THE BIBLICAL USE OF NARRATIVE AND THE BENEFITS OF ITS INCLUSION AS THE PRIMARY METHOD OF INSTRUCTION FOR ADULT CONVERTS TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

by

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A Senior Project Submitted to

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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ABSTRACT

The Bible is essentially one grand story focused on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lived a perfect life gave himself into death for the sins of the world. It is not incidental that as God told salvation's story he delicately wove its fabric with the threads of human experience so that fallen man could identify with his holy maker. It is also no accident that God chose to give narratives center place in his Spirit-wrought Word; good stories resonate with the intellectual and emotional faculties of man. Modern scholarship has come to realize this fact in the secular realm and a great deal has been written championing the merits of narratives in instruction, particularly by those in the constructivist school of thought. Although some tenets of constructivism must be rejected by Christians, there is a natural synthesis between narrative teaching and the concept of active knowledge construction. Thus, it is imperative that a basic Bible instruction curriculum be created that uses narratives as the basis of instruction, which has the added benefit of counteracting the effects of biblical illiteracy in America. This thesis project has undertaken to design such a course that traces the promise of the Savior though the ages, using Bible stories as the primary tool for instruction, while at the same time creating an inductive organizational structure that allows learners to gradually grow in their knowledge and understanding of God and his plan of salvation.

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I. BIBLE BACKGROUND

Introduction: Holy Scripture is a Cohesive Narrative

No one was there to see it happen. No human being witnessed the awesome event of God's creating the universe in an instant and shaping and populating the earth by the miraculous power of his word. Adam was even *sleeping* while God performed his final creative act and fashioned Eve from his rib. Given this lack of human observers, why did God have Moses write out all the details of Genesis chapter 1—what God made on each day followed by the echo of his approval, "It was good"? At first glance it seems like such a waste. It would have been a much cleaner composition if Moses had simply written, "God used his word to create a perfect world in six twenty-four hour days," and then moved on to chapter 2; but there we find more of the same, more seemingly unnecessary details. Does it *really* matter that after Adam named all the animals no suitable helper could be found for him? Why does God invite us to identify with Adam's predicament—a perfect man alone in a beautiful and perfect world in which something still wasn't quite right? Why does God record that fateful conversation between the serpent and Eve, when it's all too obvious what the final outcome would be? This reductionist procedure could be applied to the rest of Scripture, and one could surmise that God *could* have given humanity a Cliffs Notes version of Scripture.[1] The inspired writers could have recorded just the cold hard facts in black and white, creating a condensed, boiled-down version of the Word, without entangling readers in the daily lives, conversations, and emotions of hundreds of individuals over the centuries; but experience teaches that condensed is never as satisfying as the real thing. God did not want to write a dry textbook full of names, dates, and events long-since drained of their vitality and meaning. *He wanted to write mankind a story*—a story through which sinful morals could relate to the incomprehensible and perfect God; a story through which the Lord of Life and Love could establish a living relationship with his lost creatures.

At its heart God's Word is a splendid story in which God narrates his plan of salvation and how he carried out that plan in time.[2] Leland Ryken argues that "the most obvious element of literary unity in the Bible is that it tells a story. It is a series of events having a beginning, a

[1] As John tells us at the end of his gospel, the Holy Spirit has in fact already done the editing and reserved the vest gems in the Scriptures: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (Jn. 21:25 – NIV, 1985).

[2] According to Shimon Bar-Efrat a narrative is a form of storytelling in which the narrator acts as a mediator and a selective filter between the reader and actual persons and events. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 13.

middle, and an end[,]"[3] that Scripture like any good story has "unity, coherence, and emphasis."[4] When you survey the Biblical narrative as a whole it has one grand unifying U-shaped plot that plays out between the protagonist (God) and the antagonist (Satan) with man caught in between. It is God who brings the world into being. He takes the initiative to rescue man from sin by enfleshing himself in the person of Jesus Christ to conquer sin, death and Satan. God awakens saving faith in the hearts of believers and promises to create a new heavens and earth at the end of time. The theme of this ongoing conflict is solidly laid out in God's curse of Satan in Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."[5]

As the narrator of salvation's story, God incorporates a variety of literary forms—history, poetry, and prophecy—to shape and enliven the telling of events. Biblical history provides the reader with *contact* with real people and events in time. Poetry explores the *depths* of the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual impact of God's working in the hearts and lives of his people. Prophecy creates *anticipation* of the wonderful future that God's story holds. Within these broad categories of history, poetry, and prophecy we see the overall theme of enmity between God and Satan playing itself out again and again like a geometric fractal in which each episode contributes to and underscores the larger whole.

As the perfect story teller God uses a variety of perspectives. Sometimes he gives a "bird's-eve-view" of history by describing the collective actions and qualities of whole nations while focusing on key events and leaders. At other times the Lord zooms in to let us listen in on conversations and even hear the thoughts and inner struggles of people. In the epistles God sits us down and educates us through the informed perspective of the inspired writers. True, there are times when God's perspective seems somewhat distant and impersonal (e.g. in long lists of genealogies), but even here his purpose is clear: he lists these people whom he intimately knows to provide a vital connection with reality. God was not in the mood to write folk-tales of "once upon a time…" rather he wanted to show his very real love and concern for his creation in real time and concrete ways.

[3] Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 177.
[4] ibid., 14.
[5] NIV 1984.

God Saw Narrative as an Effective Means of Communication

God makes no apologies for communicating through stories that are neither mundane, nor simplistic. The Lord has never been ashamed to hide himself under the cover of foolishness and weakness, much to the dismay of those who imagine that they are wise in the things of this world. He dismisses the reductive logic of the scholar and the abstraction of the philosopher: "Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?"[6] The same God who knew how to assess his creation as "very good," that is perfect, also assesses his word as perfect and flawless.[7] As with everything that God does this is the best way he could achieve his goal. In his wisdom he saw that stories are an effective means of communication. God knows *what* to say and *how* to say it. More properly it should be said, "God knows what *man* needs to know and how he needs to hear it." The Apostle John describes the salvific purpose of God's Word, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."[8] Thus everything that the Lord does, he does with our best interest and salvation in mind.[9]

God has perfect comprehension of the human psyche, the subtle interrelationship between our psychology and physiology, the synergy of reason and emotion in our memory. He knows how our consciousness is wired, what will draw us in, what will make us tune out. God knows all these because just as surely as he formed every cell of Adam's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into him a self-conscious soul,[10] likewise God has also formed every person since in their mother's womb, knowing them personally even before birth.[11] If that were not enough, with one glance the omniscient God searches the heart of every man for all time and eternity, "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind[,]"[12] and "the LORD knows the thoughts of man; he knows that they are futile."[13] The Creator knows his creatures. He knows exactly what we are made of mentally and materially. He knows our intellectual and conceptual

[6] Isa 40:13-14, NIV 1984.
[7] Ps 18:30.
[8] Jn 20:31, NIV 1984.
[9] Ro 8:28.
[10] Ge 2:7.
[11] Jer 1:5.
[12] Jer 17:10, NIV 1984.
[13] Ps 94:11.

limitations. For example: God is omniscient, omnipresent, and eternal. He could have written his word in such a way that only he could understand, but because we are beings trapped in space and time he describes events consecutively—one after the next—so that we can grasp what is going on.[14] In his wisdom and mercy God has decided to take our limited capabilities into account; he knew that we could grasp and understand stories.

The Lord has rightly described himself as the master teacher and the master communicator. Elihu says to Job, "God is exalted in his power. Who is a teacher like him?"[15] and the Psalmist describes God as the one the one who teaches men.[16] Indeed, who can communicate with his creatures like the Lord? Who, but God alone, knows the right words to capture the fleeting and fickle thoughts of man or describe the details of an event without bias and with perfect insight? It was he who gave man not only his consciousness but his mouth.[17] It was he who confused the languages of the earth at Babel.[18] Not only does God have perfect command of human language, he who implanted the ear and formed the eye knows how our senses apprehend his world and his words.[19] Understanding the puny thoughts of man or communicating his own thoughts to man are no difficulty for God. It is the arrogance of man to assume that God cannot adequately or clearly communicate with us. As if God is in any way limited in comprehension or expression. Rather it is the sublimity of God's thoughts that should give man pause for he says: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways[.] …As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."[20] The amazing thing is that it pleases God to send his radiant heavenly wisdom calling to a world of sinful simpletons who by nature refuse to listen to him.[21] By including countless human stories in *his* story, God shows himself to be a teacher who is not afraid to relate or get involved with the messy lives of his students. He reveals himself as a communicator who stoops to the level of his listeners so as to bring them up and carry them along as he enlightens them.

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[14] Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 17.
[15] Job 36:22, NIV 1984.
[16] Ps 94:10.
[17] Ex 4:11.
[18] Ge 11:9.
[19] Ps 94:9.
[20] Isa 55:8,9, NIV 1984.
[21] Pr 1:20-22.

The Psychological and Supernatural Working of the Word

From Scripture we understand that God's Word works psychologically and supernaturally. That the word works psychologically means that God's Word, like any other human communication, touches the intellect, emotion, and will of a person. As an individual studies the Scriptures he or she grows in the knowledge of God and his will so that a deeper understanding of God's wonders and promises develops. When God's Word, his master-plan of salvation, is understood, it also stirs our emotions: the Emmaus disciples asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"[22] This same word also motivates and moves the will so that its commands are happily obeyed, as Paul encourages the Romans, "I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."[23] Without a doubt God's Word is compelling communication that impacts every aspect of the human psyche.

That the word works supernaturally means the Holy Spirit infuses the words of Scripture with his divine power that enables it to create and sustain faith and change hearts and lives. The LORD asks Jeremiah, "Is not my word like fire …and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"[24] Because of the Holy Spirit the word has the power to convict and convince sinners of their hopeless condition and by faith to cling to the merits of Christ alone. Although these two qualities of God's Word are sometimes spoken of separately it must never be forgotten that they are in reality entwined and work together simultaneously. However, it is only natural that a study of the use of narrative in Scripture will have an inherent emphasis on the psychological as opposed to the supernatural working of the Word.

The Prominence of Narrative in the Old Testament

The Old Testament traces the consequences of God's first promise of the Savior through the ages until the stage was set for his Son to come into the world. In his divine wisdom God chose to narrate much of this history through the individual and collective lives of his people. In telling *his* story, God decided to incorporate *our* stories, and in telling them he shows himself to be the master storyteller. The Holy Spirit does not bore us with trivial facts or flood his stories with every detail; rather he saw fit to shape his story in ways that accommodates our psyche. He

[22] Lk 24:32, NIV 1984.
[23] Ro 12:1, NIV 1984.
[24] Jer 23:29, NIV 1984.

decides what dimensions plot and character need to be known and when so that in every sense of the word a traditional "story" is read and heard. As Leland Ryken observes, the Bible contains various plot lines: heroic narratives that focus on an individual; epic histories of nations; comic[25] (U-shaped) plots; and tragedy.[26]

All these plot forms are used with a high degree of regularity, particularly in the historical narratives of the Old Testament. Several well-known stories come to mind. We have the heroic accounts of the judges, such as Samson, who with God's help used a donkey's jawbone to kill a thousand Philistines and whose self-sacrificial death did more for Israel than his life.[27] The heroic plot form shows that people are not just cogs in the machine of God's plan. Rather in his grace he works through the great and small and even the timid and unassuming to carry out his will. The epic of the exodus from Egypt was a transformational event in the history of God's people; a story they were to annually repeat and reflect upon every Passover.[28] Epic histories demonstrate that the Lord is the ruler of nations, as the Lord says through Daniel, "The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."[29] Perhaps the most recognizable comedic plot in the Pentateuch is the story of Joseph. Initially Joseph is hated by his brothers because of Jacob's favoritism and his own arrogance. After being nearly killed by them, he is sold into slavery in Egypt, where after a series of rises and falls, he rises higher than anyone else in the ancient world, just short of Pharaoh himself. In the end Joseph's attitude towards his brothers is totally transformed and he saves the lives of those who had once tried to kill him. Comic plots remind us that trust and reliance on God is never unfounded—God is able to save and prosper his people in life and in death. The use of tragedy is also not uncommon in the Old Testament histories. One need only consider the tragic demise of King Saul, whose kingship began being filled with the Spirit and prophecy but ended with Saul being tormented by evil spirits and employing necromancy.[30] The purpose of tragedy in Scripture is clear: it is not used merely to elicit emotion, but rather as a horrible warning against rejecting God and falling away. All of these different plots lines are contained in clearly organized narratives. When God inspired Moses to record the early history of the earth and his people, he organized Genesis

[25] Here the term comic does not denote humor, but rather a plot line that moves from a problem or crisis towards the eventual resolution of that problem and the triumph of the protagonist.
[26] Ryken, 75-83.
[27] Jdg 15:15; 16:30.
[28] Ex 12:26,27.
[29] Da 5:25, NIV 1984.
[30] 1Sa 10:10; 16:4; 28:7.

around the ten "toledoths" or "histories" that primarily focused on key individuals and their descendants who would play major roles in shaping Israel's and subsequently salvation history.[31] From the time of the exodus through the return from exile we see the Lord vacillating back and forth between epic histories and heroic stories.

