them: minds that have been form’d  
And tutor’d, with a relish more exact,  
But none without some relish, none unmoved.

— “The Task,” Book IV, The Winter Evening, Lines  
731-42

While Cowper recognizes that a flame of love for creation flickers in every breast, he also knew, given his knowledge of Scripture, that sin smothers this flame and seeks to snuff out what it truly illuminates. Familiarity with the world may be one source of our contempt for it or its Maker, for according to Cowper, “All we behold is miracle; but, seen/So duly, all is miracle in vain.” (The Winter Walk at Noon, Lines 132-33).

More seriously, however, Cowper was quite conscious of the noetic or cognitive effects of sin, recognizing that despite God's vigorous testimony of Himself in His works, that "imagination vain/Possess the heart, and fables false as hell" (The Winter Morning Walk, Lines 857-62). In other words, we suppress the truth in unrighteousness, as Paul puts it in Romans 1: 18.

This, of course, indicates something catastrophic has happened that has vandalized the cosmos, rendering it and its creatures blind and woefully abnormal. That event, of course, is the second major theme of the biblical story and worldview, namely, the primeval rebellion of humankind against God and the fall of the whole creation into sin.

### **The Fall**

Philosopher Peter Kreeft has noted that, "What happened in Eden may be hard to understand, but it makes everything else understandable."<sup>8</sup> What this story helps us to understand is the problem of evil, and on an existential level, our devastating human brokenness.

Why the evil and brokenness? Because, as Genesis 3 informs us, we errantly sought autonomy and self-determination, if not self-deification, by an act of insubordination against God and his rightful authority. This pursuit of unchecked freedom was achieved by the willful violation of the divine commandment that banned the consumption of a forbidden fruit from an excluded tree.

As the narrative of Genesis 3 indicates, when we succumbed to the temptation and failed the test of covenant fidelity toward God, everything changed. We hid ourselves from God's presence among the trees of the garden and were separated from Him spiritually. Upon being found out, we experienced great fear at the presence of God, shame over our nakedness, and guilt because of sin, and became alienated from ourselves psychologically. Instead of taking responsibility for his actions, the man blamed the woman for his wrongdoing,

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<sup>8</sup> Peter J. Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," in *G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis: The Riddle of Joy*, eds. Michael H. Macdonald and Andrew A. Tadie, foreword Janet Blumberg Knedlik (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 260.

fostering social alienation and the breakdown between the sexes. The serpent was cursed. The woman was cursed. The man and the whole creation were also cursed. Finally, we were sadly exiled from the splendor of the garden and barred from its tree of life. Paradise was lost.

The garden became a wilderness choked with brambles and briars. Existence itself was besmeared with blood, sweat, toil, and tears. Human life, in constant fear and danger of violent death, became solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*).

In this hellish transition from creation to uncreation, from a well-formed to a deformed world, from a cosmos back to chaos again, real moral guilt for sin ensued, spiritual and physical death followed, and the powers of evil were set free in the world. In short, the fall of humanity into sin resulted in the colossal vandalism of *shalom*.

William Cowper had first person familiarity with human heartache and struggle born of the fall. And his theological insights into the causes and effects of our “thorny” and “jarring” world, “where ev’ry drop of honey hides a sting” are impeccable.<sup>9</sup> In an Augustinian kind of way, he knows that we are trapped in ignorance and falsehood, as he seeks to discover from his poetic muse, “By what unseen and unsuspected arts/The serpent error twines round human hearts” (“The Progress of Error,” Lines 3-4).

For Cowper, our intellects are wayward due to sin, for “such a veil/Hangs over mortal eyes, blind from birth/And dark in things divine” (“The Task,” Book III, The Garden, Lines, 233-35). Cowper is convinced, however, that we manufacture most of our mistakes by bending the truth to fit the character of our disordered lives and loves. “Thus men go wrong,” he says, “with an ingenious skill;/Bend the straight rule to their own crooked will.” He knows that whatever is in our lives eventually ends up in our minds, and whatever is in our minds eventually ends up in our lives in a give-and-take sort of way:

**(6)** Faults in the life breed errors in the brain;

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<sup>9</sup> Respectively, these quoted words come from: (1) “The Task,” Book IV, The Winter Evening, Line 333; (2) “The Task,” Book III, The Garden, Line 675; “The Task,” Book VI, The Winter Walk at Noon, Lines 830-31.

