Dipping a Ladle in the Cauldron of Story: Assessing Worship Leadership as Gospel Narration

Jonathan Ottaway

Jonathan Ottaway is Assistant Professor in Christian Theology at the Regent University School of Divinity. He is a member of the Contemporary and Alternative Worship Seminar.

> "Liturgy, as divine drama, tells again the old, old story…[it] demands words and images of wisdom and power, theologically significant body language, lights, colors, smells and food."[1]

The past forty years has witnessed the emergence of a body of literature that addresses the topic of evangelical worship. While this literature may be underdeveloped in contrast with other liturgical traditions, much development has occurred to provide liturgical guidance for evangelicals. In part, this was a byproduct of a renaissance within evangelical scholarship in the latter twentieth century.[2] As scholars increasingly sought to envision theology through an evangelical framework, some also began to contemplate the longstanding problem of evangelicalism's "missing jewel."[3] Robb Redman, in particular, identifies the 1980s as the key moment in which a "worship awakening" occurred. For Redman, numerous

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1. Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (London: SPCK, 1996), 99.
2. Michael S. Hamilton, "Whoring After the Gods of Babylon?: Or Pining for the Fleshpots of Egypt?," *Fides et Historia* 48:1 (2016): 121. Hamilton particularly pinpoints the period following the 1960s where a "commonwealth of Christian scholars" flourished who "rejected the values of the mainstream historical profession" and "concentrated on speaking to and for the church." How quickly this commonwealth of scholars effected change within evangelicalism more broadly is uncertain. As late as 1994, Mark Noll would still famously lament that "the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind." Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 3. The ongoing development of evangelical theology since then has been far from linear. However, large strides forward have also occurred. In his preface to the 2022 edition of *Scandal*, while Noll still laments the aggressive anti-intellectualism of popular evangelicalism, he notes that evangelical institutions of higher learning enjoy an "extraordinary breadth of support" and carry out "solid scholarship."
3. This description of worship in A.W. Tozer's 1961 booklet, *The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church*, has become a popular description.

developments—the publication of Ronald Allen and Gordon Borror's book, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, the emergence of Robert Webber as a leading evangelical voice, and the expansion of institutions like the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship—indicate a definitive turning point in evangelical worship.[4] At the same time, the emergence of Contemporary Praise and Worship gave an additional urgency to this new literature. Effecting a radical and bottom-up liturgical transformation across a broad ecumenical spectrum, Contemporary Praise and Worship sparked intense debate and dialogue about the practice and theology of evangelical worship.

Within this growing body of literature, the topic of worship leadership or liturgical presidency has remained underexplored. Little within the literature has reflected about what effective or theologically coherent worship leadership means. While some guidance exists within mainline and Catholic contexts,[5] much of this literature does not translate easily or naturally into evangelical contexts. The language deployed within these resources of eucharistic communities, baptized infants, vestments, mystery, symbol, and rite place their potentially helpful wisdom at a far remove from the worship that is familiar and meaningful to evangelicals. Furthermore, many of these resources assume the presence of a fixed liturgical text that the presider's role is to embody. By contrast, the vast majority of evangelical worship has followed its broader Free Church heritage by exercising freedom from fixed liturgical forms.[6] Such an approach to worship necessitates its own distinctive approach to worship leadership.

This paper proposes to offer one possible framework through which to assess

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4. Robb Redman, "Worship Wars or Worship Awakening?" *Liturgy* 19:4 (2004): 40–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/04580630490490512.

5. For instance, European Assembly of National Liturgy Secretaries, *Leading the Prayer of God's People: Liturgical Presiding for Priests and Laity*, 1991; William Seth Adams, *Shaped by Images: One Who Presides* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1995); Kimberly Bracken Long, *The Worshiping Body: The Art of Leading Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Simon Reynolds, *Table Manners: Liturgical Leadership for the Mission of the Church* (SCM Press, 2014).

6. Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Andrew Wymer, "Introduction: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions," in *Worship and Power: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions*, eds. Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Andrew Wymer (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023), 6–9.

evangelical worship leadership.[7] Noting the emphasis that evangelical scholars have placed on worship's essential function to *narrate* the Christian gospel, this paper envisions the worship practitioner[8] as a gospel narrator. In this approach, the art of leading worship well has similarities to storytelling. If this description holds true, then reflection upon good storytelling may be suggestive for evangelical worship leadership. This paper offers one potential answer to what it means to tell a good story and draws out several implications for evangelical worship leadership. I draw upon the literary theory of one of the most influential and popular storytellers of the twentieth century—J.R.R. Tolkien—to consider what his approach to storytelling might suggest to evangelical worship practitioners. Specifically, Tolkien's description of the storyteller's craft as creating an immersive and textured fictional realm that holds not only the attention, but the belief, of the reader will be extended to consider how this can shape a basic rubric for evangelical worship leading.