Within these manifold plots we also see God's concern for developing the character, the humanness, the *simul justus et peccator* of God's saints. How could sinners ever consider themselves to be the spiritual children of Abraham, the man of faith, if all that was recorded was Abraham's faith at its brightest and best? He was truly given the gift of a heroic faith—a faith that moved him to leave his homeland without knowing where he was going; a faith that was willing to sacrifice his own son to prove his love for God. If this was all the Holy Spirit would have revealed about Abraham's character we would have to conclude ourselves to be illegitimate children because of our frequent doubts, weaknesses, and half-hearted love for God. By God's grace the narrative of Abraham's life also shows Abraham at his lowest. On two different occasions Abraham was so unsure of God's protection that he lied and said Sarah was his sister instead of his wife.[32] We see Abraham and Sarah trying to fulfill God's promise in their own way, by using Sarah's maidservant Hagar. In this regard Abraham is in good company. Sinful human flaws are found in all the other heroes of faith—in Jacob, Moses, David, and more. In all these descriptions it becomes apparent that it was never the Holy Spirit's intent to sanitize his story. Instead, he shows just enough of believer's weaknesses, without dwelling on them, so that readers always keep in mind that *God* is central character and the central actor in salvation's story. In his mercy God upholds and sanctifies those he has justified.

If the narratives of the Old Testament provide overall breadth of content, the Psalms and poetry of the Old Testament provides *depth*, allowing the Holy Spirit to explore the personal impact of events from the poet's perspective. Many of the psalms literally unlock the hearts of God's people and let us step into their souls and experience life right alongside them—we understand their fears and add to their list of grievances; we leap at their joys and drop our jaws drop at God's goodness; we appropriate the peace of God's promises and forgiveness as our very own. Think of the depths of personal insight gained in the Psalms that are not found anywhere else! Without the insight of Psalm 18 it would be tempting to surmise that David relied on his

[31] Carl J. Lawrenz and John C. Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1-11* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 90.
[32] Ge 12:13; 20:2.

own ingenuity while he was on the run from Saul. Instead David said, "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies."[33] Likewise, years later, when David was confronted for his adultery and murder, the sincerity of his simple confession, "I have sinned against the LORD[,]"[34] could be suspect were it not for the bitter anguish and unflinching trust in God's full forgiveness spelled out in Psalm 51! In the poetry of Job we are invited to take a seat with him among the dust and ashes and spend nearly thirty-nine chapters pondering while his faith wrestles with his pain. Thus, the poetry of the Old Testament supplements and reinforces the truths established in the historical narratives by providing the reader with new insights and first person perspectives.

Like the poets, the writings of the prophets serve to expand and explain their historical context, often by masterfully weaving stories into their preaching and teaching. Their writings are full of countless extended illustrations used by God to break through to a rebellious people who were "ever hearing but never understanding."[35] Consider how the prophet Nathan used a simple story about a rich man who stole and slaughtered a poor man's beloved ewe lamb to confront King David when he was content and confident that his sin had passed. Perhaps there is no better example of the prophets' use of story than Ezekiel 16, in which the Lord describes the reason for his hurt and ultimately his judgment upon his unfaithful people. There he likens the people of Judah to a discarded infant—unwanted from the moment it was born—helpless and left thrashing around in its own blood. God says he saw her and took pity on her, covered her nakedness and married her. He washed her from her blood and lavishly adorned her with fine clothes, jewels, and a crown so that soon the perfect beauty the Lord had given her became known among the nations, but then the unthinkable happened—relying on her great beauty, Judah became a prostitute with the nations and their gods, giving away her husband's food and jewels to her lovers and sacrificing her own children to their idols. God laments that she was even worse than a prostitute because she paid others to ravish her, and he promised that she who had shown such contempt for her husband would be treated contemptuously by her lovers—she would be stripped bare and hacked apart by them. In such graphic terms Ezekiel portrays the

[33] Ps 18:2,3, NIV 1984.
[34] 2Sa 12:13, NIV 1984.
[35] Isa 6:9, NIV 1984.

Lord's love and his long-standing exasperation with his people, and in doing so he is echoing the motif of marriage found throughout the prophets. Jeremiah writes,

> How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her.[36]

Likewise through Isaiah the Lord denounces Judah's idolatry, "Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed, you climbed into it and opened it wide; you made a pact with those whose beds you love, and you looked on their nakedness."[37] The theme of marriage and unfaithfulness is just one among many commonly used by the prophets. On the whole they told a wide array of stories in prose and poetry that captured the heart of God's desires for his children and his dealing with the nations.

Thus in the Old Testament we see that narrative takes the center stage. God narrates his interaction with his people as a story in which he selectively reveals essential details concerning individuals and whole groups of people so that Biblical persons are made real and their thoughts, words, and actions fit into a coherent plot line. Through the poetry found in the Psalms and elsewhere, the Holy Spirit adds a dimension of richness and first-person insight to the people and events described in the historical narratives. The prophets used stories and shorter vivid illustrations to communicate the need for God's people to repent, trust in his gracious promises, and anticipate their fulfillment.

If the narrative accounts were removed from the Old Testament it would be a sparse volume indeed, but God had a purpose for devoting such time and effort and care to these stories. A key admonition that rings throughout the Old Testament is God's call to *remember*. God recorded and preserved these narratives so that his people would remember; so that they would have no excuse for ignorance. They were to remember his gracious promises to Abraham, their miraculous deliverance out of Egypt, God's personal covenant with them at Sinai, how he had set his heart on them and fulfilled his love to them. The book of Judges catalogs the awful consequences that came upon Israel for forgetting God and his mighty deeds.[38] The stories of the Old Testament make it clear that God wanted his people to embrace him as the God of love and power who takes *personal interest* in the lives of his people and takes action on their behalf.

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[36] La 1:1,2, NIV 1984.
[37] Isa 57:8.
[38] Judg. 2:10, 3:7.

The Prominence of Narrative in the New Testament

The gospel accounts occupy a unique position in Scripture, and serve as a transition and a turning point in the spiritual history of God's people. The first coming of the Son of God was at once the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the beginning of something new. When Jesus appeared to the disciples on that first resurrection evening he said to them, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."[39] At the same time, the writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that the Son of God is the final authority in faith and life: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."[40] Thus, it is no accident that at the heart of God's story we see the life-story of our Savior Jesus Christ play out before our eyes.

The incarnation of the Son of God is so important that the Holy Spirit inspired it to be recorded at four different times with unique emphases in each gospel—emphases that were initially aimed at different audiences. Matthew's gospel seeks to identify with a predominantly Jewish readership by making numerous connections to the Old Testament and focusing on the teachings of Jesus. On the other hand Mark's gospel is comparatively short and fast-paced. In it he testified to the many miracles of Jesus that proved him to be the Christ, the almighty Son of God sent to save the world. Luke's more thoroughly chronological account of Jesus' life shows that he was not about to let Jewish social conventions prevent him from ministering to *all* people, particularly the gentiles, women, and the tax collectors, prostitutes, and "sinners"—the undesirables of society. John's gospel supplements the other three because the majority of John's accounts are totally unique to his gospel and about half of his gospel is devoted to a careful narration of the events of Holy Week. However, apart from these general differences there is also a common set of accounts shared by all four gospels that highlight Jesus' person and ministry. All four accounts contain the baptism of Jesus, in which the visible presence of the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, inaugurating his public ministry.[41] Each gospel has at least one account (Luke has two) of Jesus' raising someone from the dead, thereby showing his almighty power over death.[42] All contain the account of the feeding of the five thousand—likely the most

[39] Lk 24:44, NIV 1984.
[40] Heb 1:1-2, NIV 1984.
[41] Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21,22; Jn 1:31-34.
[42] Mt 9:18-26; Mk 5:22-43; Lk 8:41-56; Jn 11:1-44.

widely witnessed of all his miracles.[43] Finally, the gospel writers include the essential details of Christ's suffering, death, burial, and resurrection. Thus, we see the Holy Spirit narrating four carefully crafted accounts of Jesus' life that allow for flexibility and diversity of perspective within the unified whole of who he was and what he came to accomplish.

Within the gospel accounts themselves we see that Jesus used every opportunity he could to incorporate Old Testament narrative into his teaching and was often incredulous that his listeners (often the scribes and Pharisees) had not made the appropriate connections and applications. When the Pharisees were indignant that the disciples were "working" by plucking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus replied, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?" and then proceeded to remind them how David had not been condemned for eating the consecrated bread.[44] Again when the Pharisees questioned Jesus about the legality of divorce, he went back to the creation account:

> Haven't you read … that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.[45]

Likewise when the Sadducees tried to ridicule the notion of the physical resurrection at the end of time, Jesus directed them to the LORD's name given to Moses at the burning bush to prove that God is the God of the living.[46] Although it is not recorded whether or not Jesus retold entire Old Testament narratives in his teaching, he assumed that his listeners *already knew* these stories. The fact that Jesus often went to specific scenes and took quotations from the larger context underscores this point; the narratives of Scripture are so rich and complete that the unchanging God demonstrates his unchanging dealings with man through the details of Biblical stories.

During his ministry Jesus made references to some of the most popular and memorable persons in Israel's history including Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, and Solomon. He was divinely capable of making connections between the events from Israel's past and the topic of the day. He compared his coming crucifixion to the bronze snake that Moses had erected in the desert[47] and his three days in the grave with Jonah's three days in the belly of a fish.[48] Jesus not

[43] Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:32-44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-13.
[44] Mk 2:25,26.
[45] Mt 19:4-6, NIV 1984.
[46] Mt 12:26.
[47] Jn 3:14.
[48] Mt 12:40.

only cursed the cities of Galilee for their general refusal to repent, he made their unbelief all the more striking by comparing them to Tyre and Sidon, Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that had been destroyed by God because of their wickedness.[49] So Jesus often incorporated persons and episodes from Israel's cultural and religious past into his teaching to awaken the lessons, thoughts, and emotions connected with them.

Perhaps nothing in Jesus' teaching repertoire exhibits the power of narrative more than his frequent use of parables to answer questions and describe the work of God.[50] The Greek word παραβολή literally means "to throw along-side," that is to explain a concept that is abstract or unknown on the basis of something that is known and concrete. Jesus parables can vary widely in number depending on how they are defined. Some bible scholars include even brief illustrations as parables (e.g. when Jesus compares believers to the salt of the earth), while others narrowly limit them to the longer "stories" of Jesus (e.g. the parable of the sower).[51] In any case all the parables take abstract concepts and make them concrete, embodying them in the rudiments of daily life. When asked, "Who is my neighbor?"[52] Jesus could have said, "Your neighbor is anyone who needs your help," but instead he chose to tell the parable of the good Samaritan, which not only illustrated Jesus' point, but also undoubtedly gave the man food for thought about what real mercy means, and it has nothing to do with only loving those who love you. It means showing compassion on your *enemy*.

