

Taking God seriously, taking life seriously

**Praying the Psalms as a congregational strategy for
integrated spirituality**



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Declaration:

I the undersigned hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

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Date: 2/12/98

ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with integrated spirituality. Spirituality is understood as a life-orientation that presents itself both in worship and in a re-ordering of the elements of a person's life to a growing correspondence with the reality presented in worship. It finds expression in a web of relationships between God, the particular individual, the other and creation. Integrated spirituality is spirituality that is equally serious about God and our life in the material world, and it refuses to separate these two passions.

God is the constitutive reality of Christian spirituality. He is the source of perspective and energy for Christian spirituality. However, the shape of spirituality is co-determined by factors from material existence, such as context, confessional tradition, narratives (both personal narratives and narratives of one's community) and the personal make-up of an individual. Any congregational strategy that aims at facilitating integrated spirituality, needs to incorporate both these aspects of spirituality. Nonetheless, it will have to give priority to the focus on God, but in such a way that the focus on material life retains full attention.

The spirituality that we encounter in the Psalter is a clear example of integrated spirituality. Both the subject-matter and the editorial structure of the Psalter exhibit a passion for God and full attention to the concrete realities of daily life. As such, they present us with a valuable tool for facilitating integrated spirituality.

We contend that the strategy of using the Psalms as prayers in congregations will have a distinct impact on the kind of spirituality that will evolve in these congregations. The Psalms can be used as prayers in liturgical and pastoral contexts, as well as in the private devotions of members of congregations. Praying the Psalms in these contexts will lead to integrated spirituality. However, this will depend on a number of prerequisites: The Psalms should be prayed from a proper understanding of their meaning and inner dynamics. Additionally, the whole spectrum of meaning found in the Psalms should become part of the prayer life of a congregation. If a congregation attains this, the result will be growth in integrated spirituality. Our exploration into the dynamics of spirituality as well as our overview of the Psalter's dual focus on God and life in the material world, forms the basis for this conviction.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie navorsing handel oor geïntegreerde spiritualiteit. Spiritualiteit word verstaan as 'n lewensoriëntasie wat uitdrukking vind in beide aanbidding en in die herrangskikking van die elemente van 'n persoon se lewe tot 'n groeiende ooreenkoms met die werklikheid wat in aanbidding voorgehou word. Dit kom tot uitdrukking in 'n web van verhoudinge tussen God, die betrokke individu, die ander en die skepping. Geïntegreerde spiritualiteit is spiritualiteit met ewe veel erns oor God en oor die lewe in die materiële wêreld, en wat weier om hierdie twee belange te skei.

God is die grondliggende werklikheid van Christelike spiritualiteit. Hy is die bron van perspektief en energie vir Christelike spiritualiteit. Die gestalte van spiritualiteit word egter medebepaal deur faktore uit die materiële lewe, soos konteks, kofessionele tradisie, narratiewe (beide persoonlike narratiewe en die narratiewe van iemand se gemeenskap) en die persoonlikheidsstruktuur van 'n individu. Enige gemeentelike strategie wat geïntegreerde spiritualiteit wil fasiliteer, moet beide hierdie aspekte van spiritualiteit insluit. Dit sal egter aan die fokus op God prioriteit moet gee, maar op so 'n wyse dat die fokus op die konkrete aardse lewe volle aandag bly geniet.

Die spiritualiteit wat ons in die Psalms aantref, is 'n duidelike voorbeeld van geïntegreerde spiritualiteit. Beide die inhoud en die redaksionele struktuur van die Psalms vertoon 'n passie vir God en 'n totale ingesteldheid op die konkrete werklikhede van die alledaagse lewe. As sodanig bied hulle vir ons 'n waardevolle instrument waarmee ons geïntegreerde spiritualiteit kan fasiliteer.

Ons voer aan dat die strategie om die Psalms as gebede in gemeentes te gebruik 'n merkbare impak sal hê op die tipe spiritualiteit wat in hierdie gemeentes sal groei. Die Psalms kan gebruik word as gebede in liturgiese en pastorale kontekste, en ook in die persoonlike gebedstye van gemeentelede. Die bid van die Psalms in hierdie kontekste sal lei tot geïntegreerde spiritualiteit. Dit sal egter van 'n aantal vereistes afhang: Die Psalms moet gebid word vanuit 'n behoorlike begrip vir hulle betekenis en innerlike dinamika. Verder moet die hele betekenispektrum van die Psalms deel word van die gebedslewe van die gemeente. As 'n gemeente hieraan voldoen, sal daar groei in geïntegreerde spiritualiteit wees. Die grondslag van hierdie oortuiging word gevorm deur ons verkenning van die dinamika van spiritualiteit, sowel as ons oorsig oor die Psalms se dubbele fokus op God en lewe in die materiële wêreld.

Dedication:

To my wife, Francé
and my children, Ben, Minkie-Anne and Joanie.

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My years of postgraduate studies have brought me to the firm conviction that the only worthwhile knowledge one ever accumulates, is the kind that can only be attained in community. I count myself fortunate to have been surrounded by the community of saints, of which some have had a more direct impact on my research than others. I would like to acknowledge my debt to the following persons:

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blessed with the full support of my family, who helped carry the burden in many practical ways. I am, now, thoroughly convinced that this completed doctoral dissertation reveals more about the long-suffering of a wife and children than it does about the intelligence of the writer.

As in the Psalms, I regard it as essential to end of with doxology: I want to offer the work I have done during my time of study to our Lord. The last verse of Psalm 19 expresses my prayer better than I am able to with my own words: “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

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INTRODUCTION

“Biblical faith rejects, fiercely and unhesitatingly, any conduct or thinking that diminishes our ability to function as human beings in time and space. Ideas that drive a wedge between God and creation are false. Prayers or acts of devotion that divert or incapacitate us from the here and now are spurious. Biblical faith everywhere and always warns against siren voices that lead people away from specific and everyday engagement with weather and politics, dogs and neighbours, shopping lists and job assignments. No true spiritual life can be distilled from or abstracted out of this world of chemicals and molecules, paying our bills and taking out the garbage” (Eugene Peterson 1983:170).

1. Motivation

The split between the sacred and the material produces two innocuous kinds of spirituality: One presents itself as a concern for prayer that is isolated from a concern for the fate of this world. The other presents itself as a concern for issues of life, but acts with scant awareness of God’s active involvement in the world and has little experience of transcendence. The first is otherworldly; the second is thisworldly. The one has lost its relevance; the other its roots. Both have become salt that has lost its saltiness (Mt 5:13) - tepid Christianity (Rv 3:16) with little or no effect in assisting the advent of God’s kingdom in this world.

This study has grown from a concern for a spirituality that encompasses both a passion for God and a full involvement with this world. It is our conviction that this kind of spirituality is the only hope for the church to become the salt and light of the world. Only such integrated spirituality can get involved in the world in a way conducive to the coming of God’s kingdom. Only such integrated spirituality can pray in a way that energises and shapes believers for their involvement in this world.

Integrated spirituality (as we prefer to name it) is vitally necessary in our post-Constantinian,¹ secularised times. The church that fails to understand its new

1. By “post-Constantinian” we mean the new situation where we can no longer assume that the state and society will sponsor the cause of the church and where the church has lost its power to influence state and society in a direct fashion. The church suddenly finds itself marginalised, in contrast with its former status as one of the “pillars of society” that had gone unchallenged since the edict of Milan in 313 AD. See Johnson (1995a:24-9; 1995b:15-6), Hauerwas and Willimon (1989:15-29), Hauerwas (1991:13-19), Mead (1991:8-29), for analyses of this change in the situation of the church.

cultural situation will continue to assume that it still speaks from a position of influence in the world. The church is, in fact, becoming more and more marginalised in our times. Hauerwas and Willimon's description of the church as "resident aliens" (Hauerwas & Willimon 1991) is more apt by the day. The church has been forced out of the public square. If it is to be a factor in society it will have to rely on something more than political clout. It will have to rely on the witness in word and deed of its individual members as and where they are deployed in society. We support Richard John Neuhaus in his claim that "the naked public square" is a greater *theological* problem than a political or institutional or legal problem (Neuhaus 1984:xii). We will need theological thought on the way the spiritual and material dimensions of our Christian experience interact. The fruit of this theological labour must be allowed to inform our congregational strategies for spiritual formation.