Recovering Worship's Story: The Focus of Evangelical Worship Literature

Before exploring Tolkien's theory of storytelling, it will be helpful to demonstrate why the concept of the worship practitioner as a storyteller may be a helpful and organic development in relation to the existing body of evangelical worship literature. Across the most influential recent works that have sought to resource

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7. To speak of evangelical worship necessitates some kind of description of this tradition. Evangelicalism can be challenging to define as it not only transcends denominational boundaries but "it is also in a constant state of evolution as it takes on new theological and cultural commitments, develops new ecclesial offshoots, and moves across cultural, social, and national boundaries." Jonathan Ottaway, "The Faith Once for All Delivered: Liturgical Theology, Scripture, and the Evangelical Free Church Tradition," *Studia Liturgica* 51:1 (2021): 107. https://doi.org/10.1177/0039320720978923. In her book *Evangelical Worship: An American Mosaic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), Melanie Ross's inductive definition of evangelicalism provides a helpful starting place for understanding the tradition. Although her "mosaic" of evangelical worship might suggest no coherent center to the tradition, she concludes by drawing those fragments together into a unified whole. She defines evangelicalism as "a theological culture that must continually negotiate the paradoxes of continuity and change, consensus and contestation, and sameness and difference" (pp. 227–28). Such a definition of evangelicalism recognizes both its "essentially contested concept" (p. 242) while also refuting the claim that it has no coherent theological core. Instead, building on Kevin Vanhoozer's image of evangelicalism as a securely tethered boat, anchored (but not rigidly fixed) by its Trinitarian and crucicentric emphasis (p. 240), Ross notes that across the broad diversity of evangelical churches in her mosaic, each would intuitively understand themselves as participating in an eschatological culture who are "being slain and made alive, dislocated and re-established, grounded yet subverted by the shock of the gospel" (p. 242). This provides the broad parameter within which this essay will consider evangelical worship.

8. Because terms like presider, president, or liturgist are less-commonly recognized in evangelical contexts, the term I will use throughout this paper to describe those who lead evangelical worship will be worship practitioner. This term is intentionally broad and ambiguous in order to be inclusive of a broad number of stakeholders—pastors, creative directors, and worship leaders or musicians—who often collaborate in the structure, content, and leadership of evangelical worship.

evangelical worship, there has been a common emphasis on recovering the Christian story that worship does. These writers—in this section I consider the contributions of Robert Webber, Bryan Chappell, and Constance Cherry—have overwhelmingly pursued the recovery of the content and structure of the gospel in Christian worship.

Robert Webber has been one of the most longstanding and prominent voices in evangelical worship. Webber's many books, including *Worship: Old and New* (1982, rev. 1994), *Worship Is A Verb* (1985, rev. 1992), *Celebrating Our Faith* (1986, republished as *Liturgical Evangelism* in 1992), *Blended Worship* (1996), *Planning Blended Worship* (1998), and *Ancient-Future Worship* (published posthumously in 2008), alongside the development of the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, has produced a generation of adherents to his vision of "Ancient-Future" faith. Across his long ministry, Webber's fundamental concern was to counter the congregational passivity, the absence of substantive content, and the lack of mystery that he witnessed in evangelical worship.[9] Webber's oeuvre encouraged a return to historical Christianity, a recovery of God's narrative in the church, the active participation of the congregation, and a new approach to experientialism.[10]

The core prescriptive idea that underpinned many of Webber's articulations of worship renewal is that worship should narrate the Christian story. For instance, in *Worship Is A Verb*, the first verb that Webber uses to describe worship is "celebrate": biblical worship *celebrates* the once-and-for-all Christ-event by telling and acting out the story, and, in the process making it real for the contemporary congregation.[11] In *Blended Worship*, Webber counters what he perceives to be a pervasive goal-driven orientation to worship by emphasizing worship's "event-oriented" nature. Worship repeatedly rehearses the events of God's saving deeds, in turn inspiring praise for God's faithfulness.[12] This repeated rehearsal not only provides the essential story that worship narrates but also the structure through which the story is narrated—the fourfold order of worship centered on word and table.[13] At the end of his career, Webber's commitment to worship as gospel-narration remained undimmed. In *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber argued that "Worship…is rooted in the gospel. And when worship fails to proclaim, sing, and enact at the Table the Good News that God not only saves sinners but also narrates the whole world…not only has worship lost its way*, but *the fullness of the*

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9. Robert Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 12–17.