There are numerous qualities of parables that make them psychologically powerful and memorable. First of all, their content drew from everyday experience and objects from daily life in ancient Israel—Jesus could literally point to the fields, the fishermen, and the farmer as he taught. The parables were extremely simple stories with comparatively few characters, who tended to fit stereotypical roles (e.g. a Pharisee, a tax collector).[53] Yet often embodied in these characters we see the sinful impulse inside everyone—the self-righteous pride of the Pharisee, the brutality of the unmerciful servant, the self-indulgence of the prodigal son.[54] Jesus was not so much concerned that we see *others* in the parables as that we see *ourselves*. Typically the

[49] Mt 11:21-24; Isa 23; Ge 19:1-28.
[50] Roy Zuck notes that this accounts for almost one quarter of Jesus' teaching. Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 306.
[51] Herman Harrell Horne, *Teaching Techniques of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), 77.
[52] Lk 20:29, NIV 1984.
[53] Ryken, 140.
[54] Ibid., 143.

parables contained internal and external conflict among the characters and surprise resolutions (e.g. the parable of the workers in the vineyard).[55] Thus, in the gospels we see narrative being used to tell the story of our Savior's life and to enliven his teaching and preaching.

When one considers the epistles and the book of Revelation, their narrative underpinning are not as easily recognizable, but they are there. As all the epistles were written to those who were already believers, the knowledge of Jesus' life story and the Old Testament are already implied. Like Jesus, Paul frequently used the historical accounts of the Old Testament (especially Abraham) as case studies for his doctrinal discussions, to prove that his teaching of salvation by grace alone, apart from the law, was nothing new, but had always been found in Scripture.[56] The entire letter to the Hebrews uses the corporate and individual examples of Israel's history to exhort God's persecuted Christians to faith and trust in the grace of God. Lastly, perhaps no book in Scripture is as dramatic and vivid as Revelation, in which John sees visions of heavenly messengers, wars, destruction, plague, and judgment that culminate in heaven restored. How fitting that as the closing chapter of God's Word he should give his people comfort in their present trials by previewing what is to come!

Thus, the prominence of narrative in the Holy Scriptures cannot be understated. We can equate the Bible to one grand salvation story centered in Jesus Christ. The unfolding of this narrative from Eden to eternity, from the *protevangelium* to our promised heavenly home is the driving force of Scripture. We have seen that the histories, poetry, prophecy, and epistles of Scripture all contribute to this meta-narrative with their own unique emphases and insights. It is also evident that the use of stories—as supporting historical references and as imaginative illustrations—is an indispensible and essential element of how God has chosen to reveal himself to us and instruct us the truths of the Christian faith. For these reasons Scriptural narrative should in no way be overlooked or minimized as we seek to make Christ known to all people, because if we lose the stories we lose touch with *what* and *how* our God wants to teach us. As Paul writes, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."[57]

[55] Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 316, 317.
[56] Consider Gal 3 and Ro 4.
[57] Ro 15:4, NIV 1984.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A few preliminary remarks are in order before beginning a review of what current literature says about the power and effectiveness of narrative. First, the majority of researchers in the field of narrative education are secular theorists, whose studies naturally disregard the working of the Holy Spirit and the unique content and arrangement of the Holy Scriptures. When they speak of "narratives" and "stories," they typically mean narratives, either spoken or written, produced by man, both fiction and non-fiction. Second, much of their research (except for more recent brain studies using MRI's) has been qualitative instead of quantitative for obvious reasons (i.e. How can a researcher objectively "test" a person's level of interest or emotional response or assess an individual's ability to recall the same information whether told them deductively or through a story?). Lastly, because the theoretical foundations of narrative theory are based largely on constructivism this section will also include an evaluation of constructivist epistemology. Throughout this section Biblical connections and applications (both positive and negative) will also be included for discussion.

The Power of Narrative

If the average layperson is asked to recite their favorite Bible passage, chances are they might wriggle their hands and mumble an answer, but when asked to tell their favorite Bible story words come pouring out, "David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion's den, Samson and Delilah," and on and on. Why is that? What gives stories this special power to grab our attention, our emotion, and our memory? It is often said that stories *pull us in*. Stories have a draw, an intrinsic appeal that is difficult to quantify or qualify. We love stories because if only for a moment they transport us from our day-to-day reality and put us in another.[58] Stories engage our imagination; they require that we invest ourselves into their unfolding and unpacking their words. If a story is simply sitting on a shelf it is nothing but *words*, but when it is opened up magic happens: the letters disappear, and we see *worlds*. Worlds that however vividly described they may be must be supplemented by our own experience. "We must fill in, from our own store of knowing, that which is unspoken. In so doing, we create as well as discover meaning, and we pose the questions we ourselves need to answer."[59] Authors divine and human rarely need to tell the reader the emotional states of the characters; he or she supplies that all on

[58] Ryken, 34.
[59] Marsha Rossiter, "Narrative and Stories in Adult Teaching and Learning," *ERIC Digest* (2002), 3.

their own. Humans are by nature social creatures for whom God said it was not good to be alone. When a narrative is read the reader instantly looks for connections between himself and the characters he encounters. Perhaps part of the power of stories is as simple as, "[P]eople have an interest in people."[60]

Well-written stories have intrinsic emotional appeal that makes them more memorable than abstract concepts. In any narrative the purpose of crafting character and plot is to lead the reader to empathize with the situation. Shimon Bar-Efrat puts it beautifully:

> [Characters] generally arouse considerable emotional involvement; we feel what they feel, rejoice in their gladness, grieve at their sorrow and participate in their fate and experiences. Sometimes the characters arouse our sympathy, sometimes our revulsion, but we are never indifferent to them. We want to know them, to see how they act within their environment, and to understand their motives and desires. We follow their struggles to fulfill their aspirations and pay particular attention to everything they say, for when they speak to one another they are also addressing us.[61]

As a story progresses not only is new content learned on what characters are doing, we also simultaneously share in the internal states of the characters. We have a vested interest in what they experience because we will experience vicariously through them.

In the past it was thought that emotion and cognition were two separate functions of the human psyche—you might *feel* sad, but you could still *learn* your math lesson—but today most psychologists agree that empathy is both affective and cognitive, that is there is no real difference between learning and emotion; they are part of an integrated whole.[62] Neuroscience and brain imaging now allows scientists to see the real-time mechanics of empathy.[63] Somewhat unsurprisingly, one of their findings is that emotion plays a critical role in creating memories.[64] This simply means that when a situation is emotionally charged it will be more vividly remembered. Everyone has had this experience. Likely very few people can remember what they ate for dinner three weeks ago on Tuesday, but no one has a problem recalling their first kiss or our first day of kindergarten—because these were very emotional events. Scientists have also discovered that emotional situations, both real and imaginary, "activates [sic] automatic representations of that same state in the onlooker, including responses in the nervous system and

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[60] Zuck, 310.
[61] Bar-Efrat, 47.
[62] Suzanne Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 208.
[63] Ibid., 207.
[64] Pat Wolfe, "The Role of Meaning and Education in Learning," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 110 (Summer, 2006): 37.

the body."[65] This means that when a person imagines someone being in pain it triggers the same reactions in the brain and body that actual pain would cause, without triggering the pain centers in the brain.

God knows how our brains are hardwired, and he has definitely filled his word with emotionally charged and suspenseful situations that are even more powerful because they *actually happened*! Ryken notes that the Scriptures are full of different kinds of conflict—people fighting for physical survival and spiritual conflict within.[66] Why would Cain kill his brother Able and then try to hide it from God? What thoughts must have been running through Abraham and Isaac's minds as the father bound his son and lifted the knife, ready to slay him? Would the apostle Peter meet the same fate as James and be executed at the hand of King Herod? The narratives of Scripture abound with danger, emotion, and unpredictability involving an infinite variety of persons and circumstances that naturally bring out an empathetic response. In addition the very purpose of Scripture is emotionally charged. In its pages we find that our eternal life and present peace and purpose hangs in the balance of God's truth. What could possibly be more emotionally engaging than that?

Narratives are also an effective way to translate meaning from one culture to another and one area of expertise to another. Juanita Johnson-Bailey notes: "Because we make sense of our very existence by recalling, reflecting, and reviewing the stories that make up our individual life narratives, using narrative as a classroom tool is not only logical but extremely practical. Each of us can relate more easily to an idea in the form of a story."[67] Every field of study has its own jargon and set of terms that take on a particular meaning within that context. If people are not careful it is easy for them to "talk past" each other if words and concepts are not carefully defined and those definitions mutually shared and shaped.[68] Biblical narrative can be extremely helpful in this regard, because although Scripture can use the same word with a number of different meanings (e.g. justify[69]), it often does so in a specific *concrete* context that clarifies an otherwise abstract definition. Thus, narratives can provide a living example of what words mean.

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[65] Keen, 211.
[66] Ryken, 40-41.
[67] Juanita Johnson–Bailey, "Learning in the Dimension of Otherness: A Tool for Insight and Empowerment," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 126 (Summer, 2010): 77.
[68] Ernst von Glasersfeld. "Cognition, Construction of Knowledge, and Teaching," *Syntheses* 1 (Jul 1989): 132.
[69] Compare Lk 10:29 and Lk 18:14.

Another strength of stories is that they provide concrete situations and models that foster personal growth and change. Reading narratives from other cultures and other perspectives can help us learn about them and broaden our own social and cultural perspective. "When we hear another person's story, we search for how this story might relate to our own—we look for common ground. Inevitably, we also notice now their experience might be different from ours."[70] Some episodes in God's Word put the reader in a strange world where the specific historical and cultural setting needs to be explored in order for people and events to be fully understood. Although we are removed from the time and place in which the Bible was written we can come to appreciate the rich meaning and symbolism behind various social, cultural, and religious practices.[71] At the same time we also know that God's Word also transcends time and culture. Jesus did not let his Jewish culture get in the way when he, a Jewish rabbi, had an opportunity to reach out to a Samaritan woman who was trapped in an adulterous lifestyle. Paul, who was a self-described "Hebrew of Hebrews,"[72] encourages us, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."[73] As one grows in their understanding of Scripture's stories, their cultural perspective will undoubtedly be challenged, but by God's grace it will also be broadened so that they see how culture can become a tool to serve the gospel.

Stories can give the reader a new perspective on life. "A clear and compelling narrative… is not a diversion; the best stories make our lives more understandable and focused."[74] We gain insight about ourselves, our own thoughts and relationships by learning about others. To put it in a slightly different way, "New ideas, concepts, and perspectives can help learners… generalize and apply their consciousness in a wider range of situations."[75] When a reader identifies with a character and witnesses how that reacts in a remarkable way to adverse circumstances, they are then emboldened to consider changing their own pattern of thinking and behavior. "Stories of others' success can stimulate learners' imaginations, opening up new

[70] Johnson-Bailey, 79.
[71] Such as the practices of foot-washing, marriage, and the Old Testament sacrificial system.
[72] Php 3:5, NIV 1984.
[73] 1 Co 9:22, NIV 1984.
[74] Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998), 48.
[75]Barry G. Sheckley and Sandy Bell, "Experience, Consciousness, and Learning: Implications for Instruction," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 110 (Summer, 2006): 47.

worlds and ways of thinking and acting."[76] This is especially true of Bible stories that provide God-pleasing models of faith and life.[77] The concept of using Scriptural models as grounds for personal change is regularly found in Scripture. The apostle James reminds his readers:

> Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.[78]

Of course Jesus Christ is the perfect model of godly living and bearing the Christian cross. Jesus *lived* the words he preached. His command to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven"[79] is given even, greater affective impact as he pleads from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."[80] The same God who encourages believers to run the race of faith in the footsteps of those who have gone before us, also promises never to leave us or forsake us. As a believer reads God's Word and identifies himself with God's people he or she will see with ever greater clarity and conviction that they are part of a larger community of faith that spans space and time.[81]

The Inherent Weaknesses of Narrative

Teaching using narrative does not *necessarily* mean that Biblical doctrine or any subject will be more readily understood. Like all forms of instruction it needs to be used judiciously and understanding its inherent weaknesses and limitations. Although narrative has the advantage of making the abstract concrete, connecting to emotion, and experience, it does have other significant psychological hurdles to overcome. One of the weaknesses of narrative-based-teaching is the danger of cultural irrelevancy because "human beings… tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like us[.]"[82] This means that if the reader feels that a story is totally beyond their realm of cultural or life experience they may dismiss it out of hand because they cannot make sense of it. For example, if the reader does not understand the social stigma of being barren in the ancient world, Sarai's giving Hagar to

[76]Nancy Lloyd Pfahl and Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner, "Creating New Directions with Story: Narrating Life Experience as Story in Community Adult Education Contexts," *Adult Learning*. 18 (Sum-Fall 2007): 12.
[77] Karen G. Massey, "The Narrative Model for Teaching the Bible," *Review & Expositor*. 2 (Spring, 2010): 201.
[78] Jas 5:10,11, NIV 1984.
[79] Mt 5:44, 45, NIV 1984.
[80] Lk 23:34, NIV 1984.
[81] Wiessner and Pfahl note that sharing one's personal narrative with others can change one's perspective by making them feel part of a broader community or organization (30).
[82]Keen, 214.

