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## Response to Collin Cornell, PhD: *God Draws Near*

Christopher J.H. Wright, PhD

For Panel at the National Evangelical Missiological Society Conference on Oct. 3rd, 2025.

If you read the Preface to Collin’s book, as well as the Preface to the 2nd Edition of my own book, *The Mission of God* (publication 21st October, 2025), you will see that Collin and I had some extensive interaction in relation to each other’s works—a fact that is further evidenced by the mutual endorsements you’ll find on our back covers...!

In 2024 Collin had the kindness (and perhaps the courage!) to send me the whole typescript of his book, *God Draws Near*, when it was in the later stages of editing with Baker, since he had referenced my own work extensively in it. I read it in full, taking some 20 pages of handwritten notes and then sent Collin a 14 page response, with a combination of some warm affirmation and agreement (we share many fundamental biblical convictions), alongside considerable specific critique. We then had some lengthy email exchanges even after that. What follows is a very condensed version of some key points in our “conversation.”

Collin argues that I am one of a whole school of biblical theology of mission exponents who, since the mid-twentieth century have adopted what he calls “the dramatic paradigm” of canonical interpretation. That is, seeing the whole Bible as essentially one great canonical narrative, encompassing creation, fall, redemption (promised in the O.T. and accomplished by Christ), and consummation in the new creation—a schema that goes back in Christian history to the second century, to Irenaeus and Justin Martyr (and I would argue would not have met any objections from the Apostle Paul).

Collin’s book is very wide-ranging, but let me highlight three ways in which Collin sees significantly detrimental effects of this “dramatic paradigm,” several of which he sees instantiated in the work of mission theologians such as Arthur Glasser, Michael Goheen and myself. I can only speak for myself of course, in attempting some response to each of these. Collin argues that:

**1. The dramatic paradigm adopts a rigidly *unilinear* reading of Scripture.** It’s all one single line of sequentiality—a reading that fails to see how the Bible has a more “*geometric*” pattern (Collin’s preferred phrase), with different centers, multilinear plots, the ability to anticipate forwards and echo backwards within itself.

I would argue that the biblical canon is certainly not *unilinear*, like a canal. But it is *unidirectional* (like the River Amazon, which for all its massive complexity is all heading to its destination in the Atlantic Ocean). That is, with all its complexity, twists and turns, and geometric lines and shapes, the Bible does have an overall purposeful direction of flow towards its destination. The core motif of divine promise and fulfilment surely demands that, as does the constant affirmation of God’s sovereign engagement in history, which generates the covenant promises of O.T. Israel, the explosion of their fulfilment affirmation in the gospel, and the eschatological hope of God’s ultimate victory throughout.

So I am happy to endorse Collin’s observation of the multiple layers and intersections of biblical content (e.g. the echoes of the fall of humanity in the fall of Israel in Ex. 32; the anticipation of Sinai and tabernacle in the blessing promised to Abraham and so on—such inter-textual and trans-historical connections have been part of biblical theology—and disciplined typology—since Jesus himself). But many of the Bible’s own characters seem to have appreciated the linear nature of the story, both its remembered past and its hope-filled future, as something that in itself validated their faith in the faithfulness of God, as a community of memory and hope. Think of the recitals of the story, up to their own day, that we find in the mouths of Moses, Joshua, the Psalms, Nehemiah, Jesus, Stephen, Paul... The dramatic paradigm is hard to overlook in any construal of the Bible itself, in the form God has providentially given it to us.

**2. The “dramatic paradigm” operates fundamentally as a *missiology* of “repair”** (Collin’s own much repeated word, which I’m not very keen on, since when something just gets “repaired,” it feels like it’s a temporary “fix” of the same old thing—which is decidedly not the glory of the biblical language of redemption, renewal, restoration, “all things made new,” regeneration, reconciliation, etc.). Collin argues that the dramatic

paradigm gives too prominent, too pivotal, importance to the Fall as the trigger for the whole rest of the story, which then becomes God’s long-term project to “fix” the problem the Fall created. Not that Collin denies the reality of sin and fallenness (far from it), but his point is that such relentless focus on the narrative of repair obscures, or gives very little if any attention to the Bible’s own emphasis on *communion* as God’s greatest and ultimate goal (God’s longing and intention to dwell within his own creation in loving union with human beings and indeed with all his non-human creatures). That is the freight that the title of his book carries—*God Draws Near*—and God does so not only at the end of the story in the new creation (when the “repair” job is finished), but all the way through in anticipatory relationships, institutions, (like the tabernacle), and profound texts of loving mutuality (The Song of Solomon).