10. Jonathan A. Powers, "Robert Webber: Preserving Traditional Worship Through Contemporary Styles" in *Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, ed. Lester Ruth (Pickwick Publications, 2020), 109.

11. Webber, *Worship Is A Verb*, 34.

12. Robert Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 36–40.

13. Webber, *Blended Worship*, 40–48.

gospel, the story which worship does, has been lost" [emphasis added].[14] Webber's concern has become the clarion cry echoed by the evangelical writers who have followed in his wake.

From the outset of Bryan Chapell's book, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*, Chapell demonstrates his affinity with Webber's convictions. The very first words of the book proclaim, "Structures tell stories."[15] For Chapell, the content and shape of Christian worship should tell the story of the gospel: "The worship of the church communicates the gospel. And, the gospel shapes the worship of the church."[16] Chapell begins the book by providing an overview of various historical and ecumenical structures of worship, particularly describing their component elements and what they mean. Through this, Chapell hopes that his reader will "learn how the church has used worship to fulfill gospel purposes through the ages so that we can intelligently design worship services that will fulfill gospel purposes today."[17] Ultimately, Chapell argues that there has been a broad consensus in scripture and across Christian tradition that worship functions to 're-present' the Christian gospel through a sequence of adoration, confession, assurance, thanksgiving, petition, instruction, charge, and blessing.[18] Through the latter half of the book, Chappell provides a constructive account of these components (with examples) so that gospel-centered congregations can put them into practice.

In one of the most popular contemporary textbooks on worship, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*,[19] Constance Cherry's guiding understanding of worship is likewise rooted in worship's function to re-present the Christian gospel. Cherry teaches that worship follows a dialogical pattern of God's speaking—revealing himself as the one who has covenanted and redeemed the church through Jesus Christ—which leads to the church's response of praise and faith.[20] Like Webber, Cherry's defi-

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14. Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 40.

15. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 15.

16. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 100.

17. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 19.

18. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 97–99. This description attempts to harmonize the Eucharistic services with later Protestant sermon-centered services. Chapell argues that the "Liturgy of the Upper Room" (the Lord's Supper) is a reinforcement of this essential story that has already been communicated through the structure of the "Liturgy of the Word" (p. 99).

19. The popularity of this book is demonstrated by Baker Academic's publication of a second edition in 2021, eleven years after its initial publication. Cherry has also published two follow up books in this series, *The Special Service Worship Architect: Blueprints for Weddings, Funerals, Baptisms, Holy Communion, and Other Occasions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), and *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

20. Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 13–46.

nition not only defines the content of the service but its foundational structure as well. Cherry describes four load-bearing walls of worship—gathering, word, table (or alternative response) and sending—which facilitate the dialogical encounter of worship. While Cherry is not as prescriptive as Chapell about the exact sequence of worship, Cherry sees each load-bearing wall as an embodiment of one facet of the gospel story. Together, all four facets embody the story of how God interacts with people. To these foundations and walls, Cherry finally adds windows—prayer, music, and the liturgical calendar—which illuminates the service and allows the covenant community to both look out and be looked in upon.

Webber, Chappell, and Cherry each articulate a slightly different vision of what it means for Christian worship to narrate the gospel story. Chappell is the most didactic of these authors in his embrace of a set liturgical structure (albeit, not set liturgical texts) that narrates the core gospel message. Cherry's approach is looser. While her four load-bearing walls are a normative structure for Christian worship, Cherry describes many liturgical actions as possibly contributing toward the structure of each movement in worship. Webber's approach to worship's gospel narration is the broadest. While Webber believed that Word and Table formed the core structure of Christian worship, his emphasis (especially in books like *Ancient-Future Worship*) was focused on the more general recovery of the content of "God's story"—a story which "encompasses all of human existence and all world history from creation to re-creation."[21] Despite these distinctives, the fundamental concern has been for evangelicals to incorporate the gospel story as the core structure of worship. This has been a cause that has been widely adopted across many evangelical contexts as numerous authors, theologians, and practitioners have promoted a vision for the liturgical assembly's function to proclaim and incorporate the congregation into the Christian gospel.[22]

Telling Worship's Story Well: A New Focus for Evangelical Worship Literature

In this emerging gospel-centered consensus, the overwhelming emphasis has been on teaching evangelical practitioners to *plan* theologically cohesive structures which fulsomely narrate the Christian gospel. If Webber, Chapell, and Cherry are united in their sense that Christian worship fundamentally tells the story of God's saving activity, all three have focused on the necessity for worship to re-present the critical content of that story in its right sequence. Because worship embodies a story, the main concern is that worship embodies the right story or contains the right content.

