

getting
your
story
straight

THE
STORY OF
CHRISTIANITY

by Chris Altrick

Getting Your Story Straight: The Story of Christianity

by Chris Alcock

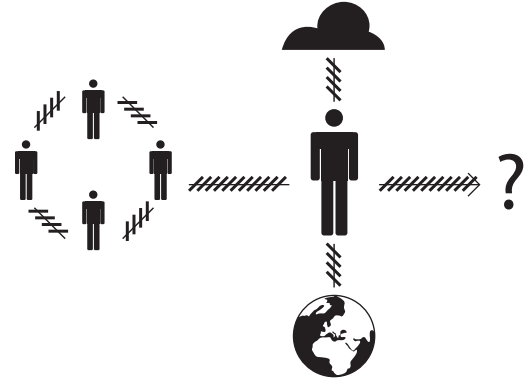
Getting Your Story Straight

The Christian story is a giant story—sixty-six chapters, thousands of pages, all packed into one big Bible!

What is it all about? The Bible comes down to four simple ideas: where we are, where we were, where we're going, and how we're going there.

Where We Are

One way to understand the Christian story is to start with your story. What is your story? If we produced a reality-television show of life today, what would it reveal? Here are four challenges we might see:



- **Social breakdown.** The loneliness and isolation we feel. The families breaking apart. The injustice of the powerful against the weak. The wars between countries. Despite advancements in science, technology, and knowledge, we still cannot get along. There's social breakdown.
- **Natural crises.** We face significant issues regarding the

planet and its resources. Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and fires destroy homes, lives, and communities. Pollution, production, and wars destroy animals, habitats, and environments. Our wealth and way of life have come with a great price. They impact our natural world.

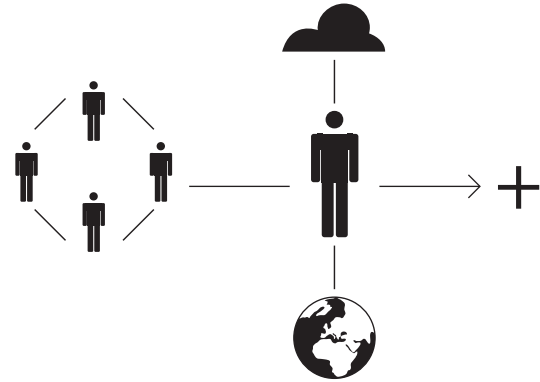
- **Future uncertainties.** At one point in history it was easy to believe in a bright future of prosperity, peace, and perfection. We have not, however, been able to turn that dream into reality. And the difficulties of our present cause much uncertainty about our future. Maybe tomorrow will be just fine. Maybe it won't. It's hard to know. Science, philosophy, politics, and economics haven't been able to secure our future.

- **Spiritual mysteries.** For a time, it was vogue to write God out of our story. We believed that we were the Ruler and Savior of the world. However, increasing numbers sense that there must be more. Given the challenges of contemporary life, we reach out in the hope that there is a Being greater than us. But who is this Being? The world's religions offer a dizzying array of answers. We're not sure who or what to believe.

These four realities represent where we are.

Where We Were

But the Christian story claims that the world has not always been this way. There was a time when things were different. The Bible describes this time in Genesis 1-2. It was a world not of chaos, but of order.



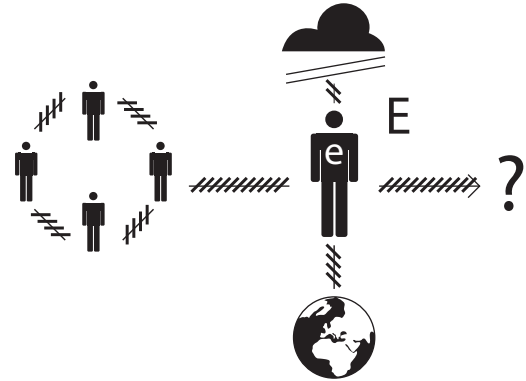
- Genesis claims that God created a world of **social harmony**. After creating the first human, Genesis says that it "was not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). Humans were "hardwired" to live in healthy relationships with others. So, God created Eve for Adam. And these first two humans "were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25). They experienced transparent and authentic relationship with one another.

