

A REVIEW OF SPREAD TRUTH'S *THE STORY*

The Story is an evangelistic booklet produced by Spread Truth Ministries aimed “to clearly present the Gospel of Jesus” by means of the grand narrative of Scripture.¹ In addition, Spread Truth offers training resources to assist people to use this tool and understand its message. A number of pastors, professors, and other mission mobilizers have endorsed the approach. An online promotional video features J. D. Greear, David Platt, Jerome Gay, Alvin Reid, George Robinson, Ed Stetzer, Scott Thomas, and Elliot Grudem, all commending *The Story* as a unique and needed way to communicate the gospel. At present, there appears only to be an English version of *The Story*. This critique focuses mainly on *The Story* booklet/tract.

The Story follows a familiar way of recounting the entire biblical story, outlined in four parts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration/consummation. This approach sharply contrasts popular methods used in the last half-century, including *The Four Spiritual Laws*, *The Roman Road*, or *Steps to Life*, all being far narrower in scope and use of use of Scripture. The introduction clearly contests postmodern thinking by claiming to tell a “true story” that “is not just another story—it is *the story*. It defines us all” [*TSb*, 1; its emphasis]. One must make certain qualifications when assessing this sort of tool. Beyond content are various contextual considerations. Something that may be a concern in one context may be essential for another. Similarly, questions about stylistic emphases do not negate a tool’s quality or basic value. This review has in mind two kinds of people; first is a western, pluralistic, non-Christianized unbeliever, and second, an East Asian, among whom I have worked for nearly 7 years.

“The story begins with God,” so one first reads in the first section about Creation (*TSb*, 2). Rather than attempting a systematized apology regarding creationism or God’s existence, the booklet gives a straightforward and humble introduction. This is evident when, in the third sentence, we hear, “If it seems confusing, it’s because He’s beyond what anyone can fully understand.” A precious distinctive of the tract starts here with its stress upon the God’s “grand purpose of worshipping Him . . .” (2; cp 6, 7). Its “Harmony” motif is unusual for Western methods and so grabs attention. One could question whether the writers either overstress or miscommunicate the notion that the universe was “perfect” and “exactly the way it was supposed to be” (2). It adds, “There was *complete* love, acceptance, and intimacy between God and man, between Adam and Eve, and throughout creation” (2; my emphasis). The “perfection” idea is reiterated on p. 3, yet on p. 8, the language is more ambiguous, seeming to imply creation’s purpose or ideal, not its actual state.

The Fall section recounts Genesis 3, using plain language coupled with vivid pictures of sin’s consequences. The writers were shrewd to implore us to “honest[ly] glance into our heart” to think on “the thoughts we’d never dare say aloud” (*TSb*, 3). The tone is personal, such as when we read that people believed the lie that God “did not have their best interest in mind” (3). The results of sin could be more personalized by mentioning things like adultery, gluttony, or

¹ Spread Truth Ministries, “FAQ” n. p. [cited 19 Aug 2011]. Online: <http://ViewTheStory.com>. This is the website for *The Story*, hereafter shorten to *VTS*. The booklet itself will be called *TSb*. (*TSb*, 1) signifies page 1. An online version can be found at <http://yourpartinthestory.com>. Spread Truth’s website is spreadtruth.com.

gossip. The booklet itself seems to concede a degree of distance and abstraction for many who have only “read or heard stories of war, poverty, disease, greed, and scandals . . .” (2). For the first time, the word “sin” is introduced without explanation or definition, though the context implies disobeying God. “Sin” is manifestly a legal category, as evidenced by the four times “guilt(y)” is used (3, 5, 8), three times “(un)righteous” (3, 5), and once “innocent” (5). Though the workbook mentions honor-shame language a few times, its orientation is overwhelmingly legal-guilt based. Intriguingly, it chooses not to use Rom 3:23, instead quoting two verses with legal overtones (Rom 3:10, 19). Not only is Rom 3:23 traditionally used because of its clarity in explaining sin, but it would add the conception of glory (implicitly shame?), furthering the booklet’s desire to center everything on God. It’s not clear then how successful the tract engages the heart on this point, especially since sin is mainly depicted in terms of actions rather than affections (volition, desires, values, etc.). As is typical, it neglects to mention sins of *omission*.

The Rescue (Part III) is beautifully Christocentric: “the whole Bible ultimately points to this one person as the focal point of all human history” (*Tsb*, 4). A rare connection is made between God’s “promise made” of Adam and Eve and the “promise kept” in Jesus (4–5). Stress is foremost on the cross, then the resurrection. However, its silence on the life of Jesus is reminiscent of the Apostle’s Creed. “He never sinned” summarizes the whole of his life, such that theoretically it would appear Jesus, if he had died as a sinless 7 year old, would have achieved the same goal. This omission no doubt masks a number of presuppositions and dangers. One among many is the propensity to subtly treat Jesus as a bridge (or tool) to eternal life, but not as an end in himself to be treasured. The booklet is exceptional in its accenting Jesus as “King” (5, 7, 8). Further developing this idea would help compensate for any weakness in not making Jesus himself attractive on the basis of his life. Finally, the tract passes over the opportunity to highlight Jesus’ promise to come back.