Abraham could cause undue hatred or disgust with Abraham. The same could be said for sacrificial practices and marriage customs. Obviously the Holy Spirit is not ignorant of the barrier that character and cultural differences can put between the word and the reader. Shimon Bar-Efrat notes that physical description of Biblical persons rarely goes beyond mere generalities.[83] One possible explanation for this lack of characteristics may be that it helps readers more easily identify with biblical characters. Moreover Allyssa McCabe has found that cultural relevancy also effects how stories are remembered. We tend to recall stories from our own culture with greater detail than those from a foreign culture, and we even remember and reshape stories to make them fit our worldview.[84] Thus, Bible teachers need to know the time and culture of the Bible so as to mitigate the negative effects it can have on uninformed students and readers.

Stories naturally invite the reader to identify with their characters, especially the protagonist, but sometimes the opposite can happen. Another possible downside of teaching with narratives is that the audience to empathize with the wrong character, which causes them to have negative feelings for the protagonist or even the narrator.[85] This experience is not uncommon when teaching Bible instruction class (hereafter BIC) or Bible history. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah provides an excellent example. Instead of focusing on God's gracious concern and rescue of Lot and his family, it very possible that a reader could identify with what they perceive as the "unjust" destruction of *all* the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They could argue, "Sure, many of the men that surrounded Lot's house were evil, but did every one of their wives and children also deserve to die?" Similar sentiments come to mind when readers first hear of God's command to exterminate the Canaanites. Thus, an emotional attachment to the wrong characters can make evil look good (or innocent) and good evil. Worse than that it can create anger and distrust towards God, the biblical narrator. Once again, in such instances Bible teachers would be wise to remind students of the big plan, the big story of God's grace—to preserve his promise to Abraham until the Messiah (who incidentally paid for the sins of these perverse people) should come. Such lessons of judgment also teach us that although God's anger is long-suffering, he is also altogether righteous and cannot tolerate sin and so must condemn it.

[83] Bar-Efrat, 48.
[84] McCabe, 8, 9.
[85] Keen, 214-215.

There is also the danger that stories, more than deductive statements, can be misinterpreted. Because stories invite the reader to create meaning, to wrestle with what is transpiring in the text, there is always the risk of subjective interpretation of events that does not conform to what the divine author intended.[86] If a student of Scripture lacks the basic understanding that "without faith it is impossible to please God,"[87] he or she can easily come away from the accounts of Cain and Able or Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac with the notion that our good works earn God's favor, which totally overturns the Bible's core doctrine that we are saved by grace alone. Correction obviously needs to take place, but it must be done patiently and gently. We need to create a classroom environment that is "psychologically safe," in which students can take risks or voice their opinions without fear of reprisal or "wrong" answers.[88] Perhaps the best way this can be accomplished is to ask students, "What reasons led you to your conclusion?" This way the instructor can see where their thinking went wrong and what emphasis they were placing on different parts of the story.

We have already noted that a strength of stories is that they encourage the personal, emotional, and imaginative investment of the reader. Unfortunately this great strength can also be a great weakness, especially if students lack energy or motivation. Telling stories is also time-consuming. What is gained in richness of detail and experience is gained at the expense of time. It takes much less time to say, "Jesus forgives your sins," than to read through Psalm 51. For both of these reasons it makes sense to "balance" Bible stories with declarative passages from Scripture.

Thus, current research suggests that in spite of its limitations, if narrative is used carefully it is a powerful and effective means of communication. People are naturally drawn to stories. They capture interest and maintain attention. We identify with characters and invest our intellect and emotion into what they experience. Better yet, what transpires is not purely entertainment; it teaches us about our world and about *ourselves*—in opening ourselves up to new perspectives we also open ourselves up to change. It is no stretch to say that God knows very well the affective

[86] This issue is compounded in cases of descriptive Scripture, where the Holy Spirit is merely describing what happened without making value judgments or encouraging our emulation (e.g. when the early believers held all their goods in common – Acts 4:32-35).
[87] Heb 11:6, NIV 1984.
[88] Pat Wolfe, "The Role of Meaning and Education in Learning," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 110 (Summer, 2006): 40.

impact of stories, so in his wisdom he also chose to imbue the stories of Scripture with his divine power.

Narrative and the Constructivist Model

In the realm of secular education and knowledge theory those that champion the benefits and use of narrative instruction typically belong to the constructivist school of thought. Learning theory can be divided into two basic schools: behaviorism and constructivism.[89] Simply stated behaviorism says that learning is an "outside-in" operation; positive and negative conditions in the environment will ultimately determine whether or not something is learned.[90] On the other hand constructivism takes more of an "inside-out" approach to knowledge. The premise of constructivism is that "knowledge is not part of an objective, external reality that is separate from the individual. Instead, human knowledge… is a human construction."[91] This means that in constructivism it is the thinking *self* that has priority, not necessarily the content to be mastered. So what is the link between constructivism and narrative instruction? Because of the strengths of narrative discussed above, it is a prime example of how the brain is *actively* forced to construct and reconstruct meaning in what it processes. In essence the reader does not enter the situation as a blank slate, rather he brings his previous experiences that make connections with and shape and shade what is learned. Three of the most prominent constructivist theorists are John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and most recently David Kolb.

John Dewey (1959-1952) was a leader in the progressive education movement. His most influential work, *Experiential Education* (1938), is seen by many as a pioneer in constructivist thought.[92] In *Experiential Education* Dewey questioned the contemporary educational system in the United States because as he saw it educators were trying to impose learning "from above and outside" without realizing the "intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education."[93] Later he expands on this critique:

> There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation

[89] Lisa M. Baumgartner and others, *Adult Learning Theory: A Primer,* ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (2003): 8.
[90] Margaret E. Gredler, *Learning and Instruction: Theory Into Practice*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1997), 16,17, 67.
[91] Ibid., 57.
[92] David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984), 5.
[93] John Dewey, *Experience and Education: The 60th Anniversary Edition* (West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1998), 4, 7.

> of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater that its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying.[94]

Here Dewey argues that the student should have center stage in the learning process. New content should not simply be deposited into his brain, like money being put into a bank only to be drawn out later, instead instruction should be tailored to fit current capabilities and immediate application. Dewey maintained that past knowledge (i.e. scientific truths) needs to be taught in such a way that it engages the present with an eye for the future.[95] This means that true learning does not take place when understanding is "compartmentalized" in an isolated (i.e. classroom) environment because "[it] is so disconnected from the rest of experience that it is not available under the actual conditions of life."[96] This connectedness is achieved by linking new experiences to earlier ones so that progress can be made.[97] The concept of the learner's active involvement in creating "connectedness" with previous thoughts and experiences is one of the hallmarks of constructivist thought. Some theorists like, Von Glasersfeld, go so far as to argue it is a fallacy to imagine that "words convey ideas or knowledge" or that there are any independent facts apart from subjective and culturally created reality.[98] Dewey consistently maintained that any experience involves an interaction of objective (i.e. external realities) and internal conditions[99] and condemned those who in an overreaction against "traditional" education chose to focus exclusively on internal conditions.[100] However, he also argues that ideas must be "hypotheses" to be evaluated and explored not final truths. "The moment they are taken to be first truths in themselves there ceases to be any reason for scrupulous examination of them."[101] To Dewey's credit it should be noted that he never took his epistemology to an extreme position, but he clearly opened the door for what might be called its logical conclusion (i.e. the outright denial of objective truth).

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a psychologist who did extensive studies on the cognitive development of children. The foundational premise of his theory is that "intelligence constructs

[94] Ibid., 77-78.
[95] Ibid., 10,11, 52.
[96] Ibid., 49.
[97] Ibid., 90.
[98] Von Glasersfeld, 133, 122.
[99] Dewey, 39.
[100] Ibid., 39.
[101] Ibid., 109.

the cognitive structures it needs in the process of adaptation with the environment."[102] As a true constructivist Piaget said that the learner was never static, rather he was always interacting and self-generating meaning from his surroundings. Piaget's work is noteworthy because it provided the conceptual mechanisms through which learning takes place and that mechanism was one's sensory perceptions. Pat Wolfe summarizes this concept quite well:

> [T]he brain is a patter-seeking organ. It is always scanning the environment to determine if what it is sensing is something it has experienced before. To make this decision, the brain searches its existing networks to find a place where the new information "fits."[103]

As an individual's consciousness struggles to make "sense" of the incoming data the organizing principle is one of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the "integration of external elements into an organism's structures"[104] and accommodation is "the adjustment of internal structures to the particular characteristics of a specific situation."[105] According to this model learning takes place when one's schema is challenged and effectively changed—when their prior assumptions, thought patterns, and behaviors are modified.

David Kolb (1939-present) is a Professor of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University, who has written extensively on experiential and conversational learning. In line with Dewey he places learner experience at the heart of his epistemology. He defines experiential learning as "a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior."[106] As a constructivist he argues that "learning is …a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience[,]"[107] and he agrees with Piaget that knowledge is created by mental tension and conflict.[108] Kolb stands out in that he believes that in order for true learning to take place there not only needs to be an initial experience, reflection, and conceptual change, there also needs to be a measure of competency to apply these changes to diverse decisions and circumstances.[109] Kolb has also done collaborative research in conversational learning theory "whereby learners construct

[102] Gredler, 203.
[103] Wolfe, 37.
[104] Gredler, 210.
[105] Ibid., 211.
[106] Kolb, 21.
[107] Ibid., 26.
[108] Ibid., 30.
[109] Ibid., 30.

meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversation."[110] According to this theory it is also true that learners "converse" with texts that have brought them different understanding and experience.[111] In conversational learning change takes place not merely through experience but also through reflection—hearing what others say and considering how it applies to oneself and their life situations.[112]

Reconciling Constructivism and Christianity

There is much in constructivist thought that is totally incompatible with Christianity. Although Dewey advocates for greater autonomy of the learner and freedom from the domination of authority,[113] he does allow for some external controls, so long as they are "democratically" imposed by the consent of the individual and the community.[114] Furthermore, Dewey saw reliance on the "fixed authorities" of the past as a result of intellectual, emotional, and economic insecurity that were out of touch with present experience (i.e. science) and warns that education can move "backwards to the intellectual and moral standards of a pre-scientific age."[115] Clearly there is little room in Dewey's experiential order for the great I Am—the unchangeable God—who claims complete moral authority over his creatures and whose word stand firm forever. Similarly, when it is declared that words are incapable of conveying meaning or that *objective* reality is subjectively construed, the authority of the word is summarily denied. Edward Koehler writes, "Because the Word of God was intended for human beings to learn and know, it was necessary that it be revealed in words of human language, intelligible to human minds."[116] These propositions directly contradict that God's word is truth itself, and ultimately can be used to deny his very existence!

However, as Christians we do not need to reject everything that constructivism has to offer. It is not inconsistent with Scripture to assume that each person constructs their own meaning and "filters" new experiences through the lens of past experiences. Teachers need to be especially cognizant of what words are used so that they are appropriately defined and clearly

[110] Ann C. Baker, Patricia J. Jensen, and David A. Kolb. eds., *Conversational Learning: An Experiential Approach to Knowledge Creation* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2002), 207.
[111] Ibid., 9.
[112] Ibid., 127.
[113] Dewey, 24-25.
[114] Ibid., 58, 60.
[115] Ibid., 108, 113.
[116] Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teachings of the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 1.

understood. Just because someone can memorize a definition or even a Bible passage, does not necessarily mean that they know it and can apply it to themselves! In addition Christians need not reject the constructivist principle that in order for learning to be meaningful it must challenge our thinking and actively engage our experience. From a practical standpoint God's law and gospel are pure confrontation. The law makes demands of us that we cannot keep—"Be holy, because I am holy!"[117]—and declares us depraved even from birth. In contrast the gospel confronts us with the beautiful reality—that unbelievable as it may seem—sinners stand completely justified before God because of the suffering and death of his incarnate Son. Lastly, something can also be learned from the constructivists' emphasis on experience in learning. The Bible is nothing if not practical and full of applications. Paul reminds Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."[118] Thus, using Biblical narrative as a basis for instruction incorporates all the strengths of constructivism without any of the weaknesses by: 1.) allowing learners to bring their prior experiences into the teaching situation in a non-threatening way 2.) providing clarity of expression and immediate illustrations of abstract concepts 3.) engaging learners on a number of levels (i.e. spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, culturally, etc.) 4.) encouraging immediate applications.