The kind of spirituality we have in mind could be named in many ways. "Incarnational spirituality", as used by Ben Johnson (among others, especially those in the Anglican tradition), is extremely tempting. It is rooted in the wonderful metaphor of Jesus Christ, the son of God, taking a human form and thus, incorporating both aspects of the kind of spirituality we seek in one being. Christ's nature as *vere homo, vere deus* provides us with the full substance of the realities found in incarnational spirituality. In addition, it incorporates both the mystery and the concrete firmness of Christ's existence.

However, one runs into problems when working with this designation for spirituality in more than a metaphorical manner. As a broad metaphorical designation for spirituality we could do no better. It links with the many ways in which we are called to imitate Christ and live our lives "in Christ." Working from its details, though, presents untold problems. There are so many different shades of interpretation of the way these two aspects of Christ come together in his person, that one becomes ensnared in convoluted arguments that do not serve our present purpose. For that reason we have chosen the term "integrated spirituality".

Integrated spirituality is spirituality that integrates a focus on God and on the material world. It grows from the conviction that we cannot speak of the God we find in the Bible without being concerned for the material world as a whole, and, vice versa, that we cannot speak of the material world without taking God into consideration. Furthermore, we consider the focus on God to be constitutive of integrated spirituality, without in any way diminishing the importance of the material dimension. All of this will be argued extensively in the study. Chapter 1 will construct a full working definition of this kind of spirituality. Our title, *Taking God seriously, taking life seriously*, refers to this two-dimensionality in the focus of

integrated spirituality. This title describes the two aspects of the main concern of the study. As such, it offers a description of the main thrust of arguments throughout the study.

The subtitle of the study (*Praying the Psalms as a congregational strategy for integrated spirituality*) deals with our application of the enquiry in the first five chapters. Chapter 6 will deal with the matter of congregational strategy. The first five chapters will keep this application in mind, by focusing on the main elements of the subtitle, namely prayer, the Psalms and integrated spirituality.

The prayer life of congregations was chosen as our focus for strategic reasons. As will be stated later in this chapter, we view prayer as a pivotal practice in Christian life. It is both *a shaping force* and *an articulation* of spirituality. The way someone prays tells us much about his or her spirituality. Conversely, the way someone prays determines much of the shape of this person's spirituality. This second statement is especially important for our choice of congregational strategies.

If prayer has this power to shape spirituality, it follows that prayer that takes both God and life seriously will act as a decisive influence towards integrated spirituality.

The importance of the type of prayer life in a congregation cannot be underestimated. Congregational prayer will have to take God seriously and it will have to take life seriously, *and* it will have to do both these things simultaneously. If the prayer life of a congregation concentrates on only one of these aspects it will work to the detriment of integrated spirituality.

Speaking of prayer that does not take God seriously, might seem an oxymoron. Yet, this type of prayer often occurs in the church. The church can become locked into a concept of God that views him only as a transcendental or as a future reality. When we lose our vision of God in the here and now, our prayers become dull and formalised statements that demonstrate little trust in God's power or willingness to intervene in our lives. Such prayers are without vitality and hope. They provide little energy for Christian living.

On the other hand, we are constantly faced with the possibility of prayer that does not take life seriously. This kind of prayer either peters off into platitudes that dull our sense of the gritty reality of life, or rushes into otherworldly triumphalism. Neither type of prayer does full justice to the complexities of existence.

From the perspective of a biblical theology and epistemology these two strains of prayer cannot be seen as taking either life or God seriously, in spite of their claims to the contrary. A perspective on life that excludes God is not acceptable. A perspective on God that excludes his passionate concern for life on earth, is likewise, not acceptable. Only a prayer life that exhibits a seriousness about both God and life will be an effective tool to shape and hone integrated spirituality.

2. Hypothesis

The following hypothesis will be tested in this dissertation:

Praying the Psalms as a congregational strategy will facilitate growth in integrated spirituality.

3. *Credo ut Intelligam*: Methodological issues

Our focus on spirituality raises the question: *Is it really possible to describe spirituality in academic terminology? Is it possible to write anything within the constraints of theology as an ordered rational discipline that could lead to a better understanding of spirituality and to better ways to nurture and develop it?*

These questions already display a certain bias. They already suppose a dualism, as if matters of the spirit and matters of scientific interest inhabit two different worlds. They create the impression that it will take some intricate arguments to arrive at “yes” for an answer.

We do not intend to fall into this trap. We will start our argumentation from the belief that we are, in fact, dealing with one world. We believe that matters of faith and matters of science cannot be separated. We believe that matters of faith can and should be investigated in disciplined, scholarly ways. We further believe that matters of science can only be pursued in a proper fashion from the basis of an awareness of the beliefs from which a person operates. We will argue that coherent arguments can only be made from a clear understanding of the inevitable belief system from which a person takes his or her point of view.

These statements will need to be substantiated by a proper statement of the nature of theology as a scholarly discipline and its relationship to practical congregational issues (such as the formation of spirituality and prayer and worship).

The scholarly discipline of theology cannot, of itself, create faith (and, likewise, spirituality). It cannot even fully precipitate it by providing the raw materials from which faith can be constructed. Lesslie Newbigin (Newbigin 1995:9), reminds us of Augustine's famous slogan, *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to know). Faith is the way to knowledge about God and this order can not be reversed. The epistemological programme of the Enlightenment attempted to reverse the order. It maintained that one should first clear the table of all that could not stand the test of reason. One could, only then, come to firm knowledge of God. This was to be derived from the rational certainties remaining after this process of elimination. This programme failed miserably. Instead of leading to certainty, it led to nihilism (Newbigin 1995:16-44).

The basic flaw in the programme of the Enlightenment was the separation of knowledge and faith. The strength of Augustine's maxim lies in the fact that it does not contrast faith and reason as the Enlightenment does. The fact that the Reformation was so heavily influenced by Augustine's thinking proved to be a boon in as much as the reformers' view of faith kept this basic polarity intact.

Tampering with Augustine's view of the relationship between faith and reason may soon lead to far-reaching problems. The work of Thomas Aquinas led to such a separation. He made a distinction between things that can be known by reason alone (such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul) and things that could be known only by faith through divine revelation (such as the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity). Thomas argued that in instances where there was a contradiction between the findings of revelation and philosophy, the former would be the truth. Theology was to be deemed a higher discipline.

These qualifications made by Thomas were not upheld by his successors. The seeds had been planted. Reason and faith had been pried apart. Not long after Thomas philosophy came to be regarded as the necessary prolegomena to all theology. The findings of theology had to be subjected to the scrutiny of philosophy (Newbigin 1995:18). Faith thus became suspect and regarded as inferior to reason. In the severest forms of Enlightenment thinking, it was even regarded as the antithesis of reason, as something that was akin to superstition and that had to be shed in order to proceed along rational lines of questioning.

In the following era the Reformed orthodoxy and a substantial part of Christian theology followed Thomas' followers' lead in ceding precedence to philosophy and reason. This development, in turn, led to the reaction in pietistic movements of shifting the emphasis from *reason* to *emotion*, from the head to the heart.

This shift failed to provide a solution for the problems caused by the separation of faith and reason. Faith cannot be adequately described either in terms of pure reason or emotion. It encompasses the head and the heart. Faith represents the whole being of man turned towards God. Both the Reformed orthodoxy and pietism failed to account for the holistic character of faith. This led to either soulless rationalism, on the one hand, or irrational subjectivism, on the other. For the one, theology was an activity of truncated, rational beings; for the other, it was an escape from reason.