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21. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 107.
22. See Emily Snider Andrews, "The Power of Claiming Biblical Authority; We Practice Biblical Worship: A Southern Baptist Vision of Liturgical Authority" in *Worship and Power*, 132–50.

While this literature has been a helpful corrective for a liturgical tradition that has long been critiqued for its overly evangelistic ethos and predisposition to pragmatism,[23] it leaves an important gap in the formation of worship practitioners. There are other critical, if hard-to-define, factors that contribute towards the congregation's full and active participation in the worship service as well as to the edification, exhortation, and comfort that they derive from it. These factors that primarily implicate the leadership of the service have been overlooked. How should practitioners lead this gospel content well? How do leaders facilitate the congregation's comprehension of the major movements of the story? How do their words support the congregation's holistic participation in the story? What should the tone(s) of Christian worship be and how should this tone correspond to the content of the service? How should practitioners embody prayer? (This is a particularly key question within a tradition that emphasizes extemporaneous prayer.) How should practitioners think about visual or architectural elements in worship and how they correspond with worship's content?[24]

If worship is the narration of the gospel story, then not only is the story's content critical but so is its dialogue, characterization, tone, and ornamental details. The existing literature has defined the content of the story of worship but has offered little guidance about these other factors. While evangelicals contest that the theological content of worship is key, these other factors should not be overlooked. The success or failure of a story can still rise or fall on how the story is told. In planning and leading worship, the practitioner should aim to winsomely communicate the gospel story so that hearers might be open to receiving the gospel's transformative power, so the deep mystery of God's love for us in Jesus Christ may stir up holy affection, and so that the ramifications of the gospel call upon the church may be grasped anew. Put simply, if Christian worship narrates the gospel, then the practitioner is its narrator. This calls for further reflection on what it means for a worship practitioner to narrate the gospel story well.

I turn to the novelist, J.R.R. Tolkien, as a helpful interlocutor for the question of what it means to tell a story well. Tolkien is particularly well-suited to answering this question both as a scholar who provided critical reflection on literature and as, himself, one of the preeminent storytellers of the twentieth century whose popularity was unrivalled. Even before the films of *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*)

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23. For instance, see the critique of James White in "The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church," *Reformed Journal* 36:6 (1986): 11-16.

24. Some initial work has been done in Lester Ruth, ed., *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020). This book used Justin Martyr's account of early Christian worship to suggest that ante-Nicene Christian worship—particularly in its extemporaneity of prayer and open-endedness of time—has some surprising similarities with Pentecostal liturgical practice. In turn, these provide practical guidance for enriching mainline Contemporary Worship. However, in providing this concrete guidance, *Flow* was not focused upon constructing a broader framework for robust liturgical leadership.

launched his books to new heights, Tolkien had sold nearly 200 million copies of his writings.[25] Moreover, Tolkien's books have had a special popularity among Christian audiences. Even though the religious nature of Tolkien's books was implicit rather than explicit,[26] Tolkien's fiction is likely familiar to a wide array of evangelical readers who can relate sympathetically to his fictional project. Accordingly, Tolkien's account of storytelling offers a constructive framework that is suggestive for the evangelical worship practitioner who desires for worship to narrate the gospel story compellingly.

J.R.R. Tolkien and Storytelling as Sub-creation

The most important window into Tolkien's approach to storytelling was set forth in his essay, "On Fairy-Stories." This essay was first delivered orally at the 12th Annual Andrew Lang lecture at St. Andrews University on March 8, 1939 (eighteen months after the initial publication of *The Hobbit* and while Tolkien was forming the early episodes of *LOTR*).[27] Although the text of this lecture is not extant, Tolkien would go on to publish the essay in considerably revised and expanded forms.[28] Because "On Fairy-Stories" represents Tolkien's "definitive statement about his art…and the concept that lies behind it,"[29] this essay will be summarized in detail as the primary window into how Tolkien understood good storytelling.

In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien sought to counter two main issues in the contemporary reception of fairy-stories. The first issue was the widespread and popular misconception of fairy stories as being stories about *fairies*—"supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to have magical powers and to have great influence for good or evil over the affairs of man."[30] (This popular understanding of fairy stories persists to this day.) Such a definition sentimentalized the fairy story, demoting it to rank alongside other supernatural stories like traveler's tales, dream stories, and beast fables. For Tolkien, the definition of a fairy-story lies properly, not in the nature of fairies, but in the nature of *Faërie*— "the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country."[31] This fictional realm's

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25. T. A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), xxiv.

26. "The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world." J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 172.

27. Paul E. Michelson, "J.R.R. Tolkien on Faërie and Faërie-Stories," *Linguaculture* 10:2 (2019): 82. https://doi.org/10.47743/lincu-2019-2-0147.

