

# SAVING THE OLD, OLD STORY

Robert Webber and the ancient evangelical future



**B**ob Webber has a story to tell. It's an ancient story, which stretches from before the beginning of time. It's a future story, which continues on long after the end of the world. Though it's found in the Bible, Webber believes many Christians have lost sight of it. Instead, he says, they focus on fragments of the story, but miss the big picture.

For years, Webber has advocated an "ancient-future" faith: that in order to face the years to come, Christians must recover their roots and return to the biblical story of "creation, incarnation, and re-creation." That story risks being drowned out as competing voices—some political, some religious, some social—try to pull the church's attention away from the kingdom of God and on to their story.

Webber and a group of evangelical pastors, theologians, and writers recently issued "A Call to an Ancient Theological Future" ([ancientfutureworship.com](http://ancientfutureworship.com)), aimed at focusing our attention back on God's story.

It begins: "Ancient Christians faced a world of paganism, Gnosticism, and political domination. In the face of heresy and persecution, they understood history through Israel's story, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of God's kingdom. Today, as in the ancient era, the Church is confronted by a host of master narra-

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tives that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: who gets to narrate the world?”

Webber is professor of ministry at Northern Seminary in Lombard, Illinois, author of more than fifty books, including *Younger Evangelicals*, *Worship Is a Verb*, and *The Divine Embrace*. He and his wife, Joanne, are members of Harbert Community Church, a Covenant congregation in Harbert, Michigan.

Features editor Bob Smietana recently visited Webber at his home in Michigan.

### **How would you contrast this current call to the “Chicago call,” which you were part of in the 1970s?**

That call was more specifically about the issues of the 1970s—let’s become more historical, let’s recover the sacraments, let’s recover our social responsibility to the world, let’s recover ecumenism.

Whereas this call addresses a different cultural situation. It’s saying that if you recover the biblical narrative, you rediscover the history of the church, the history of theology, the history of worship, the history of spirituality. This call is a face-off with a nihilistic, non-narrated world: let’s rediscover the counter-cultural message that got through in the pre-Christian, premodern, pagan world of the first century. That’s the message we need for a post-Christian, postmodern, neo-pagan world.

### **What’s the most important part of this call?**

Until we get back to the narrative nature of the Bible—creation, incarnation, and re-creation—and put all of that back together again, we are in big trouble, because Gnosticism is so huge. We see it in New Age spirituality, which searches for a spiritual experience as an escape from this life. True spirituality does not run from the world but embraces the world that God intended. The model of true spirituality is the vision of a garden, where all live in the community of God. True spirituality

does not call us to a “new self” but to the self created in the image of God made fully visible in the life and ministry of Jesus.

The Gnostics separate the creator from the redeemer. The Bible brings the creator and the redeemer together. Unless we are able to give an account of how God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit created the world and became involved in creation through incarnation, the death, and resurrection—we don’t have the story straight. Right now it is so fragmented and shaped by culture. Our desperate need is to recover the depth of the Christian story.

### **Where is it fragmented?**

Liberals focus on the Father as the creator and the God of love. Therefore, we should care for creation and care for our neighbor, and care about justice for the poor. But it doesn’t seem that the whole story is there—they have Father as creator, but they don’t have the Son and Holy Spirit as redeemer and sanctifier.

Evangelicals are so Son-focused that they are just almost exclusively focused on redemption. Their Christianity becomes individualism because they don’t understand how redemption and creation hang together, or how the faith reaches out to the eschaton, when God restores the whole world. When you have individualistic Christianity, it’s fragmented. There’s a personal story but no cosmic story. You need both the cosmic story and the personal.

Pentecostals, who emphasize the Holy Spirit, fall into simply experiential religion. Whereas, if they had the whole story, of God the creator, the redeemer, and the one who re-creates—then they would see that there is a personal and a cosmic story. The fragmentation comes in with these three different groups that emphasize either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

**That fragmentation was a focal part of a recent *Time* magazine article on the prosperity gospel as a focus on**

**the Spirit without the rest of the story. There were no boundaries.**

And there is no redemption in there. The redemption is prospering, or the redemption is experiencing God, but it’s not a redemption of the whole world, where Christ becomes Lord of all creation.

**N.T. Wright refers to some of the conflicting narratives of modern life as “moral climate change”—that we have lost a common story and can no longer agree on the boundaries of life.**

That’s a product of nihilism, which insists that there are no boundaries. There is nothing out there except what you create for yourself.

I really feel like evangelicalism has lost its way in this culture. It’s become so shaped by the culture that it has lost the fullness of the biblical story. And the fragments we have are shaped by consumerism and a market-driven, business approach, or a therapeutic approach to the gospel.