Now I do not want to question Collin’s rich emphasis on God’s mission to dwell with us and all creation in loving union. Immanuel, after all, means God with us—ultimately in the unified heaven and earth, Rev. 21:5—not us going somewhere else to be with God in the end. Nor do I overlook the many points in the biblical story when that eschatological communion is anticipated, in the geometric way Collin portrays the canon, e.g. especially in the tabernacle, the temple, and supremely of course in the Incarnation. When I teach or preach on the mission of God I usually start with Eph. 1:9–10 where Paul succinctly summarizes God’s ultimate mission to bring the whole creation into unified, healed, wholeness in Christ and through Christ. I fully endorse that wonderful biblical, gospel truth and hope!

But what troubles me (as I’ve told Collin in our exchanges) is that he insists (again and again) that a missiology that focuses on this unquestionable desire and intention of God for communion is somehow **antithetical or a necessary corrective**, to the “dramatic paradigm” of envisaging the unity of the canon of scripture in terms of a great arching narrative that spans from creation to new creation. The dominant missiology of repair “cannot accommodate” communion, he says. Furthermore, it remains exclusively horizontal in nature (that is, historically sequential within the economy of salvation), and operates with an instrumental Christology that lacks the vertical dimensions of the immanent Trinity (but those are more than we can address here!).

In my view, the dramatic narrative of redemption and the divine goal of communion are simply complementary, not contrary in any way. Collin acknowledges that some (like myself) will argue for a “both and,” rather than “either or.” And he recognizes of course that there has to be “repair” in order for there to be “communion.” Or, in his own words, “God’s will towards communion generates God’s will towards repair.” But I still wish his overall style of argumentation had not set these things up in opposition.

In his own defense, Collin wrote to me in one of our email exchanges, as follows:

You indicate some discomfort with the antithetical quality of my rhetoric here and there in the book. I suppose in self-defense I would observe that ...a single paradigm has dominated biblical theology of mission since the mid-twentieth century. That being so, the Bible as one big story or drama will feel natural or inevitable to many or most readers of my book. If I am to pitch an alternative, it almost requires sounding a klaxon blast—demonstrating sharply and repetitiously what the dramatic paradigm is and entails and in what respects another proposal could differ. I am quite open to the possibility that I have overstated some contrasts—but I wonder the extent to which drawing bold contrasts is necessary or strategic for a book that could help to kick off an era of renewed biblical theology of mission. Or that is my hope, anyway! (and I suspect that the almost simultaneous publication of our two books has a real chance of doing that kickstarting; perhaps providentially, their joint impact will exceed what either individually might have done)

Well, let's see what happens!

3. **The dramatic paradigm leads to *obsolescence***, and that in turn generates *anxiety*. Collin illustrates this by reference to western missionaries, who, being totally invested in the dominant missiological paradigm of repair, see mission as fundamentally a linear and time-limited *task* that we have to somehow complete so that God too can get the job finished and Christ can return. The psychological/spiritual effect can be that when they “retire from the mission field,” and so no longer have a meaningful part to play in that task, they feel obsolete (or have indeed become obsolete, in relation to sending churches and agencies). Anxiety kicks in. Do they matter anymore to God, if they are now redundant to his great mission to fix the world?

At the much more serious theological level, if, in the dramatic paradigm, the redemptive story of O.T. Israel has an “ending” (in the middle, so to speak) in Jesus Christ, then Israel itself is disposable—as classic *supersessionism* boldly affirms. The whole Old Testament, or at least the massive chunk between the Fall and the Incarnation, becomes likewise dispensable, it is no more than a “fly-over zone” (Collin’s expression), since who needs it once the “repair” has been accomplished? (And that is indeed how the O.T. is simply ignored in many Christian churches, mission theologies, and evangelistic practice—though the last thing that could be said about my own teaching and writing is that I treat the O.T. as a dispensable fly-over zone!). Indeed, not

only Israel would become obsolete, but so would the human Jesus, since the need for the incarnation would have gone once he accomplished the “repair” through his bodily death on the cross. The incarnation also would have an expiry date!