28. Michelson, "Faërie-Stories," 82. In this essay, I will refer exclusively to the version published in *Tree and Leaf* in 1965 (pp. 3–84).

29. Verlyn Flieger, "'On Fairy Stories,'" The Tolkien Estate, accessed January 11, 2024, https://www.tolkienestate.com/scholarship/verlyn-flieger-on-fairy-stories/.

30. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 4. Tolkien charges that such an understanding of fairies is historically based on a misquotation of the country (p. 8).

31. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 10.

magic imparts its own "particular mood and power"[32] that, for Tolkien, was the essence of the fairy story. Stories that touch upon *Faërie* may be highly diverse in purpose and genre, but they are united in the influence they receive from that country.

The second, arguably more intractable, problem that Tolkien sought to counter was that the study of English literature had become overly focused of questions of literary origin and influence. For Tolkien, this focus had also contributed to the diminished stature of fairy stories. In Tolkien's scholarly context, myths held a higher status because they were deemed to be closest to the true source material—the natural phenomena—of which the myth was an allegory.[33] Myths that had passed into canon were assumed to be "some sort of adumbration of what was once either fact, or felt to be fact, or desired to be fact."[34] By contrast, fairy stories were disregarded as localized retellings of these higher ancient myths, the result of a "dwindling down"[35] process as myths became attached to real places, people, and events.

This historical narrative of myth-to-fairy-story diminution and its corollary fascination with uncovering the underlying *Ur*-text was, for Tolkien, wrong-headed. Fundamentally, this approach undermined the role of the storyteller within the story. Even in ancient tales where natural phenomena are most easily perceivable in relation to the myth—Tolkien uses the example of the myths surrounding the Norse god, Thor—it was a problematic assumption to view the natural phenomenon of thunder as the *Ur*-text. After all, Tolkien notes, Thor has a human personality that is distinct from his thunderiness (even if his personality is influenced by it). Even in a myth with such a clear association to natural phenomena, Tolkien asked why the human character of Thor, and the natural phenomena of thunder could not plausibly emerge separately, or even, simultaneously.[36]

This point prepared the groundwork for the most significant contribution that Tolkien made in "On Fairy-Stories" (especially as it relates to our question of good storytelling). Tolkien was concerned that the fascination with literary origins limited scholars' ability to describe literature *as* literature. For Tolkien, the chain of a myth's historical transmission was irrelevant to the power that a good story has. Far more significant was the way in which human authors reinvented myths and tales, telling them anew in creative and potent ways: "It is precisely the coloring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all

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32. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 10.
33. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 23.
34. R Reilly, "J. Tolkien and the Fairy Story," in *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 132.
35. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 23.
36. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 24–25.

the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count."[37] It is the story *as a story* that was Tolkien's concern.

Instead of envisioning the historical transmission of story as an original myth devolving into countless lower derivatives, Tolkien posited a new analogy for literary development: "the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story."[38] This Cauldron of Story is the common body of plot devices, characters, figures, ideas, and facts from history from which all stories—whether myth or fairy-story—are drawn. This Cauldron has always been boiling. New details and elements are constantly being added to simmer alongside the other ingredients. They wait for the Cook— the storyteller—to draw his or her ladle through the Soup.[39] In this analogy, myth and fairy-story are not distinct genres that can be separated into 'higher' and 'lower' categories. Instead, they are co-equal participants in a living tradition that is constantly evolving through processes of invention, inheritance, and diffusion.[40]

If, as Tolkien argues, all story is derived from a common but constantly evolving inheritance, this places a new emphasis on the storyteller's role in fashioning their tale from the ever-simmering Cauldron. It is here that Tolkien introduces the now-famous concept of the storyteller's art as "sub-creation."[41] As Tolkien explained,

> He [the storyteller] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by kindliness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable.[42]

This concept of sub-creation or secondary world provides a foundational definition of good storytelling. A successful storyteller (a sub-creator) is one who crafts an immersive, plausible, and internally coherent literary world. Such a storyteller opens a door for their reader into "Other Time" and beckons them through to "stand outside our own time, outside Time itself maybe."[43]

For Tolkien, this key marker of a good story—the fashioning of an immersive and convincing world that holds its readers enthralled—was primarily the product of

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37. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 18–19.
38. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 26–27. Elsewhere in the essay, Tolkien uses a similar analogy of the "Tree of Tales" (pp. 19, 56).
39. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 30.
40. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 20–21.
41. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 22–23. See also, 37, 47–48, 53–54, 70, and 72.
42. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 36.
43. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 32.

the author's presentation of the story. In fashioning a narrative, a good storyteller will shape the tone and quality of their work to produce "the inner consistency of reality."[44] This inner consistency is critical if the storyteller is to create a Secondary World that can command belief:

> Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say 'the green sun.' Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough…To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labor and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft.[45]

A careful attention to maintaining the fabric of details that is critical for creating a coherent and compelling sub-creation was the storyteller's art.

