
How We Frame Faith Makes All the Difference in the World

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Any organism that cannot reproduce itself will become extinct. Unfortunately, this means the Western church's challenge in recreating adherents means its future is uncertain. Barna research suggests roughly 60 percent of millennials who grew up in the church have dropped out.¹ These millennials are not different than us racially, ethnically, or culturally; they are our own children. Yet for some reason, we have not been able consistently to socialize them to value a life of faith in the context of organized religion. Since its inception thirty years ago, membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is down 30 percent, while the U.S. population simultaneously has increased by some 30 percent. Of course, this phenomenon is not limited to the ELCA.

Should this conundrum not be of the highest concern for all those who love the church and find its mission essential for the world? No matter the church's breadth or the depth of its remarkable ministries, when we no longer have any disciples left to lead, serve, participate, and financially resource it, the church and its ministries will end. "God's work" through the church will stop when there are "no more hands." What is it about the priorities and our recipe for Christian formation that has hindered us in forming new generations of followers? This question is both urgent and calls for constant attention throughout the church.

For the purpose of this article, I will explore the critical importance of narrative for our faith, Christian formation, and how we live our lives. I claim that a significant part of our struggle in forming new disciples is that people's master narratives of faith are not as relevant or competitive with other ways they might view the world. Giving our hearts to Christ is not limited to having faith in God and God's existence but is about trusting a much larger worldview as to who God is, where God is at, what God is doing, and what God's activity looks like in history. Different worldviews answer these questions with varying degrees of usefulness and relevancy. Hopefully, evolving accounts and theologies integrate new ideas and perspectives to keep them fresh and compelling relative to older versions and as compared to modern, Godless explanations. Consistently replicating followers of Christ in the West today will depend on refreshing our master narratives of

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faith. I believe that how we frame faith makes all the difference in the world.

The power of story in our lives

Stories are critical in providing meaning and helping us to share a common understanding of everything that is not scientifically or factually verifiable. Think about the value of paper money as an example. Objectively a person who does not participate in our narrative about the value of money just sees green paper rectangles. Objectively it is nothing more than paper, yet the stories and the experiences we share with others about paper money make all the difference in knowing its value.

Stories are not limited to simple ideas but can be complex, nuanced, and multi-dimensional. Paper money's core storyline provides a storehouse of value that simplifies buying and selling. Around this story there might be many variations: that money is good or bad, plentiful or scarce. Ultimately people align with stories, including their subtleties, because these stories are useful and relevant for solving real problems, for example, money's utility in facilitating transactions.

Stories of shared understanding are usually so ingrained by our culture and socialization that we function without conjuring up the underlying narratives and perspectives. Much like we know how reflexively to drive a car or ride a bike after many hours of experience, we do not need to be conscious of narratives in order for them to affect our beliefs and behaviors. Just as we instinctively know that two plus two equals four, so we come to know that small pieces of green paper are valuable.

Relative to Christian formation, the foundational role of story raises many interesting questions. What is the master narrative of

1. See Barna: FRAMES, "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church," <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church>

our Christian faith that provides a useful and relevant framework for understanding all of life and illuminating our ultimate concern? How has this story changed over time as human beings learned things we never knew before? What does this story tell us about God, Jesus, and the divine? And, how do we learn this story so that eventually we can give our hearts to Jesus Christ and God at the center of it all?

Furthermore, what are the behavioral implications of our faith-based worldview? How do the narratives of the faith inform our sense of meaning and purpose, including what we should be doing with our lives? Our master narrative is not just a way of thinking inside our heads but inspires how we behave and live. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story do I find myself a part?’”² Again, how we understand and frame existence makes all the difference in the world for discerning how we are to live our lives.

Christian formation

At a very high level, Christian formation is a process of transformation, a journey that continues for the duration of our lives. It starts in a secondhand way, where we are told Bible stories, what is true and worth paying attention to, the doctrines and dogmas of the church and why they matter. Formation at its best moves to a firsthand, personal, relational knowledge of Jesus, God, and the Spirit toward which these earlier learnings pointed.

When this formation process starts in childhood, it begins with simply trusting our parents and other adults that the worldview they teach us is true. As we get older, moving from a secondhand to a firsthand faith often requires critical thinking, pondering, questioning, and even doubting the secondhand faith that was shared with us. If and when firsthand faith develops, it is less about the order and certainty that come from believing in a list of seemingly unbelievable things, and more about putting our trust in and giving our hearts to a mysterious living and loving God who is integral to all that exists.