Forming Content Interconnections through Biblical Narratives

As was previously noted, a large part of learning is making connections. However, these connections go beyond linkages between the learner and the content and include internal connections within the content itself. When the Holy Spirit inspired God's Word he designed it to be full of internal connections—references to people and places, allusions and echoes of past events, and pictures revisited time and again. As learners are walked through key Biblical narratives in clear chronological order they will be encouraged to do what Scripture does naturally: to make historical and personal connections with prior persons and specific episodes. This in turn creates a foundational framework for *future* understanding by explaining *why* and *where* a story fits into the grand scheme of salvation's story as it unfolds. In essence teaching stories promotes the understanding and retention both of other stories and the rest of Scripture.

[117] 1 Pe 1:16, NIV 1984.
[118] 2 Ti 3:15,16.

Telling the stories of Scripture also allows for the *gradual* building of knowledge into larger concepts that are learner-discovered rather than teacher imposed. For example, when teaching the topic of original sin the instructor could simply cite a number of passages describing man's spiritual nature as dead, blind, and hostile to God. This amounts to the learner being told what to believe. In comparison the same truths could also be taught through a careful reading and examination of Adam and Eve's condition and disposition towards God and each other before and after the fall. Both of these methodologies arrive at the same conclusion, but the latter *demonstrates* the very real and immediate consequences of sin and allows the learner arrive at these conclusions by active learning and knowledge construction.

Fighting Forgetfulness: The Threat of Biblical Illiteracy

In the foregoing we have seen how God has chosen to reveal himself and his gracious plan for redeeming humankind through Holy-Spirit-inspired, faith-working stories. Yet when we look at the world around us we see that the knowledge of these stories, to say nothing of belief in them, is fading fast. A recent (2010) survey by the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life confirms what many Christian pastors and teachers have suspected for years—that there is an alarmingly low level of Biblical literacy in the United States.[119] Kristin Swenson gives a simple yet comprehensive definition of what "Biblical literacy" includes: "[The] ability to identify significant passages and stories, people, places, and things in the Bible; it means knowing something about the Bible's organization, wide-ranging historical contexts and original languages."[120] Needless to say, the majority of Americans do not even know the basic facts of Christianity, much less possess the broad range of concepts and knowledge that Swenson's definition suggests. Nor should we imagine that this problem is limited to unbelievers. As a matter of fact this same study found that only white evangelicals and Mormons had a better recollection of basic Biblical facts than atheists and agnostics, and even more sobering was the fact that when all Christians[121] are lumped together, on average atheists and agnostics actually scored higher than believers! What a truly terrifying state of affairs exists among us when those who deny and question God's existence know more about his revelation than his worshipers!

[119] The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey." Available from http://pewforum.org/other-beliefs-and-practices/u-s-religious-knowledge-survey.aspx; Internet.
[120] Kristin M. Swenson, "Biblically Challenged: Overcoming Scriptural Illiteracy," *Christian Century* 122 (Nov 2009): 23.
[121] This grouping includes Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons.

There could be any number of reasons for widespread Biblical illiteracy that will not be fully explored in this paper. Among Christians it's possible that poor catechetical training and a lack of doctrinal clarity and content in sermons is in part to blame.[122] Or is it something larger, a gradual cultural shift within American culture that has finally discarded even the veneer of Christianity and embraced a post-modern and pluralistic mindset? Many significant statistical trends point in this direction, especially among younger adults.[123] Regardless of the reasons the lack of Biblical knowledge in America it is a reality that pastors and teachers alike will have to confront in their day-to-day ministry.

So then, what is the solution to Biblical illiteracy? Some, such as Stephen Prothero, the chair of religion department at Boston University, think an overhaul of our public education system is in order. He advocates that the instruction of the basic beliefs of *all* religions become mandatory in public schools.[124] Prothero makes the argument that in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized *everyone* should possess a basic understanding of world religions because religion plays an integral role in cultural understanding and national and world politics.[125] As Christians we would reject Prothero's argument for a number of reasons: 1.) His goals come from a purely secular and utilitarian mindset. Prothero has no interest in spreading the gospel of Christ-crucified; rather he imagines that if the public is better educated on religious matters citizens will be more responsible and get along. 2.) If the "Christianity" taught in public schools is robbed of its exclusivity and put on equal footing with all other world religions, it thereby ceases to be true Christianity. 3.) At the same time, if the truth of salvation through faith in Christ alone is taught, it will not foster harmony but instead create division.[126] 4.) Prothero's

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[122] Mollie Ziegler Hemingway, "Flunking Pew's Pop Quiz: Good thing the Last Judgment is not a Round of Final Jeopardy!" *Christianity Today* 1 (Ja 2011): 62.

[123] Another 2010 survey by Pew found that 25% of Americans age 18-29 declare themselves to be unaffiliated with any particular faith, meaning they are either atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular." This is an even greater cause for concern when the data is compared to earlier generations at the same age—there is a 25% increase from 20 years ago and an almost 200% increase from 60 years earlier! Likewise the number of young adults aged 18-29 who describe their religion as "none" has almost doubled (12% to 23%) in the past forty years (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. "Religion Among the Millennials." Available from http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx; Internet.). Both the Pew study and a separate Gallup poll suggest that those who are religiously unaffiliated make up 16% of the US population, a 400% increase from 1950 when Gallup began asking this question (Gallup. "In U.S., Increasing Number Have No Religious Identity." Available from http://www.gallup.com/poll/128276/Increasing-Number-No-Religious-Identity.aspx; Internet.).

[124] Stephen R. Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2007), 17.

[125] Ibid., 13, 15.

[126] Lk 12:51-52 "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three." (NIV 1984)

proposal verges on mixing the scriptural roles of church and state. 5.) Paul says in Romans 10:17 that faith comes by hearing the word of Christ. Therefore, faith and knowledge of its content are connected, but knowledge can certainly exist apart from faith and trust in the heart. Even in the secular world it is understood that "learning a catalogue of factual data about beliefs and traditions seems to have little to do with what really matters about religion."[127] We could simply say, head knowledge doesn't mean heart knowledge. Thus, for the Christian the "solution" to Biblical illiteracy can never simply be the widespread dissemination of Scriptural facts. The results of the aforementioned Pew Research study only underscore this point. The fact that the average atheist knows more Bible facts than the average Christians has not translated into their becoming believers in Jesus Christ.

It is worthwhile to consider the holes in Prothero's argument because it goes to the heart of why Biblical illiteracy is a serious problem for Christ's Church. It's not a problem because it means that Christianity will be misunderstood by society at large—this will always be the case. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, who wanted to be wise by worldly standards, "[T]he message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing."[128] Biblical illiteracy is not a danger to the Church because an ignorant citizenry will malign the faithful. Jesus says, "All men will hate you because of me."[129] Biblical illiteracy is a threat not because of the negative impact it has on our society, but because of the consequences that lack of understanding has on our members and visitors. Like earmuffs put upon hearts and ears of God's people, Biblical illiteracy impairs their ability to understand and apply his word. For example, many of our hymns are peppered with Biblical allusions, but these allusions lose their intended affect if they are not understood in the larger context of Scripture. One can only imagine what picture comes to mind while a biblically illiterate worshiper sings, "You can be like faithful Aaron, holding up the prophet's hands,"[130] or "Faith and hope to walk with God in the way that Enoch trod."[131] In similar fashion, teachers and preachers risk misunderstanding (or no understanding at all) if Scriptural illustrations are not explicitly expounded. Such methods can have disastrous results. The example that was meant to encourage them, the illustration that was meant to appall them, and the truth that was meant to

[127] Rein, Nathan, "Truth, Fact, Trivia: The Meaning of Religious "Literacy,"" *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 2 (Ap 2009): 40.
[128] 1 Co 1:18, NIV 1984.
[129] Mt 10:22, NIV 1984.
[130] Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), hymn #573.
[131] Ibid., hymn #385.

heal them will have little or no effect because it will not be understood. More than that, some portions of Scripture will remain very obscure until the reader makes the connection between the inspired word and the persons or events being referred to by the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately this widespread lack of Scriptural understanding also demands a change in our ministry methods. It means that in our teaching and preaching we will have to be conscious that many of our listeners could be starting from square one. It means that many (and in the near future likely the vast majority) of the new adult prospects will have little or no exposure to the Bible. This calls for care and consideration on our part. These people whom the Holy Spirit has drawn to us may be physically, cognitively, and emotionally adults, but spiritually they are newborn infants who do not know anything about the true God beyond what their conscience and creation and popular culture has taught them.

As the possibility of such scenarios will likely increase in the immediate future, the "solution" to religious illiteracy quickly turns from the abstract to the concrete. What is the best way to teach an individual who has little or no prior knowledge of God's plan of salvation and the truths of his word? Should we simply supply them with a deductive and systematically ordered presentation of the essential doctrines of God's Word? At first glance this method would seem the most efficient and direct, but in this case one wonders if it is wise. In all other disciplines one starts with the concrete and moves towards abstract ideas and concepts.

We witnessed above how our Savior, the Master-Teacher, using this method of instruction almost exclusively in his parables. In the parables Jesus goes from the known to the unknown, the concrete to the abstract. When the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees complained that Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners, he did not jump into a deductive discourse on justification. Instead he painted three pictures: a hopelessly lost sheep and a lost coin diligently searched for and joyfully found; an ungrateful and hedonistic son freely forgiven by his father. Jesus did not give his enemies a text-book definition of what justification means, he showed them *what it looks like in action*. This would also be one of the strengths of teaching basic bible doctrines using scriptural narratives. The beginning student would not have to piece together abstract thoughts and doctrines, which have no constructed reality in their mind nor any prior experience in their life. Instead the stories of Scripture can provide a framework for understanding while supplying concrete and vivid illustrations of God's grace in action, which can immediately be applied to real-life situations. A wise choice of Bible narratives would

provide the new believer with *both* a doctrinal and historical framework from which their faith and understanding of Scripture can build.

However, there is no such resource for adult instruction among the published materials currently available in WELS. Of the eight total courses on basic adult instruction found in the seminary library[132] only one, *The Wonderful Works of God*, by Paul E. Eickmann (1970), used Bible narrative as the *basis* of study *for each lesson*,[133] and it is no longer in print. This is especially unfortunate because Eickmann's course has much to commend itself. The narratives that he selects encompass the central truths and episodes of Scripture, and he ties them together in a very simple and logical way. At the same time, *The Wonderful Works of God* does have several weaknesses. The scripture passages it quotes are from the King James Version, which could prove problematic for modern readers. The study does not ask the reader to wrestle with the main points of each narrative; instead it states its propositions up front. Similarly, the study questions following each lesson are often too quick to "jump" to other parts of Scripture, which a brand new believer would likely find very confusing. Perhaps it would be better to focus on expounding the truths that are in the narrative and incorporating and clarifying new knowledge as it comes along. His review questions only rarely touch on personal application of the narrative. More often they are directed at theological truths. It seems that more balance is needed here. Lastly, Eickmann's study does not have a framework in which students can gradually expand their knowledge around various doctrinal loci (i.e. the nature of God and man, law and gospel, etc.).

For these reasons it is necessary to create a BIC course that teaches Bible doctrine using select narratives. To that end a course outline and sample lessons will be developed that use a primarily inductive approach to learning, which would allow the biblically illiterate to gradually to build a historical, doctrinal, and practical framework as the course progresses.