- Genesis also states that God created a world of **natural responsibility**. After forming creation, God proclaimed it “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Then, to ensure the continuation of creation’s beauty and fruitfulness, God appointed humans “to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). Humans became keepers and wardens of the natural world.
- Genesis further reveals that God created a world with **future possibilities**. God gave the humans the capacity to reproduce and called them to be “fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28). He also gave plants the capacity to continually bear fruit (Genesis 1:29). This was God’s way of ensuring that our future would be bright and abundant. Tomorrow would not bring an end to the food we eat or to the children we bear.
- Finally, Genesis claims that God created a world with **spiritual intimacy**. God created humans “in his image” (Genesis 1:27). To our very core, we were made for communion with God. God and the humans spoke directly to one another (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:9). There was closeness and connection between God and humanity.

This was the world as God intended. It is the world we were made for. In spite of where we are, this is where we were.

But what happened? Why aren’t we experiencing now what Genesis describes?

Genesis claims that what was created started to un-create. Life began to unwind. Order gave way to chaos. Light gave way to darkness. How? It happened when humans did one thing: they declared their independence from God. Genesis 3 reveals that the first humans wanted to become like God—they wanted to take charge of their lives. They expressed this by eating from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”



Their declaration of independence exposed two things. First, it exposed the evil in the human heart. Humans were given the freedom to choose good or bad. Their declaration of independence revealed our tendency to often choose the bad. The second thing exposed by this declaration was the existence of

evil spiritual forces. Genesis shows that in this pristine early world there was an evil spiritual force that sought to turn humans from God. In Eden, that evil spiritual force took the form of a snake.

- The declaration of independence led to a rift between God and humans. The innocence and intimacy of their relationship was shattered.
- That, in turn, led to social breakdown. Soon after these events we find the first murder in human history being committed (Genesis 4:8).
- The declaration also hurt the natural world. We are told that the soil lost some of its fruitfulness and the earth was cursed by the selfish actions of humans (Genesis 3:17-19).
- As the story progresses from Genesis 1 through Genesis 11 the future becomes more and more chaotic. The first murder is followed by a man who boasts about his serial killings. This is followed by a flood of water triggered by a flood of wickedness. The humans who survive eventually congregate into one mega-city and strive to become greater than even God. It seems unclear that humanity and the world will survive.

According to the Bible's story, the human declaration of independence in Eden gave rise to the challenges we find in our world

today. Influenced by the disobedience in our own hearts and by immoral spiritual forces, we have sought to live without the wisdom, guidance and partnership of the One who created us. The result has been social breakdown, natural crises, future uncertainties, and spiritual mysteries.

Where We're Going

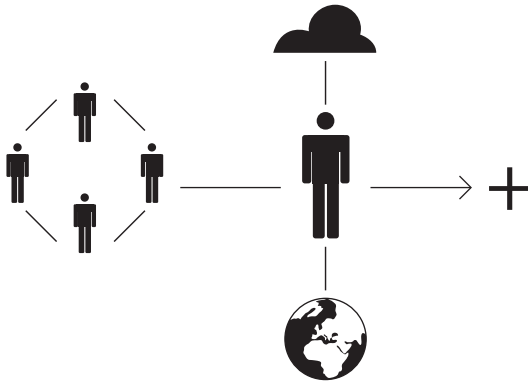
But the Christian story says that God has not given up. Instead, he is working to re-create us, the earth, and the heavens so that we can experience what he first intended. God's trying to get back to our future.

In the Old Testament, God gives a prophet named Isaiah a vision of a future in which relationships are restored, spiritual intimacy is experienced, and nature and creation are renewed:

"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind...Never again will there be in it infants who live but a few days, or older people who do not live out their years; those who die at a hundred will be thought mere youths; those who fail to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days

of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,' says the LORD." (Isaiah 65:17-25).

God's planning a future where the former things, the hard things about life, won't even be remembered.