And these, reciprocally, those again.  
The mind and conduct mutually imprint  
And stamp their image in each other's mint:  
Each, sire and dam of an infernal race,  
Begetting and conceiving all that's base.

—"The Progress of Error," Lines 564-69.

To be sure, Cowper is aware of the fact that the inordinate things we think and do, and their nefarious interplay, are not aimless, but targeted, however wobbly, at the dream of happiness. Autonomous of God, however, we are sure to be disappointed.

**(7)** I see that all are wanderers, gone astray  
Each in his own delusions; they are lost  
In chase of fancied happiness, still woo'd  
And never won. Dream after dream ensues;  
And still they dream that they shall still succeed;  
And still are disappointed.

—"The Task," Book III, The Garden, Lines 124-29

The net effect of this madness of head, heart and hand is idolatry, and predictably our self-created gods are designed to serve our own desires and purposes. We invent for ourselves, as Cowper says, "Gods such as guilt makes welcome; gods that sleep/Or disregard our follies, or that sit/Amus'd spectators of this bustling stage" ("The Task," Book V, The Winter Morning Walk, Lines 876-78). Cowper himself was not immune to this human tendency, and he does not exempt himself from it. His recognition of our ambition to create user friendly gods and religions may stand as the background for this stanza from one of his most recognized Olney hymns:

The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be;  
Help me to tear it from thy throne,  
And worship only thee.

—"Walking with God," Lines 17-20.

To be sure, Cowper's understanding of fallen human nature and the fallen human condition as a whole was quite dark, but nonetheless, it was realistic. Bondage and blindness, idolatry and immorality, despair and death are central to

his understanding, as we see in the following passage that ties the various strands of Cowper's harmartiological thoughts together into a whole.

**(8)** Chains are the portion of revolted man,  
Stripes, and a dungeon; and his body serves  
The triple purpose. In that sickly, foul,  
Opprobrious residence he finds them all.  
Propense his heart to idols, he is held  
In silly dotage on created things,  
Careless of their Creator. And that low  
And sordid gravitation of his pow'rs  
To a vile clod so draws him, with such force  
Resistless from the centre he should seek,  
That he at last forgets it. All his hopes  
Tend downward; his ambition is to sink,  
To reach a depth profounder still, and still  
Profounder, in the fathomless abyss  
Of folly, plunging in pursuit of death.

— “The Task,” Book V, The Winter Morning Walk,  
Lines 581-95

If this is, indeed, our doleful situation, and the Scriptures and Cowper's thoughts make it pretty clear that it is, then along with our poet we must confess that “without grace, the heart's insanity admits no cure” (“The Task,” Book 6, lines 522-523).

The bulk of the narrative from Genesis 3 forward records the mighty deeds of God performed in love and justice to bring grace and redemption to the world. God *formed* all things. Sin *deformed* all things. Now God will *reform* all things through Jesus Christ. There has been *good news* in creation, *bad news* in the fall, but *good news* again in the New Testament gospel of the kingdom of God. A biblical worldview, ensconced in the total narrative of the Scriptures, proclaims joyfully who has ransom'd man, and where the cure for the heart's insanity is to be found.

### **Redemption**

Even in the midst of His judgments on the world at the time of the fall, God announced in Genesis 3: 15 — the famed prot-evangelium — that the offspring of a woman would crush the head of the serpent, symbolizing the destruction of evil and announcing the hope of salvation. Even as human wickedness spreads

and escalates in fratricide, polygamy, apostasy and rebellion, the “Scarlet Thread of Redemption” can be traced in Genesis 4-11 from Adam to Abel to Seth to Noah to Shem to Terah to Abraham.

God called Abram or Abraham in Genesis 12 as His answer to the devastations wrought in the earth wrought by sin, death, and evil. The Creator turned Redeemer demonstrates immediately that He intends to replace cursing with blessing, death with life, darkness with light, and despair with hope. He promised to Abraham that through him and the nation that would emerge from him that all the families of the earth would be blessed, or perhaps better, re-blessed.

That one singular offspring of the woman and seed of Abraham, after a long series of Old Testament covenants, prophecies, and promises was Jesus Christ, “Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human.”<sup>10</sup> This One was “the Son of David and the Son of Abraham” as the gospel of Matthew identifies Him, the “Son of God” as the gospel of Mark proclaims, the “Son of Adam” as the gospel of Luke asserts, and the very Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us, as the majestic prologue to John’s gospel announces.