Theologian Marcus Borg provides this example:

One of the most powerful expressions of this transformation is to be found in the book of Job. At its climax, after Job has experienced a dramatic self-disclosure of God, he exclaims:

“I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye beholds thee.”

That change—from having heard about God with the hearing of the ear to “beholding” God, from secondhand belief to firsthand relationship—is what the alternative wisdom of Jesus is most centrally about.³

2. Alisdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 250.

3. Marcus J. Borg. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009), Kindle Locations 1943–1946.

What is the master narrative of our Christian faith that provides a useful and relevant framework for understanding all of life and illuminating our ultimate concern? How has this story changed over time as human beings learned things we never knew before?

One pathway for better worldviews and master narratives involves reducing the distance needed to travel between secondhand belief and firsthand relationship. The greater that gap, the more work that is required for people to be reformed and re-socialized from their earlier development. The need for more radical transformation suggests fewer people will do the work to make the change. They are more apt to quit the journey altogether.

The formation of our worldviews and master narratives is not static, but changes and needs to keep evolving. Jesus had a different vision of reality than his ancestors in the faith. As the theologian Richard Rohr says, “Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity (it did not need changing)! Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.”⁴ Martin Luther had a different vision of reality than his predecessors; 500 years after the Reformation we should too. Brian McLaren talks about our evolution in thinking using the analogy of numbered operating systems, suggesting our understanding of God and reality has moved from God 1.0 to God 5.0.

We might say that two thousand years ago, Jesus inserted into the human imagination a radical new vision of God—nondominating, nonviolent, supreme in service, and self-giving. That vision was so radically new and different that we have predictably spent our first two thousand years trying to reconcile it with the old visions of God that it challenged. Maybe only now, as we acknowledge Christianity to be, in light of our history, what the novelist Walker Percy called a “failed religion,” are we becoming ready to let Jesus’s radical new vision replace the old vision instead of being accommodated within it.⁵

4. Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation: “Love, Not Atonement,” https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Love--Not-Atonement.html?oid=1103098668616&aid=iXa_UN-n2YaQ

5. Brian D. McLaren. *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York: The Crown Publishing Group, 2016), Chapter 5, Kindle Locations 1521–1526.

Moving from God 1.0 to God 5.0 is not chronicling how God is changing, but how our perception of God and reality is evolving. The hope is that each revision of our theology, worldview, master narrative, origin story, big history, cosmology, and metaphysics has the prospect of being more relevant, useful, and practical for facing our ultimate concern and making the world a better place. Continual refining of each operating claim means we will not be asking people to have faith in obsolete ideas and “buggy” ways of living and thinking.

For the remainder of this article, I will contrast three aspects of our common master narratives that compete for the attention of human beings today: “God Up There” (vertical religion); “No God” (no religion); and “God Here” (horizontal religion). Could Christian formation in the West be struggling because the “No God” narrative of science seems to be more useful than the “God Up There” narrative in much of cultural religion? How might a more creation-centric, “God Here” account, one that integrates ideas of faith and science, open the doors to a new movement for Christian formation and faith, lending vitality to the church and the world?

God Up There

This first story begins a long time ago when in the beginning God created all that is. Creation was initially good, even perfect, but once humankind came along things quickly took a turn for the worse. In the Garden of Eden, humans revealed that they were fundamentally flawed, full of sin and depravity. It became apparent that even though we came from God, created in God’s image, there was something different about us that created a sense of separateness from God. Where we once saw paradise, all of a sudden there was a pervasive sense of gloom about us and our world. How to make sense of this problem?

The heresy of dualism, which divides every subject into opposites, is a key part of this story: good/bad, black/white, conservative/liberal, sacred/profane, and spirit/matter. While dualism is not orthodox, it is alive and well in Western civilization, in the church, and in our faith. Social science confirms that our minds prefer dualism, because it takes less mental energy to process either/or thinking instead of the messiness of both/and.

Our first story explains the gap between God and creation by connecting God’s perfection and goodness with a spiritual realm—heaven—that is different than the physical world that we inhabit. Spirit is good and eternal, while matter and flesh are flawed, sinful, bound to die. Soul has its true origin in the spiritual realm, while its place of exile is in the bodily existence of nature and matter.

Unfortunately for us, according to this story we inhabit a material world with temporary physical bodies, meaning there is a structural problem: God is up there and we are down here, not good enough to be with God. So, out of God’s goodness, love, and desire to bridge this chasm, God became incarnate, taking the form of a human being in Jesus Christ. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus saves us from our sinful, physical nature, and becomes the source of our salvation. This gift of salvation is

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freely given and cannot be earned. Through Jesus, God brought the flawed material world back together with the perfection of the spiritual and holy. Luther summed this up by saying “humans are like piles of manure, covered over by Christ.”