Now, the charge of supersessionism has been robustly leveled at myself, specifically in relation to my book *The Mission of God*, both by Collin, and by Kendall Soulen, whom he quotes. I need to equally robustly affirm that I *do not* embrace supersessionism, or replacement theology. The critique of my book by Kendall and Collin, however, led me to some careful clarifications and adjusted terminology in the 2nd edition (October 2025), and a lengthy response to both in a wholly new chapter 8. For my full response on that issue, then, I refer you to that book, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Biblical Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press; and London: IVP, 2nd edition, 2025), pp. 257–278.

As for the matter of obsolescence, in Collin’s hands, it is routinely a “bad thing.” But there can indeed be wrong assumptions of obsolescence, but also some right and necessary ones, which the Bible recognizes. E.g.:

- The physical tabernacle – with all its vast theological significance gives way eventually to the temple, and both eventually are sublimated in the body of the Messiah, and then the “body” of those who, in Christ and through the gospel, become the dwelling-place of God by the Spirit (Eph. 2), and finally in the cosmic temple of the new creation. And within that sequence, there is a theologically proper obsolescence (the physical tabernacle and temple), and a “never-ever-obsolescence” (the body of Messiah and God’s dwelling in and with his people).
- In Galatians, Paul insists on a temporal change between the eras of Abrahamic promise, the era of the law, and the era of Messiah. Again, there is a combination of eternal non-obsolescence (the promise and the Messiah) with appropriate theological obsolescence (of the role of the law in relation to both).

So then, it is not the case that, just because the dramatic narrative of redemption reached the “It is finished” of the cross, and will reach its “ending and new beginning” in the new creation, then those who have participated in that great story *themselves* become obsolete, disposable, “throw away,” whether one thinks of the irrevocable election of Israel, the eternally incarnate Jesus, Christian missionaries, or the Christian church itself as the ultimate population of the new creation, redeemed from every tribe, people, language and nation.

## Response to Chris Wright, PhD

Collin Cornell, PhD

November 28, 2025

The acknowledgments section of my book *God Draws Near* thanks Christopher J.H. Wright for his extraordinary generosity (pp. x–xi), and I want to begin this response to his response with more of the same. Readers of this journal will appreciate that Chris is the premier evangelical biblical theologian of mission, and his book, *Mission of God*, is rightly hailed as a classic in the field. I, on the other hand, was unknown to missiology and unknown to Chris when I first reached out to invite his feedback on my manuscript. Besides being unknown, the manuscript itself also voices a number of criticisms of Chris’s work. Chris might have responded briefly, dismissively, or not at all. Instead, he sent detailed notes to me, and more than that, he adapted a chapter he had already drafted for *Mission of God* in order to address this new material. All this is testament to Chris’s character—and his passion for the subject matter. I hope I can show the same grace if (when?) my writing occasions similar criticism.

I am grateful as well to the editors of the *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society* (JEMS) for this opportunity to make a written response to Chris’s comments, which he first prepared for a book review panel at the 2025 annual meeting of the society. Chris has helpfully organized his thoughts into three sections. These concern, respectively, architecture, theme, and obsolescence, i.e.: the most adequate “architecture” for understanding the Bible; the principal theme or themes of God’s mission in the Bible, and their relationship of opposition or complementariness; and the necessity of discriminating between the everlasting and the occasional elements in the Bible. I will address each of these individually. But it strikes me that the first (architecture) is most decisive and probably the most fundamental bone of contention between Chris and me, so I will spend relatively more time there.

**Architecture.** Chris argues that the Bible is not unilinear like a canal. But it is, he urges, unidirectional: like the River Amazon, it contains many twists and turns, bends and eddies, and yet its waters all flow into the Atlantic Ocean (cf. *Mission of God*, pp. 55–56). Likewise, the Bible holds multitudes but flows, ultimately, in a single direction. Notably, Chris understands this direction *chronologically*. It is not just that the Bible flows toward Christ. The Bible flows *forward* in time toward a Christ who is *later* relative to earlier testimonies—he is the fulfilment of prior prophecies; the down payment on a previous earnest. Indeed, Chris in his response characterizes promise and fulfilment as the “core motif” of the Bible, and in the revised edition of *Mission of God*,

he uses the metaphor of a clock: “Christ’s coming moved the clock forward from Israel’s life under the *paidagōgos* of the Torah into the era of the Spirit- and Messiah-focused salvific faith” (p. 266).