Jesus embodies and fulfills in Himself Israel’s history in obedience and faithfulness, and indeed, in Him the true story of the world is encapsulated. He proclaimed that in Him, the kingdom (empire) of God had come in an exercise of the divine sovereignty against all the evil in the world. As Jesus asserted in Matthew 12: 28, “The kingdom of God has come upon you,” in Mark 1: 15, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand,” finally in Luke 17: 21, “The kingdom of God is in your midst.”

We must understand, however, that the redeeming rule of God in Jesus did not arrive in an extravaganza of signs and wonders. Instead, it came as a mystery in secret and through service, and by suffering and sacrifice. It was but a

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<sup>10</sup> *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., John H. Leith, ed (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 33.

mere mustard seed or a pinch of leaven. Yet at the same time, the kingdom is a hidden treasure and pearl of great price, worth the sacrifice of everything we have to possess it

In the four gospels we see the kingdom of God in humble yet profound action: where there was disease, Christ healed it; where there were storms, Christ calmed them; where there was hunger, Christ satisfied it; where there were demons, Christ cast them out; where there was falsehood, Christ taught the truth; where there was sin, Christ forgave it; where there was death, Christ conquered it.

The superlative expression of the kingdom of God was in the cross of Christ. Though it appeared to be anything but a royal victory in its injustice and grisliness, there by a broken body and shed blood, His sacrifice propitiated God by His self-offering; He broke the back of evil; and He conquered death by death and resurrection. In short, He crushed the head of the serpent and set the cosmos free! He unleashed a new exodus and established a new creation! Christ Victor!

When this cosmic and personal grace is appropriated by faith, it entitles the believer to the forgiveness of sin, renewed fellowship with God, and the gift of eternal life. In the opening stanza of perhaps Cowper's most famous hymn,

There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.

Of course, the redemption story has begun, but is not yet complete. Though the kingdom of God has *already* arrived, it has *not yet* been consummated. Indeed, Christ has died and Christ is risen. But it is also true that Christ is coming again. As the New Testament theologian George E. Ladd has explained, "The Kingdom of God involves two great moments: fulfillment within history [already], and consummation at the end of history [not yet]."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 91

For Cowper, this present yet future kingdom framework of the New Testament meant that we could enjoy and exemplify a taste of our blissful future even now. As he writes, “He is the happy man, whose life ev’n now/Shows somewhat of that happier life to come” (“The Task,” Book VI, The Winter Walk at Noon, Lines 905-06). Indeed, that happier life to come is something for which Christians and the whole creation groan and yearn, and it will not arrive until it arrives with Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and great glory (Matt. 24: 30). So, as we stand on tip-toe in this time in between the times gazing intently into the future, we look forward to Christ’s return and final announcement when He happily declares ‘Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21: 5).

Such was the cosmic sweep of Christian redemption for William Cowper. He looked forward to the day when the divine curse would be lifted from the earth. He longed for that hour when the whole creation would be renewed and God in Christ would rightfully conquer and reclaim His world. “Sweet,” as he says, “is the harp of prophecy.” Though he felt inadequate to put this final biblical scene in human verse, nonetheless, Cowper concluded his poem “The Task” in its sixth book with an eschatological flourish worthy of the greatest poets in the English language who stand foursquare in the Christian tradition. Here are a few of its best excerpts:

**(9)** The groans of Nature in this nether world,  
Which Heaven has heard for ages, have an end.  
Foretold by prophets, and by poets sung,  
Whose fire was kindled at the prophets’ lamp,  
The time of rest, the promised Sabbath, comes. Lines 729-33

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For He, whose car the winds are, and the clouds  
The dust that waits upon his sultry march,  
When sin hath moved him, and his wrath is hot,  
Shall visit earth in mercy; shall descend  
Propitious in his chariot paved with love;  
And what his storms have blasted and defaced  
For man’s revolt, shall with a smile repair. Lines 740-46

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O scenes surpassing fable, and yet true,  
Scenes of accomplish’d bliss! which who can see,  
Though but in distant prospect, and not feel  
His soul refresh’d with foretaste of the joy?