Two further points are debatable. First, to the uninformed listener unfamiliar with the nuances of historical theology, how might one understand the statements that Jesus died “for the sins of all mankind” (*Tsb*, 5), if only one would trust in “the rescue He purchased for you by His death” (7)? For someone with pluralistic proclivities, a natural response would be to question whether Jesus does in fact secure a salvific universalism. It would be better to convey that his death “makes rescue possible” for anyone who trusts. A minor point is the question of choosing Luke 19:10 and suddenly changing the metaphor to being “lost” (4). Might there be better options to reinforce the larger theme, like Rom 10:11; 15:8–9; 1 Pet 1:5, or Acts 13:32–33a?

As elsewhere, the wonderful contributions of the Restoration section come with a few concerns. One rejoices to read that salvation includes a *cosmic* restoration. We are beckoned to something greater than our private provision; thus “God is inviting you to be a part of the story He is writing throughout the ages to come” (8). It adds, “The most wonderful part of this new world is that we will be with God forever, experiencing complete joy” (6). Personally, I would prefer it more explicitly convey that *God* is our complete joy, not simply the new world. The use of “trust” is an improvement over the more ambiguous “faith,” though I think it would be even better to further develop the “allegiance/loyalty” idea (7). This would help to elucidate the meaning of trusting “in Christ alone” (6–8). In light of what has been said, one would be curious to know how this new world will be different or an improvement from Eden. Might this open a syncretistic door for an eastern cyclical view of history reminiscent of the Matrix?

The most serious concern with *The Story* is its *functional* irrelevance to the present life, in similar fashion to conventional methods. There is nothing about how the rescue and restoration is to affect here and now. Not everyone judges a religion on its view of the afterlife; many also want to know its present, practice value. (One needs only to think of various liberation-type theologies.) As a result, this helps clarify the meaning of trust/repentance. It is noteworthy that the tract makes no mention of repentance. Consequently, it perpetuates the this/next world dichotomy where one sees God mainly in relation to the next life, having little to do with daily life. The one clause tacked on the end (p. 7) does not compensate for the impression that Christ is mainly interested in having forgiven converts for eternal life, rather than disciples who glorify Him, in every way, now and forever. Unfortunately, this shows how *similar* *The Story* is to traditional tracts. For instance, it still skips from Genesis 3 over Israel and Jesus' life to his death, then into eternity. While helpfully giving the impression of capturing the grand narrative and wonderfully diversifying its metaphors, nevertheless one would be hard pressed to greatly distinguish its key points and flow from *The Four Spiritual Laws* and the like.

Given these considerations, *The Story* should not polarize the two testaments by omitting all but 3 chapters of the Old Testament story, in particular Abraham and Israel. This shows how the promise keeping God faithfully works in the world. (The fact that Gal 3:8 calls the promise to Abraham “the “gospel” intensifies the point.) One must keep in mind that tracts are catalysts, spurring people to read the Bible so that they may believe. Yet, without some introduction into this essential element of the biblical narrative, those interested in following Christ will immediately be confused upon opening nearly anywhere in the Bible, having no introduction to context. *The Story* wants to connect His Story with our story, but such adaptations are needed to do this. Likewise, though it is clearly written for westerners, the writers would do well to recognize that many in the rest of the world are not pursuing “work-based” salvation as much as they are entrenched in ethnic and identity based [false] “gospels.”

All things considered, *The Story* is undoubtedly the best resource of its kind. The writing style is relational (not “Christianise”), engaging, diversifying and linking motifs. Thus, since “God is writing an amazing story . . .”, we are invited “to know the author of life” (7). Most pages start with leading questions, then conclude with either lingering thoughts or questions. *The Story* employs first-rate technology and artistic design, making it attractive and user friendly. People can use its smart phone app or Facebook/Twitter access to share with friends, though this requires a free account for tracking purposes. The vivid colors, use of fonts, and juxtaposition of real-life pictures give life to the vast amounts of tract/Scripture text contained within. Hopefully, Spread Truth will develop *The Story* by contextualizing it for a non-western reader. Different versions could take on different perspectives and highlight various parts of the grand narrative. For instance, most tracts are man-oriented (not meaning man-centered); that is, its narratives are told from the place of mankind. Retelling *The Story* from a God-oriented viewpoint would be freshly engaging. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of *The Story* is the unique curriculum offered to supplement the tract; this includes both participant and leader guides. Its interactive questions stimulate response. Where the tract is limited, much ground can be made up here, both facilitating deeper understanding and training people to evangelize.