The underlying structural formulation of this first story, that the material world is a defective problem to be solved, has not served us well and has caused many problems. There is a sense that we do not really belong here in the material world because there is nothing happening of lasting significance. Instead, to participate more fully in the divine and ultimate reality, to know God more deeply, we need to get closer to God, to heaven, and the life of the spirit. Salvation is about our eternal life in heaven, not something here and now on earth.

As a result of this story, we have managed to create a hierarchy to inhabit the void between matter and spirit, which mimics our sentiments about how to participate more fully in the divine. Because human beings are sentient, having a soul and consciousness, they are closer to God than animals who have no soul. Plants, alive but not sentient, are lower than animals. Humans, animals, and plants are all alive, which makes them more divine than liquids, solids, and gases.

Closer to the world of spirit and above living things are the sacraments as a means of God’s grace. Yet higher, the Bible as God’s Holy Word, our most important revelation about the divine. Even higher is institutional religion, which is authorized to interpret the Bible, proclaim the Word, and administer the sacraments. The original meaning of sacred and profane reflects this: the sacred was anything inside the temple, while the profane was everything outside of the temple. All of this leads to what Diana Butler Bass refers to as vertical religion and elevator institutions.

“Separating the material from the spiritual is, perhaps, one of the saddest philosophical missteps of Western culture.”⁶

6. Diana Butler Bass. *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 19.

This story is a misstep because it limits our understanding of how God is present and involved in a dynamic creation that is still unfolding. Instead of seeing matter and all of creation as sacred, it injects an unhealthy pessimism about the profanity of our existence. It shifts our focus and curiosity toward theology, especially our own “brand,” at the expense of science, social science, and all the other ways that God reveals truth that helps us solve real problems. It favors orthodoxy over mysticism, stasis over creativity and innovation. This story undermines the priesthood of all believers and ministry in daily life in favor of clericalism and an emphasis on the ministries of the institutional church. This story does not prioritize ecology and care of creation, and it does not offer a compelling sense of meaning and purpose for life in this world, except as a required prelude to eternal life. It draws attention to a salvation beyond this life, instead of the possibility of salvation here and now.

The Roman Catholic theologian John Haught refers to this story as “the analogical vision.” He describes its shortcomings this way:

The analogical vision offers solace to individual souls, but it holds out little hope for a universe that is still coming to birth. Today its most ardent defenders—and they are many—fail to reflect deeply on the scientific evidence that weaves each species of life and each human person intricately into the story of a universe still being born. Moreover, the classical Catholic understanding of the self, world, and God, as Teilhard rightly complained and as Vatican II seemed to agree, provides insufficient incentive for robust moral action in the world.⁷

In general, this worldview fails the test of relevancy and usefulness in our modern world, causing people to walk away from it and the church. Instead, they are connecting to the next story, the story of “No God” as functional atheists.

No God

Recall the quote from Alasdair MacIntyre. To understand how we are to behave we need first to know which stories we accept, buy into, trust, and share with others that make them true to us.

Here is a different and competing story that seems to be winning in the West today. If we desire to receive “this day our daily bread,” maybe our focus should be on what we can observe and study in the natural world, things like agriculture, genetics, farming practices, supply and demand, and political systems. The world exists with problems to be solved, and the best way of doing that is using reason, logic, and science. Only what is objectively verifiable is considered real or worthy of attention.

In this story, because it is not possible to observe God in a scientific way, there is no way of proving the stories we formerly shared with each other, such as the earlier story about God and

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creation. In fact, some of our scientific observations call into radical question the validity and factuality of our core faith stories. Instead of believing that women have one more rib than men, which apparently was considered true up to the 1500s, we can count, verify, and confirm. This approach puts faith and science at odds with each other.

As more of our shared stories about God seem superstitious and unbelievable, their value for guidance, direction, meaning, and purpose fade away. As Enlightenment thinking proceeds, Nietzsche declared: “God is dead, and we have killed him.”⁸ Humanism, the belief in the primacy of individual and communal human feelings and experiences, is accepted as a substitute for divine authority. Life happened by chance, so production and consumption become life’s focus and meaning.

Coincidental with this story of science, humanism, and markets, is the incredible evidence of the progress today, perhaps making this the best time up to the present to be alive as a human being. This is not the pessimistic worldview of our first story about God and creation but a more optimistic, hopeful perspective that real problems can be solved. Well-being can be dramatically improved and the world can become a better place to live.