Rivers of gladness water all the earth,  
And clothe all climes with beauty; the reproach  
Of barrenness is past. Lines 759-65  
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**(10)** Error has no place;  
That creeping pestilence is driven away;  
The breath of heaven has chased it. In the heart  
No passion touches a discordant string,  
But all is harmony and love. Disease  
Is not: the pure and uncontaminate blood  
Holds its due course, nor fears the frost of age.  
One song employs all nations; and all cry,  
“Worthy the Lamb, for he was slain for us!” Lines 783-92  
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**(11)** Thus heavenward all things tend. For all were once  
Perfect, and all must be at length restored. Lines 818-19  
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**(12)** Come then, and, added to thy many crowns,  
Receive yet one, the crown of all the earth,  
Thou who alone art worthy! It was thine  
By ancient covenant, ere Nature’s birth;  
And thou hast made it thine by purchase since,  
And overpaid its value with thy blood. Lines 855-60  
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Come then, and, added to thy many crowns,  
Receive yet one, as radiant as the rest,  
Due to thy last and most effectual work,  
Thy word fulfill’d, the conquest of a world! Lines 902-05

### Inscription

*“... and in their hearts/Thy title is engraven with a pen  
Dipp’d in the fountain of eternal love.  
William Cowper, The Task, VI, Lines 861-3*

These three biblical stories of creation, fall, and redemption and the worldview they articulate are the Church’s genuine inscription. William Cowper, as I have attempted to show, is one of the Church’s chief, though forgotten, inscribers. As the narrative account of “who made, who marr’d and who has ransom’d man,” these revealed stories and their words frame the universe of Christian discourse and comprise the rich Scriptural vocabulary by which the Church should name and explain the world. Because he was conscious of this fact, St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1: 5 that believers in Christ are enriched in everything, especially their speech and knowledge. In this magnificent phrase,

the Apostle asserts that a chief blessing of Christian redemption consists in the transition from epistemic impoverishment to wealth, and that believers are given a treasure trove of new words by which to articulate this new knowledge. This regenerate form of consciousness and fresh vocabulary are not incidental, but are central to the faith. As Robert Wilkin has pointed out in an article I have already quoted, Christianity is not just a set of doctrines, creeds, or moral codes, though that it is. Rather, it is also, as he says, “a world of discourse that comes to us in language of a particular sort.”<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, we have recently witnessed the of the mythoclasm of the Christian story and the *logocide* of its enriching and world-defining terms. As B. B. Warfield once lamented, “It is sad to witness the death of any worthy thing, — even of a worthy word. And worthy words do die, like any other worthy thing — if we do not take good care of them. ... The religious terrain is full of the graves of good words which have died from lack of care....”<sup>13</sup> This is, indeed, a matter of grave concern, for as the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz once wrote, “What is pronounced strengthens itself,” and “What is not pronounced tends to non-existence.”<sup>14</sup> It seems to me, therefore, that resurrecting a biblical worldview and its Christian vocabulary from the dead ought to be one of the Church’s top catechetical priorities. How can this be done?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has stated that “People are not changed by moral exhortation, but by [a] transformed imagination.”<sup>15</sup> Though a bit overstated, he makes a good point. Most of us are quite adept at stiff-arming professional or arm-chair moralizing, regardless of the fervency with which it is

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, “The Church’s Way of Speaking,” *First Things* 155 (Aug-Sept, 2005), pp. 27-31. Also available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0508/articles/wilken.html>. Accessed March 18, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Redeemer and Redemption,” in *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), p. 345.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Wilken, “The Church’s Way of Speaking.”

<sup>15</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 25.

delivered to us. But what if we could purge our mental and spiritual vision of the film of familiarity and have our mindsets transfigured by the living and active stories of God's Word? Should this narrative and its words become engraven upon our hearts by the Spirit "with a pen/Dipp'd in the fountain of eternal love," ("The Task," Book VI, The Winter Walk at Noon, Lines 862-3), I believe it has the metamorphic power to imaginatively transform our minds, hearts, bodies and lives from larva ugly to butterfly beauty.

With this weighty, honest, and enthralling story as our embodied kardiopic, we see the world and life with fresh eyes, and life itself can change. "Go," then, as Cowper admonishes us, and "dress thine eyes with eye-salve; ask of him [God]/Or ask of whosoever he has taught/And learn, though late, the genuine cause of all" ("The Task," Book II, The Time-Piece, Lines 203-05).