- It will be a world with a hope-filled tomorrow. No more children facing short lives. One hundred years old will seem young.
- It will be a world in which the natural world is fruitful and harmonious. Vineyards will bear fruit and animals will live in harmony.
- And, it will be a time of spiritual intimacy. Before we even call on God he will answer.

In the New Testament, God gives a man named John a similar vision:

"Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4).

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life,

as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 22:1-5)

God is working toward a future in which earth and heaven are renewed. Order will replace chaos. Wounds will give way to healing.

- It is a future of **social harmony**. John reports that the nations will be present and will find renewal together.
- It will be a time of **spiritual intimacy**. God will be our God and we will be his people. Humans will see the face of God.
- It will be a place where **nature fulfills its greatest potential**. Crystal clear water will quench our thirst and trees so healthy they actually heal us will grow on the banks.

- And it will be an existence with a **secure future**. God and his Son will reign over this re-created heaven and earth forever and ever.

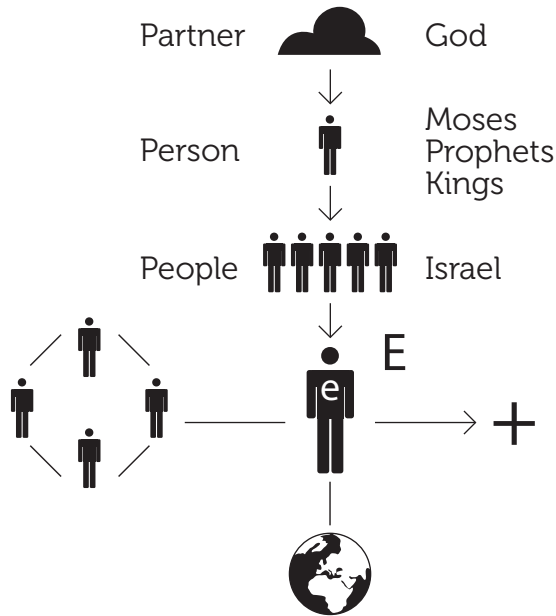
In spite of where we are, this is where we're going. God's working toward a future that mirrors what began in Eden. And it's not just pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. God's striving to break that future into our present. This renewal and recreation has already begun.

How We're Going

But how is God bringing about all of this? Do we have any role to play?

The Old Testament says that God is bringing about that future through a person who comes with a message about that future and a people who strive to model that future. It further reveals that God is acting as our partner—one with the means to achieve this future.

One prominent person was Moses. Then prophets like Samuel. Then Kings like David. Each came with a message from God. It was a true message grounded not in subjective opinion but in objective wisdom from God. These messages revealed truth about God, his desired future, and the role we play in helping to usher that future into the present.



For example, Moses' message was summarized in the Ten Commandments. These teachings in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy revealed several critical truths:

- How we could once again find social harmony ("Honor your father and mother"; "You shall not murder"; "You shall not commit adultery"; "You shall not steal"; "You shall not give false testimony

against your neighbor"; and "You shall not covet your neighbor's house").

- How we could once again find spiritual intimacy ("You shall have no other gods before me"; "You shall not make for yourself an image"; "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God"; and "Remember the Sabbath").

- How we could once again become fitting stewards taking care of creation (For example, God asks that fields lie unplowed and unused every seventh year. This not only allowed the land to rest, but provided food for nearby wild animals, and for the poor. Further, it provided rest for the ox and donkey who would ordinarily be used to plow that field (Exodus 23:10ff)).

- This message also promised a certain future of blessing if we began to live out these wise instructions (Deuteronomy 28).

In the Old Testament, the people consisted of a nation or kingdom called Israel. They were to become a living model of the message, a community where social harmony, spiritual intimacy, and natural responsibility once again thrived. Through this community "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12). In the darkness of life, this people would become a "light for the Gentiles", or nations (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). Though they were painfully imperfect, through them, God's future would break into the present.