I can hardly deny that the forward movement of time is a real dimension of the Bible’s witness. As Chris points out, the Bible features numerous historical recitals (“Moses, Joshua, the Psalms, Nehemiah, Jesus, Stephen, Paul”), and the New Testament repeatedly leverages the concepts of promise and fulfillment to describe the unique significance of Christ’s advent. The Apostle Paul even asserts that all God’s promises find their Yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20)! That said, I do deny that promise and fulfillment are the Bible’s core motif; and I deny that they constitute the organizational schema upon which the two testaments hinge.

I see other, stranger configurations of time in the Bible. The Apostle Paul also says that the rock from which the ancestors drank in the wilderness was Christ (1 Cor 10:3). He claims that Christ is the one through whom all things exist (1 Cor 8:6)—meaning, I take it, not that the pre-incarnate Christ ministered to the Israelites or that the eternal Son in his pre-fleshly phase created the universe, but rather that the crucified human Jesus was somehow present to the Israelites, or they to him, and that the whole world was made through his death and resurrection. In other words, times long past and more recent times are simultaneous to each other, if and insofar as Christ is in them. Or to think of another time-bending example: at his Transfiguration, the Synoptic Gospels show Moses and Elijah appearing and talking with Jesus. If the Bible is unilinear (or unidirectional; these amount to the same thing for me), I suppose these two prophets must have come out of their spiritual retirement to make a belated encore. But if the Bible is multilinear, or perhaps better, multi-simultaneous, then Moses and Elijah weren’t jumping forward in a chronological timeline. They were, rather, beholding and speaking with Christ *in their own times*. The glory Moses saw “back then” and the still small voice Elijah heard “in his day” were both in fact Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. (One student of mine called this an “Interstellar Bible,” thinking of the scene in the movie *Interstellar* where Matthew McConaughey’s character seeks to communicate with his daughter across time.)

My book *God Draws Near* articulates this set of relationships in terms of “equidistance” and “divine constancy.” The testaments are, it says, “equidistant” to God (pp. 19, 171). One testament is not closer to God than the other. So also, one testament is not closer to *Christ* than the other. This last is counterintuitive. Most Christians are accustomed to think of the Old Testament as promissory and the New Testament as delivering the promise. As such, the New is commonly understood to offer

a more direct and up-to-date access to God than the Old. But I don't think that is right, and my dissent reflects a certain doctrine of God. *God Draws Near* emphasizes throughout the constancy of God. God is self-identical: God did not *become* self-giving and sacrificial in the history of Jesus. Rather, Jesus's self-giving and sacrificial ministry in time reiterates the ministry of the Son within God's everlasting, triune life. Inasmuch, therefore, as the Old Testament testifies truthfully of God, the God it announces is already shaped like Jesus. The Old Testament can be consulted to know *this God*—its characters and testimonies are transparent to who God is, always and everywhere. The ways in which the New Testament “advances” the story, chronologically or theologically or otherwise, are inconsequential in comparison to this more basic truth of God's constancy.

By staking this position, I am not trying to be precious or idiosyncratic. What is at stake for me is the extent to which the Old Testament is an abiding resource for knowing God. I simply don't think that the unilinear or unidirectional schema can support this value. With the line as the architecture for the Bible, the Old Testament always remains an earlier segment; with the river as the governing image, the Old Testament is always the headwaters or an upper stretch but never the delta, never the ocean. At most, the Old Testament can mediate a plan God shared in preliminary form; an initial sketch of the divine purposes; a narrative catalyst for the main drama that follows it. But one would not turn there to discern the most essential and most current lineaments of God's mission. That is why I prefer neither the line nor the river as a guiding concept for the whole Bible. I propose instead something more solar: the Old Testament orbits the triune God—and the New Testament circles both the Old Testament and the divine sun at the center of the scriptural system. (I looked it up, a moon that orbits a planet *and* a star is called “circumbinary”; the New Testament is circumbinary)