The Enlightenment turned Augustine's statement on its head so that it now read, "reason leads to faith". This way of thinking presupposed a form of pure reason that may arrive at conclusions simply by considering the solid facts of our existence in a way unencumbered by subjective interferences. It was thought that one could, by way of objective deductive reasoning, make rational observations about God and come to conclusions about him that any rational human being would agree with (Newbigin 1995:19). One had to begin one's search for truth by doubting everything. All that stood the test of the queries of doubt could be accepted as truth (Newbigin 1995:16-28).

Subsequent epistemological developments have knocked the bottom out of these arguments. The work of theorists such as Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn² has conclusively shown the so-called "objective" observations of the Enlightenment to be no less statements of faith than the kind of theology proposed by Augustine. The "objective scientific method" that was held up as *the* model to follow, has been shown to be much less objective than it has always claimed.

This does not call for the rejection of the fruits of Enlightenment thinking in the theological endeavour, even though it sounds some very explicit warnings about the dangers of becoming enamoured with its presuppositions. It certainly does not lead to an anti-rational way of doing theology, as if the one-sided focus on the rational can be remedied by a one-sided focus on faith (viewed as basically irrational) or the emotional. This would still leave us with the basic problem that comes from a strict adherence to the Enlightenment's way of speaking about rationality and faith. We would still be left with faith and reason (and emotion) as separate entities that exclude one another.

2. Thomas Kuhn's work on paradigms in *The structure of scientific revolutions*, is well-known. For a succinct summary of Polanyi's work, see Newbigin (1995:45-64).

In truth, one does not have to make that choice. This study presupposes faith and argues from faith, but along rational lines. Research along rational lines functions in much the same way as grammar does in the case of language. One learns a language by speaking it, not by first mastering the rudiments of grammar. Grammar comes after language. It was produced by thinking about language, analysing it, finding the distinguishing characteristics in ways of appropriating the possibilities inherent in language. Therefore grammar can play an important role in a community speaking a common language. It can help it to speak the language even better. It can widen the scope of the language and enable the users of the language to express themselves in more diverse ways. To try using it to teach people from outside the language community to speak the language, however, seldom produces satisfactory results. Many people have been subjected to this way of trying to learn a new language and, after years of struggle, often progressed no further than being able to decipher the language in its written form.

This study assumes the same dynamics for all theology. It can and should function as a way of helping the community of faith to be *better* adherents to their faith. It should provide the insights and language so that the meaning of the new worldview appropriated in faith would be better understood and appropriated. It should open up new vistas for faith and lead to new ways of acting in response to its realities. It should, through critical examination, expose fidelity and infidelity to the Gospel. All this can be done in rational and systematic ways, utilising the fruits of the Enlightenment's explosion of intellectual pursuits.

That brings us to the work of David Kelsey. Kelsey shows convincingly that the gains of the Enlightenment could be utilised in theology, if certain criteria are met. Theology, for Kelsey, is the enterprise of "trying to understand God more truly" (Kelsey 1992:108).³ Kelsey maintains that it is neither our *subject-matter* nor our *method* that makes our theology *theological* (Kelsey 1992:108-9). There are considerable differences between various schools of theology in these matters, while it may be maintained that they all practise theology. It is rather this concern "to understand God more truly" that makes their activities identifiable as theology.

3. Actually, Kelsey speaks about theological schools and not directly about theology as such. He is trying to answer the question, "What is theological about a theological school?" - which is also the subtitle of his book. While this is the case, his whole argument is, by inference, about theology. If the task of a "theological" school is to practise theology, the answer to Kelsey's question tells us what theology is.

This does not leave aside the question of subject-matter. “The Christian thing”⁴ that theology studies, finds concrete expression in congregations.

“The Christian thing is present in concrete reality in and as various Christian congregations or worshipping communities in all their radical pluralism” (Kelsey 1992:110).

Therefore Kelsey proposes that the various constitutive elements of “the Christian thing” should be studied only in their relationship to Christian communities (Kelsey 1992:111). Since this is the location where “the Christian thing” finds concrete expression, this would be the place where studying it can lead to a truer understanding of God. This line of argument leads to his main thesis:

“A theological school is a community of persons trying to understand God more truly by focusing its study of various subject-matters within the horizon of questions about Christian congregations” (Kelsey 1992:131).

By inference, then, theology is the study of various subject-matters (“the Christian thing”) within the horizon of questions about Christian congregations. The Christian thing studied separately from congregations is an abstraction, a mere ghost of the real thing present in a congregation.

This does not mean that congregations are viewed uncritically. The stories of Jesus’ mission and God’s mission in Jesus provides the norm to distinguish between faithful and unfaithful Christian congregations (Kelsey 1992:139-40).

Kelsey’s proposal to conduct theological enquiry within the horizon of questions about congregations does not mean that the congregation becomes a closed system in which theology should operate. Theology should be aware of the dialogical relationship between congregations and their cultural contexts (Kelsey 1992:145-7). Congregations are influenced by their cultural contexts. Congregations also impact their contexts.

Worship is, for Kelsey, the central practice of Christian congregations and it is done for its own sake (Kelsey 1992:136). But worship in its full sense - worship *as discipleship*, as the ceding of one’s whole life to God - involves shaping persons as

4. “The Christian thing” is Kelsey’s carefully chosen formula (which he acquires from GK Chesterton) for the whole field of interconnected bits and pieces that, together, provide us with clues toward knowing God more truly. This encompasses the written documents, liturgies, traditions, religious experiences and so on, that is present in Christian faith communities (Kelsey 1992:109).

agents to arrange and rearrange the cultural and socio-economic context of the congregation (Kelsey 1992:147). Worship is both the consummate end of human existence and the prime shaping force for a life of discipleship. The second aspect of Kelsey's view of worship promotes an understanding of a faith community's relationship to its context that disallows otherworldliness. The worshipping community is shaped and energised for a critical engagement with their world.

This view of the relationship between the church and its context presents a question that forms part of the central task of theology. Theology should attend to the wisdom or foolishness of the ways congregations approach their worship: *Does the way a congregation worships, prepare their members to be faithful to Christ?* Theology should also tend to the wisdom or folly of the public activities of congregations: *Is the congregation's engagement with public issues in line with its faithful worship?*

It will become apparent that the importance Kelsey attributes to worship is extremely important for the present study. We concur with the importance Kelsey attributes to worship. The questions about the way we conduct worship are at the heart of our line of questioning.

In closing, we return to Augustine once more: viewing theology as "trying to understand God more truly by focusing its study of various subject-matters within the horizon of questions about Christian congregations" brings us close to Augustine's maxim of *credo ut intelligam*. "Trying to understand God more truly" can be understood as the ultimate quest of faith. The questions about congregations are questions typically asked by faith. On the other hand, the quest can, and should be conducted along orderly and disciplined lines.

We contend that Kelsey's way of stating the task of theology provides a method to conduct theological inquiry from the perspective of faith in a thoroughly integrated fashion. We are committed to focus on God, but without losing our moorings in time and place. While our quest is unreservedly a quest for God, we may focus on the concrete elements of "the Christian thing" as it occurs in Christian congregations.

4. Formal issues

- **Research problem**

The research problem is stated as follows: *Will praying the Psalms as a congregational strategy facilitate integrated spirituality?*

- **Type of study**

This dissertation is a combination of an *exploratory*⁵ study, a *descriptive*⁶ study, and an *explanatory*⁷ study. We start off with an exploratory study of the way the term spirituality is employed. This part of the study (Chapter 1) culminates in a working definition of the concept.

The next part of the study (Chapter 2) combines a descriptive study with an explanatory study. Several typologies are used to describe various types of spirituality. Then these descriptions are analysed to make causal connections between types of spirituality and certain elements of human existence. The model of spirituality developed towards the end of Chapter 2 draws on the explanations for the shape of spirituality and on the main elements of spirituality uncovered by the descriptive study in this chapter. The model also uses the working definition taken from the exploratory study in the first chapter.

The next three chapters (Chapters 3-5) offer an exploratory study of the Psalms with the express purpose of uncovering the extent of their seriousness about God and about life. This part of the study tests the hypothesis that the Psalms are fitting tools with which a congregation may promote integrated spirituality.