In his own works of fiction, Tolkien embodied his literary theory in the creation of a vivid, immersive, all-encompassing Secondary World. Not only did Tolkien create the vast realm of Middle Earth that has its own mythology, history, and cultures, but in the fine details of his writing, Tolkien assiduously reinforced the inner consistency of its reality. Each of his characters has their own psychology along with moral, spiritual, and religious values that are both tailored to the individual and to their cultural experience.[46] Tolkien also used his philological expertise to fastidiously craft language and dialogue that revealed and reinforced the distinctive viewpoints, social positions, and historical experiences of the characters as they had taken shape throughout the long ages of Middle Earth. For instance, in *LOTR*, the great age of the immortal elf, Elrond, is encoded in his use of archaic words and sentence-structures; the stubborn, secretive nature of Tolkien's dwarvish peoples is embodied in Glóin's taciturn, abrupt, and oblique sentences; meanwhile, the duplicitous wizard, Saruman, talks like a modern politician using abstract platitudes that conceal, rather than disclose, his true meaning.[47] These lexical and grammatical choices not only add texture and depth to the characters and cultures of Middle Earth but also convey the plot of the story as well. As Tom Shippey has argued, the way in which Tolkien's characters speak is just as relevant for the narrative as the content of their words: "The continuous variations of language…tell us almost subliminally how reliable characters are, how old they are, how self-assured they are, how mistaken they are, what kind of person they are. All this is as vital as the

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44. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 46–48, 70.
45. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 48–49.
46. C. Adderley, "Meeting Morgan Le Fay: J.R.R. Tolkien's Theory of Subcreation and the Secondary World of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 22:4 (2000): 49.
47. Shippey, *Tolkien*, 68–77. For a further discussion of the distinctive phrases and words that Tolkien used and even invented to help delineate different characters and cultures, see T. A Shippey, "History in Words: Tolkien's Ruling Passion," in *Lord of the Rings 1954–2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*, ed. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006), 25–40.

direct information conveyed."[48] Tolkien's ability to craft works of such immense scope while also ensuring that the minute details maintained the reality of that Secondary World is often viewed as the source of his unprecedented success.

In sum, Tolkien understood good storytelling as the art of painstakingly crafting words which, in their tone and quality, invites the reader's belief in the world of the story. One of the storyteller's chief concerns is to maintain the fabric and coherence of their sub-creation, creating the "inner consistency of reality." This is not just a case of having a compelling plot; instead, the smallest details need to participate in the overall trajectory, forming a cohesive literary canvas upon which the plot unfolds. Ultimately, the storyteller works a kind of magic upon the reader, holding them in thrall to "Other Time."

Connecting Sub-creation and Christian Worship

At one level, connecting Tolkien's storytelling to Christian worship is straightforward. After all, Tolkien's concept of the storyteller's craft as sub-creation is implicitly theological. Tolkien's argument drew heavily on a strand of nineteenth century Christian reflection, developed by figures like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and George MacDonald, which emphasized human creativity as a facet of the *Imago Dei*. In contrast to Enlightenment empiricism that viewed humans as passive storehouses of sensory data, the countermanding argument of Coleridge and MacDonald was that humans consciously and deliberately engage in their own creative activity. This creative activity is not a free-wheeling endeavor though. Because human creativity is bestowed by a creator, human creativity ought to reflect their creator's creativity.[49] Especially for MacDonald, this particularly meant that if God's creativity had involved logic and coherence, so too should human creativity.[50] In Tolkien's own development of this argument in "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien places this theological idea at the heart of storytelling. As Mark Wolf explains, to sub-create is to 'create under', "using the pre-existing concepts found in God's creation, finding new combinations of them that explore the realm of possibilities."[51]

However, before considering how Tolkien's theory of sub-creation can construct a framework for worship leadership, it will be helpful to draw out some distinctives between Tolkien's account of storytelling and Christian worship.

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48. Shippey, *Tolkien*, 76.
49. Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 20–21.
50. "Obeying law, the maker works like his creator; not obeying law, he is such a fool as heaps a pile of stones and calls it a church." George MacDonald, *The Light Princess, and Other Fairy Tales* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), vi.
51. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 23–24.

