



John P. Bowen

## Communication

# The Gospel Is Always Bigger<sup>1</sup>

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*He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

– Colossians 1:13–20, NRSV

Sixty years ago, J. B. Phillips, the Bible translator, wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*.<sup>2</sup> It was about our tendency to shrink God to manageable proportions. But I think Paul might say that not only is our God too small but also that our Jesus is too small. Paul is writing Colossians to Christians who think that they need to supplement their worship of Jesus with other things – with religion and ritual and philosophy – a kind of “Jesus-plus” spirituality.

And Paul says, “No, no, if you think that, you haven’t really understood Jesus yet.” So he is trying to set the record straight, and the heart of his argument is here in Colossians 1. Part of that argument is the theme of your conference, which is also the historic motto of McMaster University: “In Christ all things hold together.”

It’s an amazing vision, isn’t it? Paul somehow sees that the carpenter of Nazareth

is also the one who made absolutely everything and who holds absolutely everything together. It is this Jesus who gives coherence and meaning to everything that exists. This Jesus holds together the atoms in our bodies, keeps the laws of physics constant, and keeps the distant stars in their courses. When we do our work, it is this Jesus who keeps our brain functioning, this Jesus whose world we are exploring, this Jesus whose truths we are discovering. It is even Jesus who enables our brains to doubt whether he even exists.

It would be interesting to know whether John and Paul ever had a conversation and, if they did, to know what they said to each other. They would have had a lot to talk about, not least because both have a huge understanding of who Jesus is. I imagine Paul saying, “I like to think of him as holding all things together.” John says, “I’ve been thinking about that too. In fact, I’m thinking of writing a biography of Jesus, and I think I might call him the *logos* – I’m sure you know the idea (it crops up in so many religions and philosophies these days), that there’s a rational principle behind the universe. And, of

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course, you and I know the name of that rational principle." And Paul says, "Shoot, I wish I'd thought of that."

But if we put these two things together—the Jesus whom Paul says holds all things together, and the Jesus John calls the *logos*, the creative mind of God become flesh—then every discipline that ends in “logy” is a whimsical reminder of the centrality, the bigness, of Jesus Christ. He is the *logos* in cosmology, geology, biology, entomology, biotechnology, climatology, zoology, kinesiology, even paleoanthropology (which was a new one to me). And because Jesus is at the heart of all our work, whatever our discipline (whether or not it ends in “logy”), that gives us hope and purpose and meaning that frankly is very difficult to find anywhere else.

This is why “All things together—all things cohering—in Christ” makes such a great motto for a university. It says that, whatever our discipline, whether humanities or social sciences or sciences, we are all engaged in the same project, and there is an overarching coherence to all we do. All of us are seeking to think God’s thoughts after him, in all their diversity and beauty and complexity. Whatever our discipline, we know that “all truth is God’s truth” because Jesus Christ is holding the universe together. Hence, of course, the word “uni-versity.” Without that, we are just a “poly-versity” or a “multi-versity.” No wonder it is hard for universities these days to replace Christian mottos with secular ones. How do you express the rationale of the institution in a single phrase when there is no unifying principle, no sense that all knowledge is part of some greater whole? A motto such as “Try harder” really doesn’t cut it.

But Paul didn’t write Colossians to justify the use of the word “university.” He has bigger fish to fry. So in verse 18, as Tom Wright points out, Paul moves from talking about creation to talking about a new creation.<sup>3</sup> We can’t stop at saying that Christ created all things and that Christ holds all things together. There’s more.

So, in the verses that follow, Paul talks about Christ’s incarnation (“*in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*”), about his atoning death (“*making peace through the blood of his cross*”), and about his resurrection (“*the firstborn from the dead*”). And what is the purpose of these things? It is “*so that he might come to have first place in everything*.”

But this is a little puzzling: if Christ created all things and Christ upholds all things, doesn’t he already have first place in everything? The answer, of course, is that Paul is thinking of sin and the fact that this is a fallen world, a world in which we do not see Christ supreme much of the time. And the purpose of his incarnation and death and resurrection is precisely so that *that* supremacy, which is his rightfully, might be restored. Or, to put it Paul’s way, “*through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven*.” Ultimately, God is about the renewal of the cosmos—he is not content with forgiving our sins, cleaning up our lives, and renewing us by his Spirit. He is concerned to redeem, restore, and renew *all* things (the word “all” is used eight times in just six verses)—our relationships, our neighborhoods, our cities, our cultures, our work, and all the ways that the natural world has been hurt by the evil of human beings. It is as though the redeeming work of God through Jesus is a series of ripples spreading out and out from the cross until they embrace the whole of creation.