The last chapter draws conclusions from the results of the previous chapters about the validity of our hypothesis. It proceeds to offer suggestions for practical congregational implementations of the insights gained in the study. It closes with a brief exploratory study of the way the Psalms were used in the history of the church.

- **Basic constructs and concepts**

Spirituality: Spirituality is a life-orientation that presents itself as worship (communion with God) and as a continuous growth in understanding and ordering of the elements of our lives to a correspondence with the reality presented to us in worship.⁸ This definition of spirituality focuses on its inner dynamics, but also attends to its

5. As the name indicates, *exploratory studies* simply intend to take stock of a field of research (Mouton & Marais 1985:43). In Chapter 1 this is carried out to narrow down the field of meaning we attach to the word “spirituality.”

6. The term “*descriptive study*” is, once again, self-explanatory. It is used as an umbrella-term for a wide variety of various types of research that aim at an accurate and careful description of some specific occurrence (Mouton & Marais 1985:44-5).

7. *Explanatory studies* intend to indicate the causality between variables or occurrences. In this way they explain the occurrence of certain phenomena (Mouton & Marais 1985:45).

8. This is our working definition developed in Chapter 1.

connection with and expression in the material world. Spirituality is depicted as a way of viewing the world and the workings of life, but one that inevitably translates into concrete forms of expression.

Integrated spirituality: Stated simply, integrated spirituality is spirituality that integrates concern for God and for the material world. It is neither otherworldly nor thisworldly. It views the so-called “spiritual” and “secular” spheres of life as one holistic unit and acts accordingly.

Centre of value and power: This term is borrowed from James Fowler. It refers to that which determines a person’s priorities and that in which he or she puts his or her faith and trust. This may be a cause, an institution or a transcendent being that constitutes his or her life’s meaning (Fowler 1981:16).

Context: This term is used to refer to the physical surroundings and the mixture of social, economic, and cultural conditions within which human life is conducted. It is used as an exhaustive term for all external realities faced by human beings.

Confessional tradition: This term is used to refer to the cumulative tradition of a religion or denomination that may be constituted by texts, symbols, oral traditions, music, dance, ethical teachings, theologies, creeds, rites, liturgies, architecture, the typical view of God, style of worship, style of leadership, formative history, and any other elements that convey meaning. All this tend to form a coherent whole, so that mention of one element of the tradition normally leads to the others.

Narrative: We use the term “narrative” in two ways. *In the first place* we refer to the personal narratives individuals construct according to their centres of value and power. They construct these narratives by the process of selecting certain events of their lives and ordering them in a coherent plot.

In the second place we speak of narratives as the paradigmatic narratives from outside our direct experience that shape our personal narratives by providing new and more adequate interpretative keys. For Christians the Biblical narrative provides such a paradigmatic narrative (Osmer 1992:116).

Psychological make-up: By “psychological make-up” we mean to indicate the aggregate of personal attributes which makes a person distinct from others. In this regard we refer to attributes like temperament, intellectual abilities, personality type, and preferred ways of making decisions.

Matrix: By “matrix” we mean “that by which, within which, and from which something takes form and develops”. When we speak of a matrix for spirituality we refer to the personal, spiritual, temporal, social, and teleological structure in which spirituality is conceived, gestated, born, and sustained (Johnson 1989:23).

Model: A *model* is a schematic description of a complex phenomenon. The most important characteristic of a model is its heuristic function (Mouton & Marais 1985:140). *Theories*, again, have an explanatory function. A model systematises the basic constitutive elements of the phenomenon that is studied and also indicates the relationships between the various elements. It is concerned with the dynamics of the particular phenomenon (Mouton & Marais 1985:141). Unlike a theory, though, a model does not attempt to explain these relationships. In addition, one should always keep in mind that a model does not claim to be a full representation of the particular phenomenon. It stresses the most conspicuous elements of the phenomenon to isolate certain themes for further exploration (Mouton & Marais 1985:141).

- **The Biblical text**

Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version, the most widely used English translation in South Africa. Using the NIV for the Psalms leaves one with a problem of verse numbers, since it follows the tradition of the King James Version⁹ by not numbering the superscriptions to Psalms as verses. This causes a disparity with the verse numbers of the Hebrew Psalter. The two Afrikaans translations used in South Africa both follow the Hebrew text’s numbering. This leaves the researcher with a problem, since the work is directed, in the first place, at the Afrikaans-speaking Dutch Reformed Church. We decided on the solution of adhering to the verse numbers of the Hebrew Text.

The Hebrew text we refer to is the third edition of Kittel’s *Biblia Hebraica*.

5. The basic structure of the argument

The shape of our argument is determined by David Kelsey’s statement that theology is concerned with understanding God more truly by focusing on various subject-matters within the horizon of questions about congregations. The study falls into four main parts. The first three have different subject-matters that are all part of “the Christian thing” Kelsey refers to. The final part of the study consists of conclusions and proposals for concrete applications of the insights gained. If God is “known

9. The King James Version follows the tradition of verse numbering of the LXX.

more truly” by the end of the study, it would lead us to new insights into the way “the Christian thing” could be appropriated in congregations. Our proposals apply a fresh vision of God to congregational strategies for spiritual growth.

The first part of our argument is found in Chapter 1. The subject-matter studied in this chapter, is statements about the meaning of the term “spirituality.” The main question is, *What is Christian spirituality?* The accumulation of answers from the Christian community is analysed and broken down into their basic components and then systematised into a working definition of spirituality.

Chapter 2 contains *the second part* of our argument. The subject-matter is a number of typologies of spirituality. These typologies were constructed from studies of various parts of “the Christian thing” - experiences of believers, behavioural patterns, liturgical traditions, and ways of interacting with the various factors making up the matrix of spirituality. The main question is, *What causes the variety of types of spirituality?* The answers to the first two questions are used as the basis for constructing a model of Christian spirituality.

The third part of our argument is found in Chapters 3-5. The subject-matter in these chapters is the Psalter. There are two main questions in this part of our argument. The first is, *Do the Psalms take both God and life seriously?* The inquiry also seeks an answer to a second question, which is dependent on a positive answer to the first, namely, *In what way do the Psalms take both God and life seriously?* The second question has to do with the substantive connections between these two aspects of the focus of the Psalms. If the first question can be answered in the affirmative and the second can uncover an integrated interaction between the two concerns, we will be on the brink of proving our hypothesis to be true.

The final part of our argument begins by taking the main elements of our argument in the previous chapters to prove the veracity of our hypothesis. Then we proceed to offer proposals for congregational practice, based on the insights about God’s way of generating and shaping spirituality arrived at in the course of the study.

We do hope that our questions will lead us to a better understanding of the way God works out his purposes in the lives of believers. We also hope that this will enable us to make wise recommendations (wise in the Biblical sense of emanating from the fear of God) about the way the church should attend to its worship.

CHAPTER 1: SPIRITUALITY

1. The concept of spirituality

1.1 Into the thicket of meaning

“‘Spirituality’ may indicate stoic attitudes, occult phenomena, the practice of so-called mind control, yoga discipline, escapist fantasies, interior journeys, an appreciation of Eastern religions, multifarious pietistic exercises, superstitious imaginations, intensive journals, dynamic muscle tension, assorted dietary regimens, meditation, jogging cults, monastic rigors, mortification of the flesh, wilderness sojourns, political resistance, contemplation, abstinence, hospitality, a vocation of poverty, non-violence, silence, the efforts of prayer, obedience, generosity, exhibiting stigmata, entering solitude, or, I suppose, among these and many other things, squatting on top of a pillar” (William Stringfellow 1984:19).

The word spirituality is notoriously vague. There is such a proliferation of definitions for spirituality that the concept all but loses its usefulness. At times this situation seems to open the door for many writers to get lost in an eclectic jungle with very few firm parameters and only the vaguest of directions.

Literature concerned with the subject of spirituality confirms William Stringfellow’s description of the chaos surrounding the concept. One is confronted by a rather confusing thicket of meaning when one traces the various meanings attributed to the word “spirituality.”