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[132] These include: *Knowledge unto Salvation*, by Paul Kretzmann (1927); *The Wonderful Works of God*, by Paul Eickmann (1970); *That I May Know Him*, by Oswald Riess (1971); *By Grace Alone*, by Rolfe Westendorf (1979); *What Does the Bible Say?*, by Oswald Riess (1985); *New Life In Christ*, by Forrest Bivens and David Valleskey (1986); *Searching Scriptures*, by Wayne Vogt (2002); *and Basic Bible Christianity*, by Jon Buchholz (2010).

[133] This is not to say that the other courses did not seek to incorporate the narratives of Scripture to varying degrees. Among those that placed a greater emphasis on narrative were: *What Does the Bible Say?*, *New Life In Christ*, *Searching Scriptures, and Basic Bible Christianity*. Unfortunately, the larger narratives (and in the case of *What Does the Bible Say?*, whole books of the Bible) were most often assigned as homework outside of class.

III. The Thesis Project

Course Content: Foundational Doctrines and Foundational Narratives

In his grace and wisdom our God has made the message of man's salvation short and sweet. Human beings are saved through faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, their Savior from sin, death, and hell, in whom they have been freely given eternal life. This truth is beautifully summarized in John 3:16 and proclaimed by Paul to the jailer at Philippi, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."[134] The doctrine of justification through faith alone is *the* foundational doctrine of Scripture, which all other doctrines support and intersect.[135] Without question any introductory course on the basic teachings of Christianity must be squarely centered on this good news. Thus, when it comes to designing a BIC curriculum the question of doctrinal content broadens from what is *essential* to what is *foundational*, that is what doctrines form the basis of the Christian faith and life. It is impossible and impractical that any course could adequately cover *all* the doctrines of Scripture. This means that the doctrines that are covered in BIC course are to some degree dependant on the author's goals and objectives. When former published WELS BIC courses are compared with *This We Believe*, a summary statement of the doctrines taught by the WELS (1999),[136] it is apparent that there are several doctrines that are taught universally: creation, the Trinity, original sin, the two natures of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, baptism, the Lord's Supper, conversion, the church, fellowship, verbal inspiration, the second coming, objective and subjective justification, heaven and hell, and prayer.[137] Thus, it seems wise that a narrative-based BIC course taught in WELS should at the minimum incorporate these doctrines.[138]

The development of a chronological narrative-based course has the added difficulty of choosing narratives that contain the selected doctrines and yet maintain a Christ-centered focus. To achieve this end it would appear wise to generally limit Old Testament narratives to those that trace the line of salvation history or include persons and events that are frequently referenced in

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[134] Ac 16:31, NIV 1984.
[135] Lyle W. Lange, *God So Loved the World: A Study of Christian Doctrine*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), 28, 31.
[136] See Appendix 1.
[137] All these BIC courses also include some comparison of creation and the theory of evolution and a study of the Ten Commandments. See Appendix 2.
[138] Beneficial as it would be to go beyond this general comparison and consider how each of these doctrines is taught, it would go well beyond the scope of this thesis because it would involve comparing a number of disparate variables including the various Bible passages cited, the depth of discussion, questions considered, and course format.

the New Testament.[139] In the New Testament the narratives should undoubtedly concentrate on the life, death, and teachings of Christ and how the apostles unveiled and expounded God's promises meant for all the world in Christ. Thus, an apt title for this course would be *Redemption's Story: God's Promise through the Ages*.

The following course outline lists the lesson titles, the core narratives that will be the basis for each lesson, and the doctrines taught therein. This methodology is proposed with the understanding that at times it is altogether necessary to supplement the narratives with other supporting passages (particularly from the New Testament). Lesson 3 is an example of how a brief examination of pertinent New Testament passages can shed valuable light on Old Testament narratives. In this case Paul makes it clear that Abraham was justified by faith apart from works. For the sake of simplicity the doctrines of sin, law, and gospel have been eliminated from the list of doctrines taught in each lesson because to a varying degree these are incorporated into every lesson. However, in the narratives that have special emphases on the commandments, the specific commandments under consideration are listed.

Course Introduction[140]

Lesson 1 - Creation (Genesis 1-2)

- Doctrines taught: the Trinity (Father and Spirit), creation, the natural knowledge of God, marriage

Lesson 2 - The Fall into Sin and the Promise (Genesis 3; 5:1-5)

- Doctrines taught: angels, original sin, justification, predictive prophecy, the incarnation

Lesson 3 - The Flood (Genesis 6-9)

- Doctrines taught: divine providence, original sin, subjective justification

Lesson 4 - God's Call & Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12; 15; Romans 4:1-5; Ephesians 2:8-10; Genesis 17)

- Doctrines taught: justification by faith, predictive prophecy

Lesson 5 - The Descendants of Abraham in Egypt and the Exodus (Exodus 1, 2:1-15; 3; 12)

- Doctrines taught: the Trinity (the Angel of the LORD), divine providence, civil government, predictive prophecy

[139] See Appendix 2 for a tabulation of New Testament references and allusions to select Old Testament people.
[140] See Appendix 3 for a possible course introduction.

Lesson 6 - Israel at Mt Sinai (Exodus 19:1-6, 16-19; 20:1-21; 32; 33:18-23; 34:4-10)

- Doctrines taught: the Trinity, the 10 Commandments with a focus on the 1st Commandment

Lesson 7 - Israel in the Promised Land (Judges 2:6-19; 2 Samuel 5:1-3; 7:1-16; 11; 12; Psalm 51)

- Doctrines taught: law with a focus on the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 9th commandments, divine providence, predictive prophecy, repentance, confession/absolution, prayer, the Trinity (Holy Spirit)

Lesson 8 - The Divided Kingdom and Exile (1 Kings 11:9-13; 2 Kings 17:1-23; 2 Chronicles 36:11-21; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Jeremiah 25:1-14)

- Doctrines taught: law with a focus on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th Commandments, vicarious atonement, predictive prophecy, divine inspiration, the Trinity (the personhood and deity of the Messiah)

Lesson 9 - Judah in Exile and the Return (Ezekiel 36:19-32; Ezra 1:1-8; 4:1-5; 6:13-15; Malachi 3:1-5; 4:5,6)

- Doctrines taught: divine inspiration, repentance/conversion, divine providence, fellowship, predictive prophecy, law with focus on the 2nd, 5th, 6th, and 7th Commandments

Lesson 10 - The Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-25, 57-66) and the Birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:1-21; John 1:1-5, 14)

- Doctrines taught: divine providence, predictive prophecy, angels, miracles, original sin, the incarnation, the two natures of Christ, creation, the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)

Lesson 11 - John the Baptist Prepares the Way (Luke 3:1-18; John 1:29-31) and the Baptism and Temptation of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-4:11)

- Doctrines taught: predictive prophecy, baptism, repentance, Christian vocations, the Trinity, Christ's state of humiliation, Satan/angels

Lesson 12 - Jesus' Early Ministry (John 1:35-2:11, 3:1-21; Luke 4:14-30)

- Doctrines taught: the two natures of Christ, Christ's state of humiliation, miracles, the Trinity, conversion, baptism, predictive prophecy

Lesson 13 - Jesus Calls and Teaches His Disciples – Part 1 (Matthew 4:18-25; Luke 6:17-32; Matthew 5:1-16)

- Doctrines taught: miracles, the two natures of Christ, the Christian cross, sanctification/good works

Lesson 14 - Jesus Teaches His Disciples – Part 2 (Matthew 5:17-37, 6:5-15, 25-34)

- Doctrines taught: the active obedience of Christ, law with a focus on the 5th, 6th, and 8th Commandments, prayer/Lord's prayer, divine providence

Lesson 15 - The Parables of Jesus (Luke 15, 16:19-31, 18:9-14)

- Doctrines taught: justification, heaven/hell, the sufficiency of the Word, prayer

Lesson 16 - Jesus Prepares his Disciples for his Suffering Death (Matthew 16:13-17:13; John 11:17-53)

- Doctrines taught: Christ's state of humiliation, miracles, resurrection, eternal life

Lesson 17 - Jesus Teaches Us about His Second Coming (Matthew 24:1-14, 26-44; 25:31-46; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:2; Revelation 20:11-21:8)

- Doctrines taught: Judgment Day, election, heaven/hell, the resurrection of the body

Lesson 18 - Maundy Thursday (Matthew 26:14-30; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29; 10:15-17; Matthew 26:31-27:5)

- Doctrines taught: Lord's Supper, the church, church fellowship, passive obedience of Christ, vicarious atonement, predictive prophecy, prayer, law with a focus on the 2nd, 5th, and 8th Commandments, contrition/repentance

Lesson 19 - Jesus' Crucifixion, Death, and Burial (John 18:28-19:16; Matthew 27:32-66; 2 Corinthians 5:19)

- Doctrines taught: passive obedience of Christ, civil government, vicarious atonement

Lesson 20 - Christ's Descent into Hell, Resurrection Appearances, and Ascension (Matthew 28:1-10; Romans 1 Peter 3:18-20; John 20:19-31; Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:3-11; Ephesians 1:18-23)

- Doctrines taught: predictive prophecy, Christ's state of exultation, justification, the Trinity, divine providence, the church

Lesson 21 - Jesus Sends the Promised Holy Spirit to Empower the Apostles (Acts 2; 5:12-42)

- Doctrines taught: divine inspiration, the Trinity, predictive prophecy, Christ's states of humiliation and exultation, the resurrection, repentance/conversion, spiritual gifts,

baptism, miracles, sanctification/good works, angels, civil government, the Christian cross

Lesson 22 - The Martyrdom of Stephen and the Conversion of the Apostle Paul (Acts 6:8-15, 7:51-8:3; 9:1-31; 1 Timothy 1:12-17)

- Doctrines taught: law with a focus on the hardening of the heart, the Christian cross, prayer, conversion, baptism

Lesson 23 - Paul's Missionary Journeys and the Growth of the Early Church (Acts 16:6-40; 17:16-34; Romans 1:18-32; 2:12-16)

- Doctrines taught: conversion, baptism, the Christian cross, contrition/repentance, justification, civil government, natural knowledge of God, law with a focus on 1st and 6th Commandments

Lesson 24 - The Holy Christian Church (Ephesians 1:3-6; 2; Romans 12)

- Doctrines taught: election, the church, spiritual gifts, sanctification/good works

Lesson 25 - Church Discipline and Church Fellowship (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Romans 16:1-20)

- Church discipline/excommunication, the church, church fellowship, heterodox churches

Course Design and Organization

From the onset it is clear that there is a natural harmony between constructivism and Biblical narrative when it is organized chronologically.[141] A brief survey of this course design demonstrates that it inherently follows the so-called "spiral" approach to curriculum design, which means that "big ideas, important tasks, and ever-deepening inquiry must recur, in ever-increasing complexity."[142] This design allows students to gradually build knowledge and rethink and expand their concepts as the course develops. The progressive revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity is a prime example of how the spiral design plays out in action. The entire Trinity is not introduced in Lesson 1; rather it is made clear from Genesis 1 and 2 that God (the Father) is the Creator of heaven and earth, but at the same time there is also plurality in God in the Spirit hovering over the waters (1:1) and the use of "us" (1:26). Lesson 5 gives more insight into the

[141] Strictly speaking Lessons 24 and 25 do not fit into the chronological framework. This decision was made so that these doctrines and practices could be clearly understood before a prospect would consider becoming a formal member of the congregation.
[142] Wiggins and McTighe, 135.

multiple persons in God by introducing the Angel of the LORD at the burning bush. Lesson 10 reveals the Holy Spirit's role in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and describes the eternal nature of the Son of God. The baptism of Jesus recorded in the following lesson crystallizes the fact that God is triune. With this naturally inductive framework in place it is evident that "formal explanations come *after* inquiry, not before."[143] In a similar fashion the other doctrines of Scripture could be similarly developed and explored as the course progresses.