The most significant distinction is in the nature of the story that Christian worship tells. Tolkien's storyteller freely creates a Secondary World out of the concepts present in God's creation. In this creative endeavor, the storyteller has only a limited obligation to truth. In maintaining the inner consistency of reality, the storyteller's primary responsibility is to convey what is true within the Secondary World. The truth of that Secondary World is only true in a broader sense if the story "faithfully reproduces the traditional turn toward joy which ties it to the gospel narrative of the Primary World."[52] This is a broader parameter for truth than exists in Christian worship (especially for evangelicals). Christian worship does not invite Secondary Belief in a Secondary World. It does not even invite Primary Belief in the Primary World. Instead, worship reveals, manifests, and participates in the eschatological age to come that is ultimately true—really real. In its narration of the gospel story, Christian worship beckons the congregation into a *super-primary* reality.[53] This places an additional responsibility on Christian worship that limits the scope of the practitioner's creativity. While, as Melanie Ross argue, the magnitude of God's revelation, especially in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, can never be constrained by one rendering, it is also closed and unsubstitutable.[54] There is scope for creativity in Christian worship but within fixed parameters.

Christian worship also serves a different end than Tolkien saw for fiction. For Tolkien, the primary functions of fairy stories were recovery (unfamiliarizing the familiar so that we might see things as we were meant to see them), escape (experiencing freedom from the primary world to reflect upon more permanent and fundamental things), and consolation (the "piercing glimpse of joy" that accompanies the miraculous, good catastrophe that comes at the end of all true fairy-stories).[55] While Christian worship may certainly facilitate these ends, Christian worship is not exhausted by them either. Worship's deeper ontology as a narration of the gospel and the manifestation of the church[56] gives it a much broader remit in what it seeks to accomplish.

Even with these distinctions in view, Tolkien's understanding of good storytelling can offer a framework through which evangelicals can assess worship leadership. Although worship participates and embodies a different kind of story than the fairy story, similarities in the broader task of storytelling can be suggestive for Christian worship. The suggestions that I develop are broad and do not attempt to classify exact activities, postures, or words for evangelical practitioners. After all,

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52. John W. Houghton, "Neues Testament Und Marchen: Tolkien, Fairy Stories, and the Gospel," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 4:1 (2017): 9.

53. John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 90.

54. Melanie C. Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?: Defying a Dichotomy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 121–23.

55. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 60–70.

56. Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 46.

evangelicalism is a broad ecumenical tradition with a high variety of practices and theological commitments about worship. Furthermore, these suggestions do not exhaust the possibilities of what could be said about leading well. Instead, building upon my argument that the evangelical liturgist is a storyteller, I pull a few threads from my reading of Tolkien to develop a rubric for evangelical leadership.

Towards an Evangelical Rubric for Liturgical Leadership

At a foundational level, the evangelical practitioner's role as a storyteller should provide the most fundamental orientation for leading worship. Worship practitioners often play many theological and sociological roles within the community's worshiping life, especially when they are the pastor. They are simultaneously shepherd, prophet, host, and moderator all at the same time. (These roles are sometimes more and sometimes less compatible with one another.) Envisioning the worship practitioner as a storyteller provides a guiding ethos that underpins all the other roles they fulfill. As a storyteller, the worship practitioner's activity should be oriented toward opening the door into the eschatological "Other Time" of God's mighty acts of salvation. The worship practitioner does more than merely announce and lead individual components of the worship story. They connect those moments to the broader narrative that is being enacted so that the congregation can both perceive that narrative and remain fully engaged with it. Their words maintain the fabric of the gospel story that is being enacted in worship.

This orientation provides particularly practical guidance for how practitioners guide the congregation through the acts of worship, especially through the use of transitional words. These 'in-between' words can be an invaluable source of direction, instruction, invitation, and exhortation. Reframing the entire context of the service as the narration of the gospel (whose narration takes place over the arc of the worship service) helps to give an undergirding sense of what practitioners should aim to achieve through these words. Practically, it suggests that certain kinds of transitional words—for instance, overly self-referential statements that foreground the leader rather than the story, or instructional comments that merely tell the congregation what is happening next—are unhelpful.[57] Instead, compel-

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57. Self-referential statements in worship leadership are not without their place. Even Tolkien inserts himself as narrator into the story in ways that suspend the reader's sense of inhabiting a secondary world. For example, at the outset of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien describes Gandalf thus, "If you had heard only a quarter of what I [Tolkien himself] have heard about him, and I have heard only very little of all there is to hear, you would be prepared for any sort of remarkable tale." J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or, There and Back Again* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 5. This form of narrative intrusion on the story is repeated throughout *The Hobbit* although it never feels unwelcome. This is because Tolkien deploys this technique tactically to connect the unfamiliar world of Middle Earth to the experience of his adolescent readers. The familiarity that such comments create serves a deeper purpose of helping the reader understand and navigate this secondary world. In the same way, self-referential comments can be a helpful technique in the liturgist's storehouse as long as it is ultimately oriented toward inviting the congregation into the story of worship.

ling transitional comments will assist the congregation to perceive the story, will provide commentary upon the story (making worship's meaning accessible), or will invite the congregation to participate in the story. Such an orientation for the practitioner's task provides an assessment rubric for all the elements in the worship service—does this contribute toward or detract from the gospel narrative that is being told?