I love the way that Eugene Peterson translates Colossians 1:18–20:

He was supreme in the beginning, and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he’s there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.<sup>4</sup>

But there is a word in the middle of this Colossians 1 passage that jars on me, and maybe on you too. It’s the word “church.” “*He is the head of the body, the church*” (v.18, NRSV). Maybe it jars because it has such negative connotations in our world today. But, of course, when Paul says church, he doesn’t have in mind what we often associate with church; he means something which fits perfectly into this vision of Christ. What then does he mean?

One of the most helpful ways of thinking about church comes from New Testament scholar Tom Wright. He has suggested that the Bible is like a five-act play<sup>5</sup>—although (as Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh have pointed out<sup>6</sup>) it works better if we think of it as a six-act play.

# Communication

## *The Gospel Is Always Bigger*

- Act 1 is the story of creation: God creates a beautiful and fruitful world, and entrusts it to our care.
- Act 2 is the story of what has gone wrong in our world: we decide that we know how to run it better than the Creator.
- Act 3 is the story of the Old Testament: God in love begins over, starting with Abraham and Sarah and the promise that, through their descendants, blessing will be restored to the whole world. Everywhere sin has done its dirty work, the redeeming work of God is sure to follow.
- And then, in Act 4, the Creator writes himself into the script—as if Shakespeare should write himself into the plot of *Hamlet* so that Hamlet could get to know his creator. When the Creator appears on the stage, he shows us what a fully human life is like: he dies for our sins, he rises from death, and he returns to heaven. And we call him “Jesus.”
- Finally, in Act 6, the Creator brings down the curtain on this drama at the end of time, God’s work of dealing with sin, evil, and brokenness is complete, and the new heaven and the new earth are ushered in.

So what is Act 5? This is where we are now, the time between Christ’s first coming (in Act 4) and his second coming (in Act 6), the age of the church. There is no script for Act 5. We need to exercise “faithful improvisation,” living as the people of God in contexts the biblical writers never envisioned, and yet being faithful to the spirit and the direction of the story as we have received it.

How does the church fit, right there, in the middle of Paul’s glorious vision? Because at its heart, the church is the community of those called by God to work with him in the redemption of the world. I used to say that the church is a community of Jesus’s disciples, which it is, but “disciple” is kind of an old-fashioned religious word. So, for a time, I used to say that a disciple was a student, but then I realized that student in our culture means someone (generally young) sitting at a desk, taking notes from a lecture—which is hardly what Jesus meant. (You probably know the old definition of a lecture: the means by which the lecturer’s notes become the student’s notes, without passing through the minds of either.)

I have come to think these days that a better word than disciple is probably apprentice. The church is the community of apprentices of Jesus. Like any apprentices, we are learning from the master craftsman how to do the things the master does so well. In the case of Christian apprenticeship, we are learning from Jesus our Teacher—in whatever field we are called—how to do the work of God to restore, renew, and redeem all things. That is why the church—with you and me as part of it—is right there in the middle of Paul’s vision. We are part of this amazing work of God.

I don’t know who you are, but I do know this: that whatever your role is in this world—whether professor, researcher, or student; whether physicist, neurobiologist, or medical ethicist; whether it’s in an office, a classroom, or a lab; whether beginning your career or ending your career or somewhere in the middle—if you are a disciple, an apprentice of Jesus Christ, he will work in you and through you—he is already working in you and through you—to do this work of redeeming, renewing, and restoring all things.

Friends, this is what we were made for, this is worth getting up in the morning for, this is worth giving our all for. Yes, it is the way of suffering and self-sacrifice certainly—Jesus never promised it would be easy—but it is also the way of joy. Isn’t this the heart of the Gospel? That through Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection—God is restoring joy to a fallen world—joy in us, and joy through us and through the church, to the world. ☞

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>A sermon given by John Bowen at the Sunday worship service of the ASA/CSCA/CiS Annual Meeting at McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, on July 27, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1954).

<sup>3</sup>N. T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1986), 73.

<sup>4</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, trans., *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), 1612.

<sup>5</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 140–1.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 1995), 182, 240.

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