Two factors cause this state of affairs. The first has to do with the inherent nature of spirituality as something that deals with the mystery of God, while the second has to do with the cultural context of the late twentieth century. Before attempting to formulate a working definition of spirituality these two factors will now be discussed.

1.2 Spirituality and the mystery of God

“‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,’ not of philosophers and scholars” (Blaise Pascal 1966:309).

“Admittedly these conjectures as to why God does what He does are probably of no more value than my dog’s ideas of what I am up to when I sit and read” (CS Lewis 1961:96).

The *first factor* that engenders the divergence in views about spirituality is the fact that talk of spirituality takes us into the domain of the intangible. Spirituality, in the Christian sense, is not an anthropological category, though it certainly has anthropological dimensions. The concept refers to something found at the intersection of the material and the transcendent. More precisely, Christian spirituality has to do with the encounter between God and man.

This fact has consequences for the way we speak about spirituality. As Blaise Pascal clearly understood, the God-talk of philosophers and scholars cannot suffice for such an encounter. We need something more than angular, unambiguous, precise language if we are to express the reality of this encounter adequately. In Walter Brueggemann’s words, we need the language of poets (Brueggemann 1989). Any definition or description of spirituality would function more like a bridge or launching-pad towards its meaning rather than like a wrapping that neatly follows its precise contours.

Any attempt at a definition of spirituality must deal with the fact that large dimensions of the reality to which the term alludes, transcends the very language that is used when trying to describe it. Religious language always has to deal with a surplus of meaning.

This fact can be expressed in various ways. Rudolph Otto, in his classic work, *The idea of the Holy*, speaks of an “overplus of meaning” in the term “holy” - this being the term that is used to refer to the nonrational, indescribable elements of deity (Harris 1992:87). He coins the term “numinous,” from the Latin word for divine power, “numen”, to describe this overplus of meaning (Harris 1992:87). For Otto God is a reality, but a *numinous* reality. Therefore he describes a person’s religious experience as a shadow cast by the presence of the mighty rock, the numinous.

In the foreword to Chris Harris' *Creating relevant rituals* (1992) Gloria Durka speaks of good rituals as rituals that convince participants "that God's presence is available (immanence) and inexhaustible (transcendence)". Durka's juxtaposition of the categories of immanence and transcendence expresses this double reality we are facing when trying to come to terms with the reality of spirituality. Definitions and descriptions of spirituality will always have to contend with both the inexhaustibility (transcendence) and availability (immanence) of God's presence in religious life. God is, at the same time, hidden and revealed. The paradox can never be dissolved.

It would also be rewarding to pay attention to Victor Turner's well-known categories of *structure* and *anti-structure*, to understand the problem we face in speaking about spirituality. Turner uses this terminology to refer to "two styles of being in the world" (Harris 1992:44). He describes these two styles of being as follows:

Structure refers to an emphasis on order, that concerns rank, status, position and the expectations which society attaches to these realities (Harris 1992:45). *Anti-structure* refers to a "liminal" state, a state where people step over the threshold (Latin: *limen*) of structural life (Harris 1992:45). The term "anti-structure" refers to an enormously complex phenomenon, but it becomes somewhat clearer when we describe it as the opposite of structure (Harris 1992:47). It refers to a state of being where structure is bracketed.

Harris refers to five types of anti-structure (Harris 1992:48-62). One of these is *religious anti-structure*. Religious anti-structure refers to a mode of anti-structural existence or consciousness that has direct religious motivation and produces behaviour expressly recognised as devotion to God (Harris 1992:60).

When Harris discusses the implications of Turner's categories for Christian education, he states that religious anti-structure is central to Christianity (Harris 1992:65). Structure, in the face of the mystery of God, is of secondary importance:

"Mystery is at the heart of Christianity. Theologians have always insisted that the God of Christianity cannot be fitted into human categories" (Harris 1992:62).

Structure is a necessary element of life - including religious life. Without it, all would fall apart. We need the infrastructure of roles, expectations, institutions, and traditions for life to exhibit any sense of coherence. This is not only true of society at large, but also of the church. Every move into anti-structure inevitably evolves into a move back into structure.

Yet the essence of Christianity is to be found in anti-structure. Christian worship, for all its liturgical structure, has as its deepest aim a move into religious anti-structure, an encounter with the mystery of the living God. Worship is essentially a liminal act. Spirituality has its source in this experience of religious anti-structure and, therefore, shares in the anti-structural nature of the experiences of worship and prayer that shapes it. It is, therefore, understandable that many definitions of spirituality actually describe it in terms of worship and prayer.

Structure has an important role to play in Christianity. It has to balance anti-structure and to prevent it from becoming destructive (Harris 1992:66). It also serves religious anti-structure by creating the space in which it can occur. Permanent anti-structure is a fantasy. In religious activities, though, the focus should never be primarily on structure. "If structure becomes an end in itself, religion loses its true purpose" (Harris 1992:66). This purpose being the true worship of God.

A parallel way of viewing spirituality can be found in the work of the psychologist Arthur Deikmann.¹ Deikmann distinguishes between two types of consciousness: the action mode and the receptive mode. The *action mode* is one of logic, control, analysis and prediction. It operates with signs, concepts and systems. It focuses on explanation and, therefore, limits the possibilities of our awareness. The *receptive mode* is one of association, surrender, intuition and surprise. It operates with symbols, rituals and stories. It diffuses awareness and thus allows the possibility of new or expanded consciousness. Deikmann contends that the awareness of the presence of God only becomes possible when we move out of the action mode into the receptive mode. The action mode of consciousness, though, is not seen as redundant for spirituality, but as necessary for theological reflection on this experience.

It should be clear that Deikmann's theory points towards a way of approaching the heart of spirituality - the human encounter with God - that cannot be grasped and claimed by way of logic, control and analysis. The encounter with God can only be received as revelation, as grace, as a surprise. Deikmann's theory brings us to the recognition of the mystery involved in the move from the action mode to the receptive mode. Yet, the fact that he affirms that the receptive mode can theologise around the experiences of the receptive mode, shows spirituality to be more than a purely mystical affair. Spirituality is presented as a phenomenon that is rooted in experience in the receptive mode, but also finds expression in the action mode.

1. As summarised in Holmes (1980:5-6).

There is an inevitability to Deikmann's drawing together of the two modes of consciousness, in much the same way as we perceived in the inevitable connection between structure and anti-structure.

These few examples which indicate how the human encounter with God is spoken about, makes it clear that we are dealing with something that transcends the range of our normal speech. In this study, however, the understanding of spirituality advanced does not limit spirituality to the uncanny, the liminal, the extraordinary. These experiences are relatively rare, even in the most devout Christian. Most of Christian life is, in fact, very mundane. What we wish to emphasise, though, is that spirituality cannot be understood apart from these liminal experiences. These experiences are the source of spiritual life and all Christian living should find its ultimate point of reference in experiences of worship. Any account of spirituality has to take account of its transcendent dimensions. Moreover, when one plumbs the depths of the ordinary, one finds the numinous as the bedrock of all of Christian experience.

This, obviously, creates considerable difficulty for definitions and terminology. It accounts in part for the lack of consistency in the definitions we are offered for spirituality. Any numinous experience leaves one grasping for words. We are consistently finding our best expressions to be no better than approximations of the texture, timbre and depth of the reality they attempt to describe. Add to this the fact that God encounters people in many different ways in various contexts and it becomes totally understandable that there will be divergence in the descriptions and definitions of spirituality.

Though the discussion in this section focused on the problem we are facing when trying to define and describe spirituality, it also has a constructive side to it. The attempts at finding words to point to the otherness of the encounter with God provides us with a number of useful terms for understanding spirituality - not useful as clear, concise descriptions, but useful because they are inherently open-ended and respect the indescribable dimension of spirituality. If we are to talk about spirituality in even remotely sufficient ways, we will have need of concepts like the "overplus of meaning", "numinous", "liminal", "transcendence" and "immanence", "structure" and "anti-structure", and like "receptive mode" and "action mode."