In learning of the genuine cause of all through the narrative of Scripture, at least three things can result. *First, it can change how we live.* If it is true, as Iris Murdoch once asserted that "at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over," then it is because the stories that inform our lives, whatever they may be, have done their job. As Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, all human conversations and actions are best understood as "enacted narratives."<sup>16</sup> In his poignant terms, "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?"<sup>17</sup>

By dwelling in the biblical story and by it dwelling in us, it ought to have substantial ethical implications in our lives. However we are behaviorally activated in life shows forthrightly what we truly know, believe, and narrate. As Cowper states, "Conduct has the loudest tongue. ... In the deed/The unequivocal authentic deed/We find sound argument, we read the heart" ("The Task," Book V, The Winter Morning Walk, Lines 650-54). A Christian worldview, therefore, is also a way of life, and its narratives should be normative in our lives.

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<sup>16</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 211.

<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 211.

*Second, it should change how we read and why.* The biblical story and its worldview are not tagged the master story and total truth without good reason. Though some may be incredulous, it is called the meta-narrative because it provides the definitive macro-story of humanity and the cosmos that makes sense of all other micro-stories within it, whether personal or literary.

We can't read our own stories, the stories of others, or any story at all, even scientific, technological or economic ones, without its foundational explanations of the qualities and aspirations of human beings, of their pervasive brokenness and pain, and of their search for some sort of remedy and peace. As the story of stories and the truth of truths, all the quests of conflicted characters in real time or in written text are clear and sensible only in the light of God's own revealed narrative.

In reading stories of any kind well, we also recognize we should be reading them for the sake of agape love. As the Master Teacher, Jesus Himself summarized and subordinated the whole of divine revelation and the totality of human activity to the twin goals of a supreme love for God and of love for neighbor even as we love ourselves. As Cowper put it so plainly,

**(13)** No works shall find acceptance, in that day,  
When all disguises shall be rent away,  
That square not truly with the scripture plan,  
Nor spring from love to God, or love to man.  
— "Charity," Lines 557-560

Our hermeneutic, therefore, should be one of charity, as Augustine taught us long ago: ". . . you should take pains to turn over and over in your mind what you read, until your interpretation of it is led right through to the kingdom of charity."<sup>18</sup>

We read and interpret all texts, biblical and extra-biblical, then, with these *teloi* in mind, namely to enhance our affections for God the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator, Judge, and Redeemer of the world, and to deepen

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<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, intro., trans., and notes Edmund Hill, O. P. The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, ed. John E. Rotelle, O. S. A., vol. 11 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996), 3.15.23.

our care and concern for other people — human beings as *imago Dei* — even as we have care and concern for ourselves. Reading done for any other or lesser reason is improperly motivated and possibly incorrect. Love, then, is the purpose of the study of literature in the light of Scripture.

Third and finally, we hope and pray that the Church will recover her biblical story and worldview. As it turns out, I am not alone in this ambition. Earlier just this month, a band of theologians led by Robert Webber has issued “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future” which places emphasis on the primacy of the biblical narrative in the life of the Church. This group summons the body of Christ to carry out her tasks of theological reflection, worship, spiritual formation, and mission within its holistic, humanizing and God-glorifying context under the comprehensive Lordship of Christ (*Christianity Today*, September 2006).

In summary, their call is “to recover the conviction that God’s story shapes the mission of the church to bear witness to God’s kingdom and to inform the spiritual [and intellectual] foundations of civilization” (p. 58). If this happens, then there is the possibility that along with the church, as the pillar and support of the truth, intellectually as well as spiritually, rooted in a unity of facts and values, that both the world and the academy over time will recover their stories as well. And, as I have advocated in this presentation, I believe that William Cowper as a poet laureate of this biblical story and vision of life can help get us there.

In his Olney hymn “The Happy Change,” (lines 1-8), Cowper leaves us with these final thoughts about biblical faith as our essential “kardioptic” or vision of the embodied human heart, anchored in God’s word in Christ whose fragrant grace and kingdom empire changes lives and transforms the world:

How blest the creature is, O God,  
When with a single eye,  
He views the luster of thy word,  
The day-spring from on high!

Thro’ all the storms that veil the skies,  
And frown on earthly things;  
The Sun of Righteousness he eyes,  
With healing in his wings.

Struck by that light, the human heart,  
A barren soul no more;  
Sends the sweet smell of grace abroad,  
Where serpents lurk'd before.

The soul, a dreary province once  
Of Satan's dark domain;  
Feels a new empire form'd within,  
And owns a heavenly reign.

The glorious orb, whose golden beams  
The fruitful year control;  
Since first, obedient to thy word  
The started from the goal;

Has cheered the nations, with the joys  
His orient rays impart;  
But Jesus, 'tis thy light alone,  
Can shine upon the heart.

Thank you very much.