

God's Story, Plotline 4: Reconciliation

We must add one more major plotline to complete our overview. Here we have a strange plot twist: why does this God, whose love is unlimited, constantly pick out special groups? The entire Old Testament is concerned with God's special love for his "chosen people," Israel; Jesus, in the New Testament, picks out particular disciples; these disciples then go on to form communities that we now call the church. This is a big reason why people reject the Christian story these days: God's choosiness, the claim that God has chosen Jesus, and Israel, and the church. But in the biblical text we cannot get away from this dynamic. God is not interested first and foremost in individuals, but in creating communities.

There are two ways to read this plotline. One option, running completely contrary to all three of the other plotlines, says that God chooses people that he thinks are better than others. That is, God's choosing creates a competitive order of winners and losers, good and bad people. Given what we have said about our tendencies to idolatry, it is no surprise that some people would interpret God's choosing in a similarly self-serving and competitive way.

But if the other plotlines are correct, this simply cannot be what God is doing. And the Bible takes great pains to show us that this interpretation is wrong. For example, there is a tendency in the Old Testament for Israel to understand its status as God's people in terms of political superiority: our God is the best, so we are the best. We see this too in the Gospels, when Jesus' disciples argue with one another over who is greatest. They assume that their status as disciples ensures that they will have the most power in the coming kingdom.

But in response to the apostles' claims of power, Jesus washes their feet. He does it himself, thereby setting the example that his status (as Lord) is not meant to place him above others, but to place him fundamentally at the service of others. The act of foot washing was so debasing that only the lowest of slaves were expected to do it. Peter exclaims, "You will never wash my feet," for he, understanding Jesus' lordship as superiority, cannot grasp why Jesus would demean himself this way. But Jesus explains that his status as teacher is ordered to lowly service, and that his action is an example of how the disciples should act toward one another. If there is to be competition, it should be competition to serve, not to take first place.

The same theme is echoed in the parable of the final judgment in Matthew's Gospel. This is sometimes read as referring to individuals, but the story says, "All the nations will be gathered before him" (Matt. 25:32). The story is about what it means, in the end, to be a successful nation. Then as now everyone assumed a successful nation was a powerful one, and given that Jesus is presented here as the great emperor over all nations, the nations might assume that their homage to the king will earn them favor. But of course Jesus gives a completely different criterion for judgment. To serve the king is to serve those who are most vulnerable: the sick, the hungry, the exiled, the stranger. Like the foot washing, the judgment involves a completely upside-down standard of judgment, in which status is seen as something to be used for service to others, rather than as a self-serving mark of power over others. The greatest nations will not be those that achieved the most power, but those that best cared for the vulnerable.

The other way—the correct way—to read this plotline is in line with the other three plotlines: God's choosiness is meant for reconciliation, healing, and service, not for furthering competition and power. But why would God use such means? Note that repair—what the Bible calls reconciliation—is not easy. Damage has been done. Patterns have been established. If there is to be real change, and not just nice words, there have to be alternative structures, alternative patterns of behavior, that reshape us toward love of God and neighbor. The alcoholic, for example, needs the Alcoholics Anonymous group, because the group provides a different set of structures and relationships than those in which the alcoholic was trapped before. In God's alternative the hungry are fed, sins are confessed, feet are washed. It is not a world of false, competitive selves. This alternative fellowship gives birth to a new way of living that reconciles what is broken.



When God chooses people he is establishing those real and visible alternatives. Think back to our first plotline: Abraham is called, and promised that he will be the father of a great nation. As the story points out, God's purpose is not to show that Abraham is superior, but to "bless" the entire world. Israel is meant to be a distinctive light to the world, evincing God's noncompetitive, non-idolatrous alternative. Yes, God does take special care of Israel, but not because Israel is better or deserves special treatment. Rather, God does this in order that Israel can fulfill its mission of service to the world.

The same is true of Jesus and his disciples. In the Sermon on the Mount he says, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:14–16). Two things need to be noted here. First, due to a peculiarity of the English language, the passage is often mistakenly applied to individuals. But, in this case, as in most cases in the Gospels, *you* is a plural—"Y'all are the light of the world." Jesus is not asking each individual to let his or her little light shine, but that the disciples shine as a community. Second, their good deeds are not for the purpose of glorifying themselves or earning God's rewards, but so that others might see them and glorify God—or to put it in our terms, that others might see the church and truly see God, as opposed to the idols in their own lives.

This fundamental mission is reinforced and given clarity in one of the most important documents of Vatican II, the constitution on the church. The document is called *Lumen Gentium*—the light to the nations—which already makes the point. The document begins by calling the church a sacrament, the sacrament of Christ to the world. . . . A sacrament is something that makes God's love visible and tangible. It is an effective sign of God's love, meaning a sign that actually puts into effect God's love in the world. The sacraments of the Church aren't there to tell us what we already know. Baptism is not just an elaborate welcome for a baby; the Eucharist is not just an odd meal together. Rather, the sacraments are there to show us what we forget, to show us an alternative to our ordinary ways. The church itself is one big sacrament: just as Christ makes God's love visible and makes it effective, so too the church is meant to do this for Christ.

In all these ways, the fourth plotline, that of God's constant electing or choosing particular communities, is God's way of reconciling the world, of working out the alternative to a world of competition and idolatry by offering a community structured around love and service and forgiveness. Now I hardly need to mention that this community regularly gets it wrong. Actually, this is a major element of the story, as we see from the constant failures of Israel and of the disciples. But God remains faithful, and God continues to make the offer of love. For the alternative would be for God to choose a people to carry out his work, watch them fail, and then say to them, "Forget you. I'm going to find someone better." That's exactly the competitive world. That's the father who does *not* welcome back the prodigal son. God never rejects his people. He persists in loving them so that they can become ever clearer on their mission to reconcile and love others.

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