At the same time, this process of gradual knowledge construction necessitates a means for overall organization, lest the doctrines of Scripture be left floating around as disconnected bits and pieces of information. One of the ways that Biblical doctrines could be inductively organized is by clustering new content around essential questions. In *Understanding by Design* (1998) Wiggins and McTighe describe essential questions as those that have four basic characteristics. Essential questions: 1.) focus on key inquiries and core ideas of a discipline; 2.) cannot be answered with a simple sentence to reveal depth and complexity of subject; 3.) are reoccurring questions within the heart of a discipline 4.) raise other important questions.[144] The qualities of essential questions correspond quite closely with the foundational doctrines of our BIC curriculum when they are posed as questions. The essential questions that encompass this course are listed below with the doctrine(s) contained in each question listed beneath.[145]

1.) Who is God?

- The Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- The divine attributes of God
- The two natures of Christ
- The two states of Christ
- The incarnation
- The resurrection

2.) How did the universe come into existence?

- The Trinity

[143] Ibid., 153.
[144] Ibid., 28-30.
[145] Although these questions could be listed in an abstract and impersonal format, the author has chosen to list these questions from a first person perspective because in the end all doctrine is practical; it impacts an individual's heart and life. Furthermore, the author realizes this is only *one* possible list of essential questions and some of the doctrines under each question could logically fit into more than one category. More questions could be added to this list or the existing questions could be modified or further specified.

- Creation

3.) What is my relationship with God?

- Divine inspiration/Predictive prophecy
- Original sin
- Sin
- The Ten Commandments
- Law/Gospel
- Repentance/Conversion
- The means of grace – word and sacraments
- Justification – subjective and objective

4.) What is my place/purpose in this world?

- Election
- The Church
- Christian vocations – including marriage
- Civil government
- The Christian cross
- Sanctification/good works (the Ten Commandments)
- Spiritual gifts
- Prayer

5.) Why is my life in this world full of trouble and pain?

- Satan
- Law
- Sin
- Original Sin

6.) What is God's solution for my problems, pain, and sin?

- Vicarious atonement
- Divine providence
- Miracles
- Justification – subjective and objective

7.) What will happen when I die?

- Heaven/Hell
- Judgment Day
- The resurrection of the dead

These essential questions and their tangential doctrines could then be organized using a number of different graphic organizers to be created and filled out by learners. Some of the more multifaceted questions, such as "Who is God?" could be organized using a web (also called a word) cluster. The essential question would be the central idea supported by primary doctrines supported by details. See Appendix 4 for what a sample cluster web for the question of "Who is God?" might look like. Other essential questions that are more chronological in nature, such as "How did the universe come into existence?" or "What will happen when I die?" could be organized into a time line or flow chart.[146]

Two Sample Lessons for *Redemption's Story: God's Promise through the Ages*

The following pages contain the first two lessons envisioned for *Redemption's Story: God's Promise through the Ages*. Note that in both lessons the core narratives are first previewed and then reviewed in greater detail. The initial reading allows the learner to grasp and appreciate the whole narrative in its context as well as ponder any initial questions he or she might have. The review of the narrative then functions as an aid to memory and allows the learner to wrestle with specific truths that are brought out by directed questions. These lessons also contain a mixture of induction and deduction, individual and group work, and application questions.

[146] See Appendix 5 for an example.

Lesson 1: Creation

Genesis 1 and 2

What can we learn from creation….?

Suppose you were walking through the woods and you found this object lying on the ground in the middle of the forest. How would you know that it was created?

Are there any other explanations for the existence of this statue?

What does this statue say about its maker?

<u>This lesson will explore the Biblical account of creation and man's place in the universe.</u>

An overview of Genesis 1-2:3

Read Genesis Chapter 1-2:3 as a class. As we go through…

….list at least three things you find amazing in these verses.

…note what phrases are repeated for emphasis.

Taking a closer look:

1.) With what assumptions does the Bible begin? (1:1)

2.) Let's examine the phrases that are echoed throughout the creation account. What does each one tell us about God and his creation?

And God said, "Let there be…" (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24)

And God saw that it was good. (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) And 1:31 says, **"very good."**

There was evening there was morning—the …. day. (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31)

a.) Just like in English the meaning of the word "day" is determined by its context. What does the context here suggest?

b.) How does Exodus 20:11 help us say with certainty how long these "days" were?

c.) Some people try to use 2 Peter 3:8 as a justification for saying these days were longer periods of time. What is the point that Peter is making in this passage?

According to their kinds (vv. 12, 21, 24, 25)

3.) List what God made on each day. Is there an order to this sequence?

DAY 1 – ⇨ **DAY 4** –

DAY 2 – ⇨ **DAY 5** –

DAY 3 – ⇨ **DAY 6** –

4.) What event happened before God made man and woman? (v. 26)

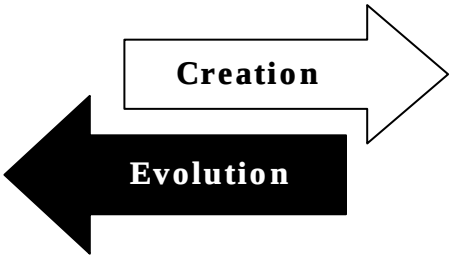
5.) What do the words "us" and "our" imply about the one God? (See evidence of this in verses 1 and 2.)

6.) What does it mean that man and woman were created "in the image of God"? (A hint of it in Genesis 2:25. Also read Ephesians 4:24.)

7.) What two things were man and woman to do? (v. 28)

8.) Based on what we have read in Genesis 1, what attributes would you use to describe God? This is part of what theologians call "the natural knowledge of God".

9.) How does Genesis 1 compare to the theory of evolution?



	Biblical Creationism	Theory of Evolution
How long did it take?		
What is the origin of matter?		
How did life on earth come to its present state of existence?		
What are human beings?		
Who am I responsible to?		

10.) If biblical creationism is true what does that mean about your place and purpose in life?

A close-up on the sixth day: Genesis 2:4-25

Read Genesis 2:4-25 as a class. As we read consider how the Lord showed his special concern for man.

1.) What command did God give Adam? (v. 16,17) What warning did he attach to it?

2.) Why would God give a perfect human being a command to obey?

3.) What is so startling about verse 18?

a.) Why would God have Adam name all the animals? (vv. 19-20)

4.) According to the Genesis account, who established marriage? (cf. Matthew 19:4-6)

a.) What are the three blessings of marriage (Genesis 1:22; 2:18, 24)?

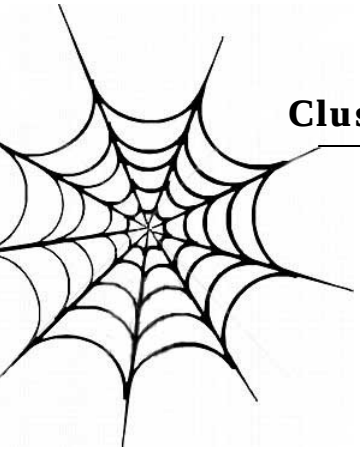
b.) Which of these is the essence of marriage, without which marriage cannot exist?

c.) What relationship has God ordained between husband and wife? (v. 24)

Making sense of it all

1.) How has God demonstrated that he loves YOU in these first two chapters of Genesis?

2.) How has our study encouraged you to look at life in this world differently?



Cluster Web Big Questions

1. Who is God?

2. How did this world get here?

Lesson 2: The Fall into Sin and the Promise

Genesis 3 and 5:1-5

What to do?

What is the first thought that comes to mind when you read this sign? Why?

How is that different from what Adam and Eve daily experienced as they walked by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the middle of Eden?

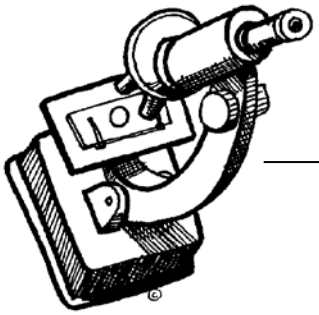
<u>This lesson will explore the origin of our corrupt nature and God's response to it.</u>

An overview of Genesis 3

Read Genesis Chapter 3 as a class. As we go through…

… evaluate God's response to the situation.

….note the change that takes place in Adam and Eve's attitude towards God and each other.



Taking a closer look:

1.) Who is the serpent? (v. 3) See Revelation 2:20 for a positive I.D.

2.) What has always been his goal, and remains his goal to this day? (cf. John 8:44)

3.) What clever progression do you see in the serpent's line of argumentation?

"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (v.1)

⇩

"You will not surely die!" (v. 4)

⇩

"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (v. 5)

IMMEDIATE APPLICATION

Do these tactics of Satan sound familiar? How does he use these lies in our own lives?

4.) What transformation had already taken place <u>in Eve's heart</u> before she ever ate the fruit? (v. 6)

= good

= food

= desirable for gaining wisdom

5.) Where was Adam (the head) while all this was going on? (v.6)

6.) Agree/Disagree: There is no explanation for why Adam and Eve disobeyed God.

7.) Did the serpent make good on his promise "that their eyes would be opened," and "they would be like God"? (v.7, cf. Genesis 1:27)

In small groups work through Tasks #1 and #2

<u>Task #1</u>

Last time we said that the "image of God" consisted of holiness and perfect harmony with God in knowledge and will. How do verses 8-13 demonstrate a total loss of the image of God in…

… heart

… knowledge/mind

… and will

Task #2

What were the specific consequences of breaking God's command (AKA "sin") for the woman? (v. 16)

What were the specific consequences of sin for the man? (vv. 17-19)

Zoom in on verse 15: The Promise

In the blank after each pronoun, write down whom it is referring to.

And I (_____) will put enmity between you (_____) and the woman,

and between your offspring (_____) and hers (_____);

he (_____) will crush your (_____) head, and

you (_____) will strike his (_____) heel."

In your own words describe the contest that would take place between the Seed of the woman and Satan:

Who was responsible for getting the job done?

Draw a line for where the enmity existed BEFORE the Fall:

God **Adam & Eve** **Satan**

Draw a line for where the enmity existed AFTER the Fall:

God **Adam & Eve** **Satan**

Draw a line for where the enmity existed AFTER the promise:

God **Adam & Eve** **Satan**

Eve's Offspring **Satan's Offspring**

9.) How do we see God's mercy and undeserved love in the following:

- His decision to confront his rebellious creatures
- His promise to send a Savior
- The consequences of sin on man and woman
- The banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden

10.) What better place did God have planned for Adam and Eve through trust in the promised Savior? (cf. Revelation 21:1-4)

The Consequences of Sin: Genesis 5:1-5

Read Genesis 5:1-5 as a class.

11.) Adam and Eve had been created in God's image. In whose image were their children now born? (v. 3)

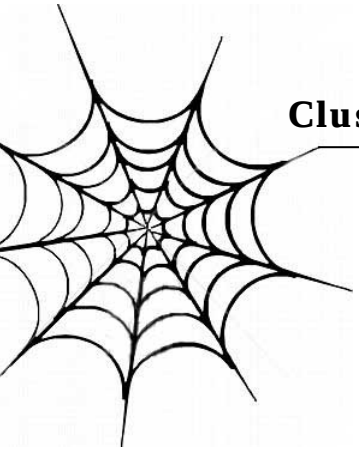
12.) What is the proof that all people since Adam have been born in his corrupt and sinful image? (v. 8, 11, 14, 17, etc. cf. Romans 5:12)

Making sense of it all

1.) Agree/Disagree: Under certain conditions it's acceptable for me to blame others for my sins.

2.) Agree/Disagree: All sin begins in the heart as rebellion against God.

3.) After having read this account, what would you say to someone who says that the Bible teaches that God is not really concerned about the evil things we do?



Cluster Web Big Questions

1. **Who is God?**
2. **How did this world get here?**
3. **Why is my life in this world full of trouble and pain?**
4. **What is God's solution for my problems, pain, and sin?**

IV. Conclusion

In recent years the secular world has come to appreciate the power of stories and because of their benefits has made a conscious effort to incorporate narratives into almost every aspect of life—psychology, the workplace, the media, and especially education. It is generally assumed that the right story at the right time can work wonders by engaging the whole person, fusing together information and empathy, and unlocking and evoking past experiences. Good stories cry out for their hearers to wrestle with them and encourage them to construct meaning from what they have heard. Since unbelievers have become so enamored by *human* narratives and convinced of their power, perhaps it is time for Christian educators to reconsider how well and to what extent *God's story* is being told in various educational settings. The all-wise God, who fashioned the human heart and mind and designed people to naturally seek meaning in their daily lives and relationships, has seen fit to teach us about himself and how he has shown mercy to our fallen race through the timeless stories of his Word—stories that are imbued with the soul and spirit-diving power of the law and gospel.