Additionally, the worship practitioner's role as a storyteller is suggestive for how they approach the relationship between the content and the style of worship. In Tolkien's writing, plot and characterization never exist separately but are interwoven with each other. As I described above, the color, characterization, linguistic choices, and tone of the prose and dialogue are integral to conveying the content of the story. Such an observation provides a helpful corrective to the evangelical worship literature surveyed in this paper. This body of literature, in response to the rise of Contemporary Worship and its emphasis on the medium *as* the message,[58] has reasserted the centrality of worship's message over the medium. To lead worship well though requires a broader focus than just the bare content of worship's story. It must also consider the ways in which the specific words and manner of the story's delivery also convey the gospel. Content and delivery are not distinct. The medium may not have the same status as the message but that does not mean that it is unimportant.

The importance of the interrelationship of content and style especially implicates how corporate prayer is led in evangelical worship services. The longstanding evangelical practice of extemporaneous prayer and its corollary suspicion of 'rote' texted prayers[59] demonstrates how word choices (common parlance, biblical allusions, theological terms), structure (tightly organized or redundant), or tone (passionate, dignified, fervent) is integral to the congregation's sense of the action that is taking place in worship. Worship practitioners need to reflect on how their congregation's perception of authentic prayer should impact the delivery, wording, and structure of how they lead corporate prayer. A written prayer that is read in a monotone voice may have rich and deep theological content, but it will fail to communicate to the congregation that they are corporately addressing their needs and concerns to a holy God who is yet intimately concerned for the cry of his creatures. Evangelical worship needs a more robust conceptual framework through which to assess how the mode and delivery of a prayer is an integral part of the prayer itself or how the music of congregational song does its own distinct work as prayer or praise.

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58. See Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 217–23, for a description of the influence of Marshall McLuhan's dictum, "The medium is the message" over evangelical worship.

59. As one example of this longstanding trend in evangelical worship, Lester Ruth describes the practice of extemporaneous prayer among early American Methodists in *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 88–89.

Finally, the worship practitioner as a storyteller suggests an essential formation that is helpful for good worship leadership. For a practitioner to be able to narrate the Christian story within evangelical worship presupposes that the practitioner is deeply shaped by, and immersed within, that gospel. The success of Tolkien's Middle Earth was founded upon his painstaking effort in creating an immersive Secondary World of unparalleled scale. By the time of the publication of *LOTR*, Tolkien had spent decades developing the (often unpublished) mythology, legends, and languages that provided the narrative context for the book.[60] It is the sense of this vast Secondary World behind *The Hobbit* and *LOTR* that gives these books their epic scope and deep pathos.

For evangelical worship practitioners to become successful storytellers necessitates a similar development of a robust and rich understanding of the Christian gospel. Practitioners need a deeply rooted sense of the "revelational mystery" at the heart of the Christian gospel.[61] This understanding of the gospel needs to be theologically rigorous, extending beyond the simple message of personal salvation and embracing the cosmic scope of the gospel message from creation to new creation.[62] This understanding not only needs breadth but also depth as the practitioner leads from their own personal experience of the ongoing grace of God extended to them. When evangelical practitioners have deeply internalized this understanding of the gospel, they will be better positioned to both tell and embody that story within the worship service. While the worship service can never cover the full scope of what the gospel means, practitioners must lead out of their sense that there is a vast cosmos of meaning that sits behind what is enacted within the worship service. Within the worship service, the evangelical practitioner helps the church to participate in realities that are too deep and numerous to name but which will be unfolded throughout the long ages of eternity.

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60. Indeed, Tolkien once described how the languages of Middle Earth were the foundation of his novels. "The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse." Tolkien, *Letters*, 219.

61. Daniel Castelo, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 48–51. For Castelo, a "revelational mystery" (as distinct from an "investigative mystery") is a mystery that becomes deeper as it is disclosed. "Christians behold a self-disclosing God, and within such moments of disclosure God is apprehended as One who defies categorization and definition" (p. 48).

62. "Worship gathers to sing, tell, and enact God's story of the world from its beginning to its end." Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 40.