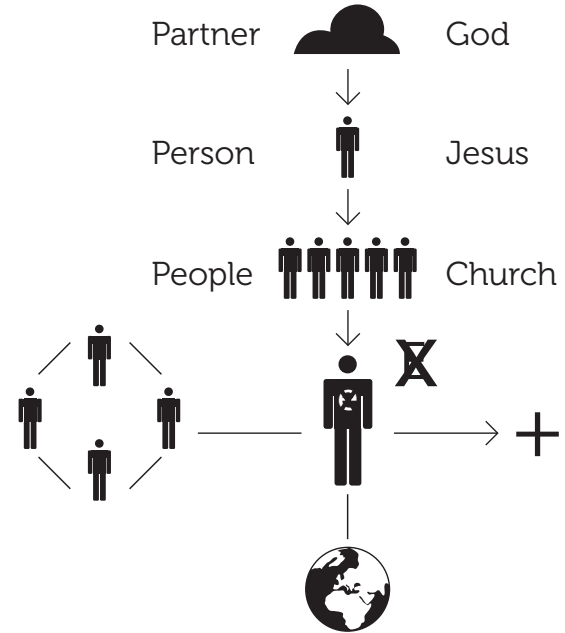
In addition, God acted as a partner with the divine means for helping bring about this future. When needed, God liberated this people from oppressive human and spiritual powers, as in the exodus story. God led each person like Moses, the prophets, and the kings so that they in turn might lead the people as they strived to live out God's desired future. God created a sacrificial system through which human sin could be forgiven and human hearts could experience the dawn of renewal.

The New Testament similarly says that God is bringing about his desired future through a person who comes with a message and a people who strive to model that future. It also reveals that God is acting as our partner—one with the means to make this future dream a present reality.

The primary person in the New Testament is Jesus. Others will follow—leaders like Paul, Peter, Matthew, and John. Jesus comes with a message of divine truth about God, his desired future, and our role in bringing it about.

For example, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus revisits the Ten Commandments and reveals their deepest meaning.

- Jesus teaches how we can live in social harmony (do not lust; do not divorce; do love your enemy (Matthew 5)).



- He demonstrates how we can find spiritual intimacy (by seeking God instead of using religion for our own purposes (Matthew 6)).
- And Jesus calms our fears about the future by teaching how God provides for all of his creation and how God will thus provide for us (Matthew 7).

Jesus called this future the “kingdom of God” and it is the central theme of his message.

Through Jesus, God acts as a partner with the divine means for helping establish this kingdom. When needed, Jesus intervenes miraculously to help this future break into the present. For example Jesus casts evil spirits out of people spelling the beginning of the end of the power of evil spiritual forces (Mark 1). Through his death on the cross, Jesus will gain ultimate victory over these forces (Colossians 2:15). Jesus forgives and heals a paralyzed man, demonstrating his ability to reverse the corruption of creation which resulted in the man’s paralysis (Mark 2). And Jesus calms a raging storm restoring creation to a balanced order (Mark 4).

Ultimately, however, Jesus’ death and resurrection were the greatest means for establishing this kingdom. Jesus took upon himself the consequences of all the social breakdown, natural crises, future uncertainties, and spiritual mysteries. He sacrificed himself to save us from these disorders. His death forever closed the gap between humans and God. And in his resurrection, Jesus gained victory over death and marked the beginning of new life for all. Finally, Jesus provided the Holy Spirit to recreate humans from the inside out and to equip humans with talents so that we too could play a role in bringing God’s future into the present.

The people in the New Testament are called “the church.” The church becomes a living model of the message. They become a community where social harmony, spiritual intimacy, and natural responsibility once again reign. They take on the mission of being the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-16). Though remarkably flawed, God makes his future present through this church. As he does, darkness in the world is dispelled and decay is destroyed. The church invites others to join this mission until Jesus returns and he finally and fully ushers in the kingdom in its fullest and most satisfying form.

Where Are You?

That’s God’s story. Is it yours? Whatever story is currently shaping and defining your life, you were meant for more. God invites you to trade your story for His. He offers you the opportunity to enter into this amazing adventure and this global mission. How? First, have faith—trust—that His story is the best story. Second, be baptized into Jesus Christ. This is God’s way of washing off your story of chaos and hurt and welcoming you into His Story of order and purpose. Third, connect with a group of others who are guided by this same story. Together, passionately live out God’s Story. Your life, and the lives of those God touches through you, will never be the same.