1.3 Spirituality and the cultural context of the late twentieth century

“The taste for Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism: the reification of concepts, idolisation of the reflexive consciousness, flight from being into verbalism, mathematics, and rationalisation” (Thomas Merton 1965:285).

“We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree” (Annie Dillard 1982:88).

The *second factor* that leads to the divergence of definitions of spirituality, is the particular cultural context of the late twentieth century. Recent times have seen a widely acknowledged surge of interest in the metaphysical in the Western world (Leech 1992:9). Wuthnow, in *Rediscovering the sacred* (1992:3) speaks of us being “in the midst of some global reorientation - a worldwide return to the sacred”. This sudden interest is a reaction to a period of Western civilisation that focused heavily on abstract rationalisation or, in Deikmann’s terminology, on the active mode. There is a growing resistance to the materialist assumptions of modernistic phenomenology.

This trend presents the church with a tremendous opportunity to point society towards the reality of God. Unfortunately though, the turn from the positivistic paradigm has not induced great numbers of people to turn to the Christian church to provide communion with God. A large percentage of people turned to other phenomena with a metaphysical aura, such as the various cults, Eastern religions, parapsychology, the occult, psychedelic drugs, and so on. As Annie Dillard says in the quote above, matches are now being lighted under every green tree in an attempt to get the burning bush going again. The reasons for not seeking out the Christian church are multifarious: In many cases the Christian church is simply seen as part of the establishment to which these individuals are reacting, and recourse is therefore not taken to Christianity. Many others contend that churches offer no real experience of the transcendental. Therefore they prefer to seek liminal experiences elsewhere.

Whatever the merits of the resistance to the church, this situation has led many individuals into a wide variety of avenues in search of, as it has increasingly come to be called, “spirituality” or a spiritual or interior life. The bewildering array of cults, activities, exercises and lifestyles that are labelled with the term “spirituality” often have only one thing in common - their search for something more than that which

the modern materialist society can offer, something that could lead to the cultivation of an inner life.

The fact that the resistance to modernistic phenomenology has led so many people away from the church, presents us with a challenge. It leads us to ask the pertinent question: If the aversion to the closed world of modernism leads people to a search for an inner life, why do so few choose the Christian church as the place to quench this thirst for spiritual depth? Do we not have the “words of eternal life”? Are we not the first place where one would expect to find more than superficiality and exteriority?

The logical answer to these questions seems to be that the modern church has assimilated so much of modern thought that people experienced it as an extension of modernity rather than as an intrusion from the transcendent realm. The life and speech of the church does not promise any more food for the inner life than the language of psychology and science.

Fortunately, we can point to a hunger for a more “spiritual” life in the church as well. The term “spirituality” has come into vogue in the church itself. There is a clearly discernible hunger for the mystical aspect of Christian faith. A greater part of this trend in the church is not a hunger for esoteric mysteries, but a healthy search for God’s presence in the here-and-now. DJ Smit pin-points the focus of most of the modern concern for spirituality in the church as a search for connections between the experience of union with God and everyday life.

“Kortom, die nuwere belangstelling in spiritualiteit is op soek na die verbande tussen die verbondenheid aan God en die allerdaagse lewenspraktyk” (DJ Smit 1989:91).²

All of this should give the church food for thought. Have we consumed so much of modern thought that the arteries that provide us with the life of the Spirit have been blocked? At the very least, we are confronted by the challenge to show ourselves to be a people conversant with God, a people speaking the language that shows us to be in touch with a bigger reality than the truncated universe of modernity. We will have to divest ourselves of the limitations placed on us by modern language and thought paradigms.

2. This can be translated as, “In short, the new interest in spirituality is in search for the connections between union with God and everyday life.”

In its self-examination the church should take care not to swing to the other extreme of an isoterical supernaturalism. Spirituality has to do with both the material and transcendental aspects of reality. Its share in the transcendental aspect of reality imparts a slipperiness, an intangible aspect to it. If one removes the mystery from spirituality one is left with a dry husk, an unrecognisable distortion of the life in the spirit. Conversely, a removal of the material element from spirituality leaves us with an effervescent soap-bubble spirituality, a world-denying and unreal existence with little application apart from eccentric and odd metaphysical experiments. The biggest problem we face though, is to bring the transcendental aspect of spirituality under words.

If we are to provide a sufficient description and practice of spirituality, we need to develop a language and spiritual life that express both these realities. This is not an easy task. Modernity has provided us with a “prose-flattened world” (Brueggemann 1989:1) where language has lost much of its power to evoke meanings deeper than the concrete, sensual realities of our existence.

Difficulties apart, one is not absolved from trying to bring something of the mystery under words, much as a painter is not absolved from including the wind in his paintings. He cannot capture the wind, but he can paint a bending tree, just as a novelist can use words to describe a creaking bough or a flapping sail or the sting of sand against our legs. In a word, even though we can never describe transcendence fully, we can develop language that point us towards it in a satisfactory way. We cannot domesticate or tame the mystery by doing this. We can give indications toward the mystery inherent in spiritual life, but we cannot encapsulate it in our language. For this reason we will find that poetic language might do better than scientific language at approaching the transcendental reality of spirituality. Poetic language can bring some of the richness, complexity and depth of spirituality to the fore in a way that descriptive language can only approximate.

Walter Brueggemann (1989:1-11) gives us insight into the language-problem we face in modern society when he discusses the impact on modernity on the manner in which the gospel is proclaimed. He points out the reductionism brought about by precise, technical ways of thinking. This way of thinking “reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, revises quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes” (1989:2). Hand in hand with technical ways of thinking we also find the modern penchant towards ideology - “closed, managed, useful truth” (1989:2).

“That means that the gospel may have been twisted, pressed, tailored, and gerrymandered until it is comfortable with technological reason that leaves us unbothered, and with ideology that leaves us with uncriticized absolutes” (Brueggemann 1989:2).

He proposes poetic speech as the only way the reduction of truth can be countered in this “prose-flattened world” (1989:1). He finds precedence for this mode of speech in the prophetic speech in Israel. This mode of speech is aimed towards opening up an alternative world to the community of faith - the real world in which God dominates our perspective.

Eugene Peterson (1988) echoes Brueggemann’s proposal in his discussion of the Revelation of Saint John. He describes John as a theologian (one who “takes God seriously as subject and not object”), as a poet (one who “takes words seriously as images that connect the visible and invisible”) and as a pastor (Peterson 1988:2-3). Peterson describes God as *logos*, that is, as revelation, as “more than a blur of longing, and other than a monosyllabic curse (or blessing)” (Peterson 1988:3). Still, God is not so completely known that He can be predicted or that there is no more to be known and that we can go on to the next subject. God cannot be reduced to what can be measured, used, weighed, gathered, controlled, or felt (Peterson 1988:4). He is not only *logos*; He is also *theos*.

“The theologian is never able to deliver a finished product. ‘Systematic theology’ is an oxymoron. There are always loose ends” (Peterson 1988:4).

For this reason we need poets, such as John. Peterson describes poetry as the use of language that does not set out to *describe* something in the first place. It *makes* something.

“It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it. We do not have more information after we read a poem, we have more experience. It is not ‘examination of what happens but an immersion in what happens.’ ”³

Poets can achieve more than religious philosophers, with the cautious choice of definitions and statements can. They can also do more than moralists with their earnestness about practical concerns. They can create a new reality that others can

3. Denise Levertov, *The poet in the world* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), p 239, quoted by Peterson (1988:5).

enter; they can transmit others into the place where God is present. Neither the descriptive language of philosophers nor moral discourse can do this (Peterson 1988:6-7).

This fits in well with what he has to say elsewhere about the ability of imaginative language to lead us towards the mystery of God:

“The imagination is among the chief glories of the human. When it is healthy and energetic, it ushers us into adoration and wonder, into the mysteries of God” (Peterson 1992:171).

He contrasts “imagination” with “explanation” (the dominant mode of discourse in modern times):

“Explanation pins things down so that we can handle and use them - obey and teach, help and guide. Imagination opens things up so that we can grow into maturity - worship and adore, exclaim and honour, follow and trust ... Explanation puts us in harness; Imagination catapults us into mystery. Explanation reduces life to what can be used; Imagination enlarges life into what can be adored” (Peterson 1992:171-2).