Furthermore, there is more at stake here than simply one method of religious instruction over another. Biblical illiteracy has reached epic proportions in America to such an extent that a single narrative-based Bible study alone will not change the tide, but it can be part of an overall shift to reemphasize stories in teaching and preaching. If the narratives of Scripture are left largely untouched when teaching those who have little or no prior exposure to Christianity, many of Scripture's examples and allusions will remain a mystery to them because they will have neither a framework nor guideposts by which to build a cohesive understanding of salvation history. This thesis project reminds Christian educators of the need to incorporate stories in their BIC curriculums and provides a model for how such a class could be effectively designed and executed.

There remain areas for study which could offer additional insight into the role of narrative teaching in Bible information class settings. As this study only considered printed and published materials available in the Wisconsin Seminary library, the scope of courses under review could be significantly broadened. There is a large number of BIC courses that are taught by WELS pastors that are either unpublished or exist in a purely digital format that are in definite need of consideration. Furthermore, the BIC resources of other Lutheran church bodies, particularly the Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, were not included in this

study. It is very possible that some of these have added insights and different methodologies that could be beneficial for designing a narrative-based course.

An additional area of investigation could be a formal analysis and rationale of the various Bible narratives that are included in WELS and other BIC courses. This would be a monumental undertaking because any such evaluation has the inherent danger of becoming increasingly subjective. It would be quite difficult to objectively answer what actually constitutes teaching a story without making mechanical rules that could not apply in every case. For example, is telling *part* of a narrative the same as teaching the whole, or at what point does the omission of intervening details obscure the purpose and message of the narrative?[147] These and other questions need to be conclusively answered before a comparative study of various BIC courses can be considered complete.

The project could possibly be enhanced by a deeper understanding of andragogy and its impact on lesson and overall course design as well as a detailed pursuit of inductive teaching methodologies. Two particular areas that could be studied further are methods of teaching narrative to adult learners and organizational methods and models that allow for the gradual collection and organization of inductive insights.

Another issue that needs to be addressed in BIC curriculum design is the ideal number and length of lessons. For example, *Redemption's Story* contains twenty-five lessons that would each likely run at least ninety minutes, which would make it difficult to teach more than one lesson per day, unless there was a significant break between lessons.[148] Assuming that in the typical ministry situation one class session is held per week, it would be difficult to cover the whole curriculum more than twice a year. However this problem could be solved by staggering classes at different intervals or by training multiple instructors.

In addition, further inquiry could be made into the appropriate sequencing of subsequent classes (i.e. What is the next step? What class/kind of class would be a good follow up to this one?).

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[147] It is the opinion of the author that the integrity of a narrative is destroyed when its plot and characters have become unimportant and its content is used merely as a device to prove a deductive truth, but alas, even this is subjective!

[148] This could be done in the form of "weekend workshops" where the class would meet for an entire morning or afternoon. However, it would appear unwise for an instructor to insist on this level of commitment without first securing it *voluntarily* from class participants. This scheduling plan would also require extended preparation (i.e. extra materials, structured or unstructured break activities, refreshments, etc.) and assumes the regular attendance of learners.

Appendix 1

A Doctrinal Comparison Among WELS Bible Studies & *This We Believe*

	Eickmann	Buchholz	Bivens & Valleskey	Westendorf	Vogt	Reiss – *WDM?*	Reiss – *TIMKH*	Kretzmann	*This We Believe*
Creation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sin/Original Sin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Angels						X	X		X
Divine Providence	X			X		X	X	X	X
Predictive Prophecy	X	X			X	X			X
The Incarnation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
The Two Natures of Christ	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
The Offices of Christ			X						
The Trinity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Christ's Active Obedience	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Christ's Passive Obedience	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Baptism	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
The L.S.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Miracles	X		X		X				X
Christ's Two States	X	X	X			X		X	X
The Descent into Hell	X	X	X		X	X		X	X
The Resurrection	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
The Means of Grace	X	X	X	X	X				X
Sanctification/ Spiritual Gifts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Conversion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Preservation in Faith	X					X	X	X	X
Election	X	X			X				X
The Church	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Fellowship	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Verbal Inspiration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Objective & Subjective Justification	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
The Second Coming/JD	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Heaven/Hell	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Prayer / the Lord's Prayer	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Natural Knowledge of God	X	X	X			X			X
The Keys	X	X		X		X		X	
Confession / Absolution	X	X		X		X		X	
Civil Government		X	X	X	X			X	X
Marriage		X	X	X	X	X		X	X

Appendix 2

A Tabulation of New Testament References to Select Old Testament People

	Direct References	Allusions	Total
Adam	8	9	17
Eve	2	2	4
Noah	8	0	8
Abraham	83	1	84
Sarah	4	6	10
Moses	83	0	83
David[149]	44	0	44
Solomon	9	0	9

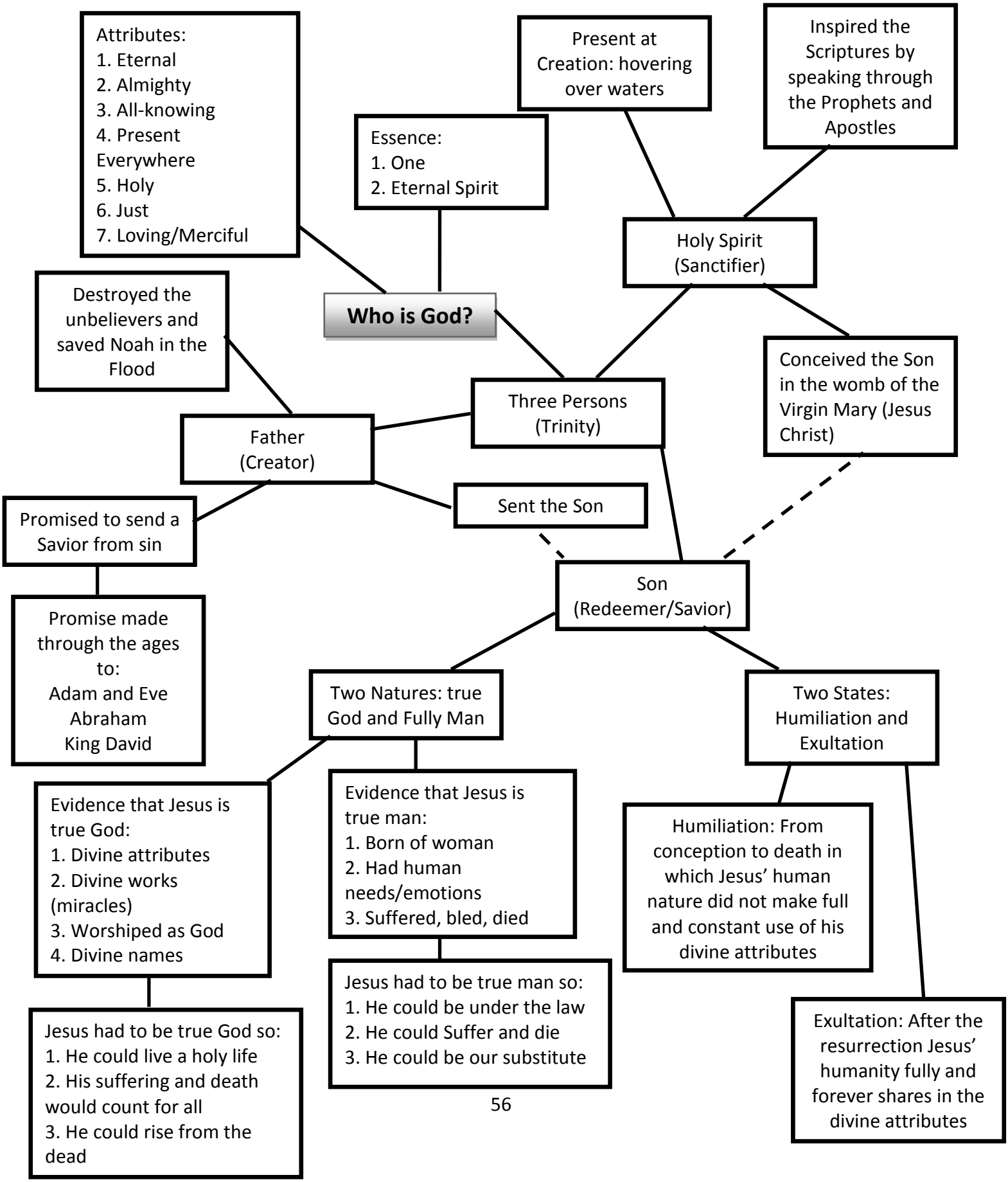
[149] This does not include references such as “Son of David” or “Key of David” that are in fact referring to Jesus Christ.

Appendix 3

A Proposed BIC Introduction

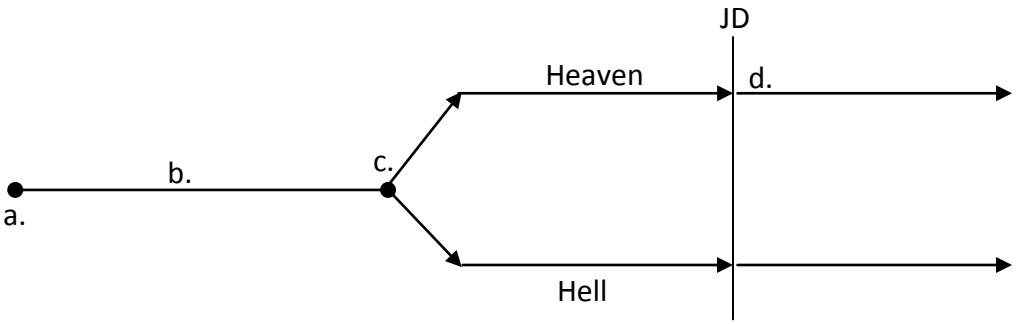
Welcome! It is an honor and a privilege for you to be joining us as we study *Redemption's Story: God's Promise through the Ages*, a course that will teach the foundational truths of the Christian faith using primarily Bible stories. *Redemption's Story* uses the Bible as our exclusive textbook because the Bible is the source of all Christian faith and practice. During the course of 25 lessons we will read through many of the key stories of Scripture and chronologically trace the gradual unveiling of God's promise through the ages. All of the narratives that we will read will teach us things that are truly unbelievable and unfathomable, for the life-long Christian as well as those who may have no prior exposure to the Bible. May God bless and enlighten us all as we study his word together and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Appendix 4 – A Sample Cluster Web



Appendix 5

A Sample Chronological Graphic Organizer: "What will happen when I die?"



a. Conception:

- My life (body and soul) begins at conception (Ps 51:5)

b. Life:

- The length of my life is my "time of grace," the time God has given me to come to come to faith in Jesus as my Savior (Ac 17:27; Eph 2:8-9) and make him known to others (Mt 28:19-20)

c. Death:

- At the moment of death soul and body separate immediately (Eccl 12:7)
- The souls of believers enjoy perfect bliss in heaven (Lk 16:22)
- The souls of unbelievers suffer torments in hell (Lk 16:22,23)

JD: Judgment Day

- Jesus Christ will come…
  - One time (cf. every reference to the second coming/JD is always in the *singular*)
  - Unexpectedly (Mt 25:13)
  - With all his holy saints and angels announced by the trumpet call of God (1 Th 4:6)
  - Visibly/Physically – all people will see him (Mt 24:27; Rev 1:7; Ac 1:11)
  - To pronounce public judgment on the living and the dead (Ac 17:31)
- The glorified bodies of believers will be raised first (1 Th 4:16)
- Then the bodies of believers that are still alive will be transformed and taken up to be with the Lord forever (1 Th 4:17; 1 Cor 15:51,52)
- The bodies of unbelievers will also be raised to be reunited with their souls (Rev 20:13)

d. Eternity:

- Believers (body and soul) will spend eternity in God's presence enjoying the bliss of heaven (Rev 21:3,4)
- Unbelievers (body and soul) will spend eternity shut out from God's presence and blessings in the agony of hell (Is 66:24; 2 Th 1:9)

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