We need something to pull us back together and into the faith. I am hoping this call would generate that kind of unity—but that remains to be seen.

This call is really countercultural, because the culture is really saying, “There is no narrative, there is no story.” We are coming along and saying, “That is not true, there is a story.”

We need to recover that story because the Islamic fundamentalists are really clear about their story. Actually, they don’t have a story. They just have a God who is very deterministic and a law under which they want to bring everybody.

**How can larger churches become ancient future evangelicals—can some combination of large group gatherings and small house groups work?**

Some of the emerging churches are doing this. There is a church near Louisville that has started neighborhood Bible studies, and then all of them come together at a Sunday night

service. They have, in a sense, knit together the small church and the large church. According to Robert Banks's book, *Paul's Idea of Community*, this is the way the early church was in cities like Rome or Ephesus. They were small house churches that came together for a larger meeting.

My own experience in small groups is that there is a lot of Christian action there. Our small group at Harbert Community Church means a lot to us. We meet on a monthly basis, we discuss books and pray together. When anybody gets sick—and two of us in the group have cancer—the small group really pitches in. It's like twelve or thirteen people working as a church. That small group has given us a deeper appreciation of the larger church community.

I think that's the way to go. If you look at history, the small church has kept the faith going when the larger church has failed.

I am not fighting for big churches or for little churches. I am not into that fight. I am much more worried about getting the biblical narrative straight and then seeing how that narrative shapes our worship and spirituality and the whole life of the church.

### **How do we get the story straight?**

We have to stop reading the Bible in the modern way, and read the Bible as it was intended to be read, as a story. That story reads us and reads the world. We have to stop reading the Bible as if we are the readers and interpreters of the Bible. That is a very modern approach: I am the subject, the Bible is the object, and I go to it and tell you what it says. Instead, we need to go to the Bible as the subject and we are the object and we need to put ourselves under the Bible, rediscover that narrative and let it read us and let it read the whole world. Until we do that, we are not going to really have a strong understanding of who we are in the image of God, and what it means to have purpose in the world; what the world means, and what the history of the world mean.

Until you know the story of God, you don't really know your own story. Our story gets connected with God's story—and once it gets connected with God's story, everything changes.

### **How do we clothe this ancient faith in modern clothes? Churches have tried that with mixed results in recent years.**

Our churches are often shaped by the modern world—rationalism, denial of mystery, denial of supernaturalism. But today we live in a postmodern world, which looks a lot like the world of the early church. What's old is new again.

## **Until we get back to the narrative nature of the Bible—creation, incarnation, and re-creation—and put all of that back together again, we are in big trouble . . .**

What's new is not the culture and following the culture and letting the culture set the church's agenda.

The Covenant Church is not a creedal church but if we went back and looked at those ancient creeds, we might find some very distinct help in rediscovering the story. Because the creeds were originally written to protect the story: you look at the Apostle's Creed, and it's a story about the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

### **Letting our story be shaped by the biblical story seems like a messy business then. One of the evangelical responses to postmodernism has been to embrace a rigid system like Calvinism. Is this call a different kind of response?**

This call is a very catholic—very universal—response. The church is a bush with many branches. Whereas in Calvinism, the church is a telephone pole—it's us and nobody else. We've got the answer to every question you've got.

Here we don't say that. We say, let's go back to the primary business of being Christians and not get all heated up about the differences between systems of thought like Calvinism, or Armin-

ianism, or the Anabapists, or this or that. Let's go back to the simple basis of the Christian faith.

### **What's the response of the emerging church to this call?**

I think some of the emergent church leaders are afraid of the supernatural nature of the Christian faith. I wanted to put this call out and say, let's rally around the ancient, supernatural understanding of the Christian faith. Out of that comes our life in the world and our social action. It's not just a humanitarian Jesus—it's a Jesus who has come to re-create the whole world.

Our social work evolves out of it. It's redemption of the whole world, rather than simply being nice because we are Christians.

### **Are you hopeful about the evangelical church?**

I think right now the evangelical church is so shaped by culture that it can't get out of its own culturally minded faith to be able to see beyond itself. I'm not saying that these churches are not Christian—but we need a deeper Christian faith than what is out there, because we are going to be facing some tough times.

The faith that is shaped by the culture will not withstand an attack by Islamic fundamentalists. We don't really know why we are Christians. Islamic fundamentalists know why they believe in Allah. If you compare the Christian story with the Allah story—there is no comparison. In Islam, they only know God's law. There's no grace, no redemption.

Whereas, when you get into the Christian story and see that the God who creates also re-creates—the nature of God is so powerful and so significant within this recovered story—it's something you are willing to die for. □