This study, as is proper for a study in this specific academic field, makes use of descriptive language in the style of theology as described in the introduction of the study. However, when this descriptive language is used, it is used in the humbling recognition of the limits that are imposed on our description and understanding of spirituality. We employ this language with an acknowledgement of the “overplus of meaning” that the phenomena described by the words on paper can merely allude to. At times this is alluded to by inserting terminology and descriptions which would rather qualify as prods and pointers toward meaning than as final formulations.

2. Towards a description of spirituality: an abbreviated catalogue of definitions

As we have mentioned above, prevailing understandings of spirituality fall into widely divergent categories. When we argue from the perspective of the Christian faith, however, we do have definite parameters which narrow the field considerably. The questions concerning congregations that form the proper field of study for theology guides our interest towards spirituality as a phenomenon occurring within the field of the encounter between God and man, as defined by the Christian tradition.

When we refer to “the encounter between God and man” we do not limit spirituality to liminal experiences, but include all human life that is lived on earth from the perspective of faith in God.

Some descriptions of spirituality confine the term to certain practices of the Christian community centred around prayer, but we find that too constrictive. We choose not to follow this narrow delimitation, since it certainly opens up the possibility of a separation between the so-called “life of the spirit” and “secular life”. These descriptions of spirituality, however, are not without merit, since we can demonstrate that prayer should be seen as the source of spirituality in everyday life. The problem with these descriptions are not that they miss the mark, but that they do not go far enough. These descriptions of spirituality only describe an *aspect* of spirituality, as we understand it, even though it is a vital aspect of it.

This objection is removed when prayer is interpreted to include all of life that is lived in the presence of God. This definition of prayer coincides precisely with the more comprehensive concept of spirituality we wish to propose. This, however, is not what most people mean by prayer. Speaking about spirituality as prayer, then, can lead to misunderstandings and to a secularist reduction of spirituality.

What follows is a condensed catalogue of the various definitions offered for Christian spirituality. Obviously it is an abbreviated list of definitions, in the face of the veritable avalanche of publications that have dealt with spirituality during recent times. We have tried to find representative statements for the most important trends in thought about Christian spirituality. The definitions are grouped according to their main thrust.

2.1 Focus on beliefs and attitudes

Carl Garner⁴:

“A word which has come into vogue to describe those attitudes, beliefs, practices, which animate people’s lives and help them to reach out towards supersensible realities.”

4. Wakefield, Gordon (ed), *A dictionary of Christian spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1983), quoted by Garner (1987:1).

2.2 Focus on acts of devotion

Don Browning⁵:

“The term ‘spirituality’ has a variety of meanings in the contemporary discussion, but in general it refers to that dimension of Christian living that emphasises various disciplines and practices designed to deepen one’s sense of being related to the divine.”

2.3 That which provides focus and integration for all of life

Nelson ST Thayer (1985:8):

“Spirituality is not merely inner feelings; it has to do with the integration and coherence of ourselves as experiencing and acting persons.”

Don Browning⁶:

“It is the function of religion to integrate experience, and spirituality is the disciplined involvement with the divine toward the end of gathering together into a coherent whole the diverse facets of our ordinary experience.”

2.4 A comprehensive system for the interpretation of reality

De Jongh van Arkel⁷ calls spirituality “die semantiese struktuurkern” (the semantic structuring centre) of human life:

“As betekeniskern van ’n mens se lewe het spiritualiteit te doen met ’n religieuse selfpersepsie (in die lig van jou diepste oortuigings) wat bepalend is vir alle verhoudinge waarbinne die mens lewe.”⁸

5. Quoted by Van der Merwe (1990:22).

6. Quoted by Van der Merwe (1990:23).

7. Quoted by Van der Merwe (1990:23).

8. “As the centre of meaning for one’s life, spirituality is concerned with a religious selfperception (in the light of one’s deepest convictions) that determines all the relationships within which your life is lived.”

2.5 Focus on the relationship with God

Urban T Holmes⁹:

“I am defining spirituality as (1) a human capacity for relationship (2) with that which transcends sense phenomena; this relationship (3) is perceived by the subject as an expanded or heightened consciousness independent of the subject’s efforts, (4) given substance in the historical setting, and (5) exhibits itself in creative action in the world.”

This definition has more dimensions to it than the relational. To name but one important facet, one should notice that Holmes expects this relation to find its substance in the material world. The essence of the definition, however, lies in the fact that it views the human capacity for relationship with the transcendent as the locus of spirituality. Concrete expression in historical settings in the world is the outflow of this relationship.

2.6 Focus on the transcendental dimension of everyday life

Eugene Peterson (1989:4):

“Christian spirituality means living in the mature wholeness of the gospel. It means taking all the elements of your life - children, spouse, job, weather, possessions, relationships - and experiencing them as an act of faith. God wants all the material of our lives.”

Geoffrey Wainwright (Jones, Wainwright & Yarnold 1986:592):

“...the combination of praying and living which is spirituality.”

Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold (1986:xxii):

“We are concerned with the individual prayer and communion with God, both of the ‘ordinary Christian’ and of those with special spiritual gifts, and with the outer life which supports and flows from this devotion ...”

Admittedly, this definition has two equal sides to it. It could also have been placed under 2.2 (which is concerned with the focus on acts of devotion).

9. Quoted by Johnson (1988:24).

Manfred Seitz (1987:123):

“... die Gestaltwerdung des Glaubens in Alltagsexistenz hinein.”¹⁰

Lawrence O Richards (1987:50)

“Christian spirituality is living a human life in this world in union with God.”

Jill Robson (1987:20):

“... spirituality is about an attempt to find, or grow towards, an integration of the holy or spiritual dimension with all other areas of living.”

The last two definitions pay equal attention to the fact that spirituality is life in union with God, and could equally well have been inserted under section 2.5.

The important elements in this last group of definitions are the recognition of ordinary human existence as the raw material of spirituality (*the anthropological perspective*); the fact that spirituality is placed in the material world (*the cosmological perspective*); and the stress on the relationship with God (*the mystical perspective*) as constitutive of Christian spirituality.

This last group of definitions will be taken as the point of departure for arriving at our own description of spirituality. This choice is quite logical, seen from a Reformed perspective. These definitions of spirituality articulate an understanding of the spiritual life, the life lived *coram Deo* (before the face of God) in a way that reverberates with the particular understanding that the Reformed faith has of what life in God’s grace should be.

It also seems as if this understanding of spirituality is quite prevalent in the present concern in the church with spirituality (Smit 1989:91). Christians from all walks of life have a growing desire to live their everyday lives as spiritual beings.

The specific concern of this study also leads us to make use of the last group of definitions. It is useful to take up the integrative aspect of the way these authors

10. This can be translated as, “... the concretisation of faith in everyday existence.”

speak of the material and spiritual aspects of reality. We will, then, use their definitions to help us towards our own description of spirituality.

The other groups of definitions are not without merit. They highlight important aspects of spirituality and will also be incorporated into our description of spirituality.

3. A summary of the main constitutive elements of spirituality

Van der Merwe (1990:26) distinguishes three elements of spirituality that may be found in most of the more recent state of descriptions and definitions of spirituality. They are especially conspicuous in the final group of definitions of spirituality given above.

Spirituality is seen as *connectedness with God*, as *being immersed in everyday life*; and as *making the connection* between the first two aspects. These three elements provide broad parameters for Christian spirituality as a whole. We will make use of this description in a slightly modified form. The divergence from Van der Merwe's formulation will be motivated at each of the three points. The three elements have been reformulated as follows:

- *Getting to know God as the source of life,*
- *embracing the material world, and*
- *discovering the unity between everyday life and a relationship with God.*

3.1 Getting to know God as the source of life

There are three concerns incorporated in reformulating Van der Merwe's first element of Christian spirituality.