**Theme.** The reason for belaboring the “architecture” of the Bible like this lies exactly in this: if the Old Testament is an abiding resource for knowing God, even and specifically for determining God's mission, then it opens up thematic possibilities that are otherwise closed off. The Old Testament contains much that is non-reparative, non-soteriological. The dynamics of sin and salvation are well-represented in it, to be sure, but they do not encompass the whole. Several Old Testament texts foreground mutuality, enjoyment, and togetherness quite apart from the logic of rupture and repair. The Song of Songs, for example, does not problem-solve or troubleshoot. It celebrates desire and delight. Arguably, too, the Tabernacle at the heart of the Pentateuch does not principally mend a breach but rather hosts a regular, joyful meeting between God and Israel. With these data in hand, it is possible to develop a

theology of mission oriented not just to the theme of *repair* but rather to *communion*, centering God’s will to bless and receive blessing; to cherish and draw close; to keep company.

If, on the other hand, the Old Testament is backgrounded—given only a preparatory or promissory role—then the New Testament with its far more obviously redemptive focus drives theology of mission. The idioms for salvation that the New Testament employs are many: Chris draws mostly on the New Testament when he highlights “the glory of the biblical language of redemption, renewal, restoration, ‘all things made new,’ regeneration, reconciliation.” Yet thematically these all share in common a sense of crisis: a problem of lostness, brokenness, deadness, apartness—and a divine initiative to rectify the problem. By applying the unfamiliar and non-biblical labels *repair* and *reparative*, I wanted to shock readers awake to this “problem-dependency,” i.e., the fact that this scriptural (but mostly New Testament) vocabulary for God and mission depends on a prior problem. I hoped that raising awareness of this problem-dependency would clarify that many Old Testament texts, by contrast, show God exercising goodwill—creating; blessing; flourishing—without any such presumption of a prior problem. God blesses in the beginning before anything has gone awry (Gen 1). God authorizes a blessing on Israel at the midpoint of Torah (Num 6), and promises blessing after all the covenant curses have run their course (Lev 26; Deut 33). God’s will to create and cultivate, bless and draw near, is primary. It is older and more lasting than the crises of sin and evil. It is distinct from God’s will to repair.

With Chris, I affirm that these two divine “wills” or divine “projects” are complementary. *God Draws Near* spends significant time laying out the relationship of the one to the other (see pp. 164–168, titled: “The Relationship between Consummation and Salvation”). It activates various images of synthesis: braiding, intertwining, double helix. But it does insist that one will, blessing and delighting, is primary, while the other, repairing and saving, is secondary. Only one is first and last; only one describes God’s own trinitarian life of mutual blessing and communion, and only one describes the life we will enjoy with God in the ages of ages. The antithetical rhetoric of the book aims not to put these two wills in opposition to one another but to differentiate between them.

**Obsolescence.** *God Draws Near* seeks to differentiate repair and communion as themes of mission theology. Its motive for doing so is not academic or technical. It is pressingly practical and spiritual. By tying people’s sense of vocation and relationship with God exclusively to the divine work of *repair*, which will come to an end, we place them on an unsteady foundation. We subject them to an anxiety of closure. The book attempts to

protect mission workers, pastoral leaders, educators, and other Christians against this risk—by reshoring theology of mission onto the theme that is first and final, communion. This is not to diminish repair. We ourselves and our whole world need repair! But repair applies to the present, problematic, perishable time, not for all time.

Chris is correct that the Bible depicts various progressions. The era of the ancestors differs from the Mosaic era. The time of kingship reshapes Israel's profile and theology. The tabernacle gives way to the temple. Life under the *paidagōgos* of law transitions to life by faith. But here again, I would say that the earlier phases and forms are *chronologically* bygone; they are *historically* obsolete. But they are not theologically obsolete. They are written into scripture. They attest God; and as signs and indexes to God, they participate in God's constancy. The tabernacle, the kingship, the *paidagōgos*—these remain viable resources for knowing God and discerning God's mission. Again: whatever "advances" happen from former to latter are relativized by the reliable, selfsame character of God.

Still, perhaps elsewhere in print or in further interactions I need to parse out more exactly the kinds of obsolescence that concern me versus those that do not. At any rate: I close by repeating my hope, expressed in an early email to Chris, that the publication of our books in such close proximity to each other will kick off an era of renewed biblical theology of mission. May it be so!

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