Data and trends across a wide array of indicators—including life expectancy, infant mortality, government social spending, homicides, automobile fatalities, acceptance of interracial marriage, famine deaths, extreme poverty and more—suggest progress is real and remarkable. Author Steven Pinker details these statistics in his recent book and summarizes the results as follows:

The Enlightenment has worked—perhaps the greatest story seldom told.⁹

This second story about reason, science, humanism, and progress is competing with the first story about God and creation. When we talk about consumerism taking over people’s lives, this story might indicate why. This particular story coincides with a definite improvement in living standards, not only for a select few but for most people around the world. This story motivates us to see ourselves as consumers and to behave accordingly.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 211.

9. Steven Pinker. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York, Penguin Publishing Group, 2018), 6.

7. John F. Haught. *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 25.

There is, however, another side to this story. A variety of other statistics about increases in suicide, mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, obesity, indebtedness, and a recent downturn in life expectancy, suggest that while our lives are as good as they have ever been materially, something else is undermining our spirits and well-being.

God Here

There is a third master narrative that has great potential for growing faith in our modern world: God with us from the very beginning in God's dream of creation. It is a different creation story that does not pit spirit against matter, or faith against science. It does not put all hope in an otherworldly salvation. Instead, it is about "thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

In this story, creation is not a static event that happened long ago but is a dynamic process where God is still birthing creation today. This story merges scientific explanations of big history, starting with the Big Bang, with a theological framework that sees God at work. This story acknowledges that our current reality is not paradise, however, it emphasizes the inherent goodness and sacredness of God's creation, and the expectation that God is pulling us into an even brighter future. This story does not make Adam's sin the reason for Jesus' existence.

With this story, God has been present and energizing the evolving material world from the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago up to now. Science describes that immediately after the Big Bang, sub-atomic particles were the only matter that existed. Through attraction, relationship, and energy—other words to describe God's love—these particles came together to form various kinds of atoms. Later on, these atoms came together to form different kinds of molecules, which in turn became the building blocks for cells, eventually leading to the emergence of life itself. As life continued to evolve and different life forms came into being, humans emerged with self-reflective consciousness and abstract thinking. Ultimately, language was invented leading to all of the later advances of civilization, science, and technology.

To help visualize the big picture, if all history from the Big Bang to the present is scaled into a one-year time period, human beings first show up at 8 am on December 31st. Jesus and the church show up even later that day, 5 seconds before midnight. The Reformation happens in the last two seconds of that last day. In this worldview, science provides a fascinating perspective about what God has been doing for a long, long time, birthing creation through love and relationship. While Jesus is the historical example of God incarnate, the cosmic Christ is the eternal template of God commingling spirit and matter from the very beginning. God always has been incarnate in all of creation making the material world a means of God's grace. God's goodness permeates all of creation, including us. That is not to say there is no suffering and death, but instead of all suffering being the result of sin, more can be attributed to natural cycles of life and death and the birth pangs of new and unfinished creation.

This third master narrative invites us to be aware of God's

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presence through the amazing gift of life, sustained by each and every breath. Conversation, sharing ideas, and being conscious of our consciousness are all gifts of God. This story accepts the idea of progress that comes through science and reason as a continuation of what God started 14 billion years ago. God's creation is one perpetual process of learning, adaptation, relationship, formation, reformation, transformation, and evolution. This system is going somewhere, and it is going somewhere good.

Stories help inform how we are to act. In this story human beings are not passive beneficiaries of a static creation but instead are co-creators with God, partners of a new heaven and a new earth: God with us, God for us, God in us. When we look at the world and ask, "God, why don't you do something?" perhaps God's response is, "I did, I made you." To engage in this mission is to be in union with God, with clarity around meaning and purpose, and knowing the life that truly is life.

Potential for the future

People today are ready for the third master story, "God Here," that better integrates matter with spirit, science, and social science with faith. We are invited to co-labor for progress with the work that yet needs to be done to make "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." One of the best-selling books last year was *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* by Neil deGrasse Tyson, which provides evidence of people's readiness for this approach. It leads to the affirmation that if something is true, it is true everywhere, in theology, science, social science, and philosophy. This emphasis elevates vocational opportunities for everyone to give leadership and make a difference, while diminishing the aspirations of people mostly to act like loyal soldiers for their denominations, company men and women for their congregations. If faith, religion, and the church are to be relevant and a force for making the world a better place, we need to have a more powerful master narrative and worldview about how God is making a difference through creation, including through each and every one of us: God Here!