Firstly, the phrase "*getting to know*." The word "know" is used in the sense of the Hebrew word יָדָע. יָדָע is a relational word. God cannot be discovered as the source of life in the objective way that electricity can be discovered as the power source of a light-bulb. It is more than a question of acquiescence to an abstract truth. This discovery can only be made from within a personal relationship with Him. Knowing God as the source of all life is the kind of knowledge we arrive at through continuous experiences of his providence. It is a personal knowledge, personal trust based on a relationship.

The phrase “getting to know” is meant to convey the fact that spirituality is not static. It is a journey and not a destination. Christian spirituality consists, in the main, of a chain of discoveries of the grace of God - discoveries that are made in a personal relationship with Him. There may be a first overpowering experience, a paradigm-shift, where a person discovers that he or she can place all his or her hope in God. As all-encompassing as this may seem at first, this is not enough. Along the way, this first discovery is renewed and augmented by new discoveries of the many ways in which God is the one true source of all of life. It needs to be renewed because of man’s tendency to sin. It needs to be augmented because of the incompleteness of all knowledge of God and the new challenges emanating from new phases in the journey that is spiritual life.

Different faith-traditions have different ways of speaking about this reality. The Reformed faith traditionally speaks of continuing conversion of the believer’s life. In the Reformed perspective, knowledge of God and knowledge of the self goes together. John Calvin starts his Institutes with the statement that all true wisdom comprises knowledge of God and knowledge of the self (Calvijn 1956a:1). The knowledge of God leads one to true insight into one’s own sin and insufficiency. This leads to a life-long process of growth - a continuing conversion from reliance on oneself and the resources of this world to reliance on God alone.

Secondly, the fact that “connectedness with God” is rephrased as getting to know Him “*as the source of life*” has two objectives in mind.

In the first place it means to affirm the knowledge of God as the constitutive element of spirituality. Relational knowledge of God provides the spark for faith to begin. God’s initiative is the moving force behind all further spiritual growth. It is not simply one equal half of the relationship that constitutes spirituality. The source of spiritual life is to be found in God and not in the moral rectitude or the ascetic liberality of believers.

Though Calvin argues that it is difficult to determine which of the two basic forms of knowledge (knowledge of God and of self) precedes the other, he ends up giving the knowledge of God the prerogative (Calvijn 1956a:4). True spirituality and spiritual growth flows from knowledge of God:

“Vroomheid noem ik de met liefde tot God verbonden eerbied, welke de kennis zijner weldaden wekt. Want zolang de mensen niet gevoelen, dat zij alles aan God verschuldigd zijn, dat zij door zijn vaderlijke zorg gekoesterd worden en dat

Hij voor hen de bewerker alles goeds is, zodat niets buiten Hem te zoeken is, zullen zij zich nooit in vrijwillige gehoorzaamheid aan Hem onderwerpen; ja, indien zij hun vast geluk niet grondvesten op Hem, zullen zij zich nooit waarlijk en van harte geheel aan Hem overgeven” (Calvijn 1956a:6).¹¹

This prerogative of God does not rule out human participation. It does not reduce believers to pawns on God’s cosmic chess-board. Spirituality is not a kind of Docetism where human nature and initiative is obliterated by community with the divine. AA van Ruler spoke of a reciprocity between God and man, but was careful to call it a *theonomic* reciprocity (Rebel s a: 141). It is a reciprocity where the original causality always belongs to God.

Referring to God as the source of life, provides us with a corrective perspective on the nature of human participation in the journey of faith. A human being cannot initiate the process of spiritual growth; he or she can only respond to God’s initiative. Faith is not a creative act; it is a receptive act. Of itself faith is an “empty act” that receives its content from outside (Berkouwer 1975:179). When we turn our hearts toward God, we discover that He had made all the first moves in our direction. In fact, we discover that our very act of turning our hearts towards Him was made possible by his initiative.

Thirdly, the word “life” is used without any prepositions such as “spiritual.” This expresses this study’s refusal to separate so-called “spiritual life” and “life in the material world.” All of life, in all its facets and dimensions, is included in the formulation. All of life, in the most wide-ranging sense of the word, is to be discovered as flowing from God (Ac 17:25).

This insight directs our attention towards the reality of God’s providence. All of creation is sustained by his activity. Believers are not the only ones that are given life and breath by God. Believers, though, are the ones that have discovered this great truth and respond to it by reorienting their lives in accordance with it. This is carried out in many ways. It is achieved by offering our lives to God, by ethical conduct, by worshipping and praising God. It is also accomplished by functioning towards the other parts of material reality (human and non-human) in accordance with their true createdness. This brings us to the second element of spirituality.

11. “I define spirituality as the God-embracing reverence that is generated by knowledge of his caring deeds. For as long as people do not feel that they owe everything to God, that they are pampered in his fatherly care, and that He is the One who is behind everything good that befalls them, so that nothing good is to be found apart from Him - for as long as this is not the case, they will never submit themselves to Him in willing obedience. Yes, if they do not base their firm happiness on Him, they will never commit themselves to God truly and with all their heart”

3.2 Embracing the material world

Christian spirituality is experienced in the material world. It leads to a specific kind of relationship to the material world. The reality of God that sparks Christian spirituality leads us to a view of material reality that differs substantially from that of modern materialism or the negative view of anti-materialistic dualism.

In Jewish thought, “nature” was not understood as something with an independent existence, but as *creation*. God created the material world and He is also the source of newness. Creation is not fixed and settled, but participates in God’s continuing transformation of all things (Brueggemann 1986:61-2). This means that when one speaks about Christian hope, one has to include the transformation of the material world in one’s eschatology.

For this reason we have chosen the word “*embrace*”. The basic world-affirmation at the root of Christian spirituality that finds its source in the vision of the material world as God’s creation is expressed by the word “embrace”. Being a Christian, of itself, implies a positive participation in one’s physical surroundings. Christian spirituality provides a key to enjoyment of both God and his creation. For this reason Hans Küng can describe being a Christian as being “radically human” (Küng 1974:554).

Christian spirituality does not view the material world as inherently evil. Instances of Christian spirituality where this dualism is upheld are not true to their own roots. Though the material world has been warped by the advent of sin (Rm 8:20), it is still the source of God’s provision and is to be enjoyed as his creation. The full redemption of *all* of creation is to be expected.

This enjoyment of and participation in material reality also shows the material world to be the raw material of Christian spirituality. We are not called to withdraw from the material world and to practice spirituality as some kind of disembodied mode of existence, far removed from the physical realities of everyday life (Willard 1988:75). We are called to incarnate God’s grace in our physical world. We are called to shape and work the material of our lives into God-infused forms. Thomas Merton expresses it well:

“The axiom that grace builds on nature has often been misused. But the fact remains that, if nothing is left of nature, there is nothing for grace to build on,

there is nothing left to be sanctified and consecrated to God. This is not consecration, but desecration of the temple of our being” (Merton 1965:26).

This affirmation of material reality can be understood to call into question the validity of ascetic practices, disciplines and monastic life. This would not be a fair reflection. None of them are *in principle* world-denying, though there are certainly enough instances where they can be shown to be exactly that.

The fact that Christian spirituality finds its source of life and orientation in God, leads to the possibility - indeed, the necessity - of *askesis* (ascetic practices). When *askesis* is practised from a Christian perspective, it is not done for reasons of contempt for material reality, but as a measure to strengthen the individual’s tie with God. Eugene Peterson comments on the fact that disasters tend to confront believers with their dependence on God and lead them to grow in reliance on Him. He then casts light on spiritual disciplines and calls them “voluntary disasters” (Peterson 1992:90). As such, they represent a turning to God in a way that temporarily brackets other parts of the individual’s existence. This should not be seen as construing a negation of material reality or a negative mien towards everyday life. This focus on God has the effect of sharpening our focus on his creation and on the everyday events of normal life.

This still leaves us with forms of monastic life or life-long abstinences. Though one would not rule out the legitimacy of an ascetic renunciation of the world, *contemptus mundi* should not be seen as a norm for Christian spirituality.

Ascetic discipline should be viewed as part of a discipline that Christians take upon themselves to sharpen their focus on God, “a matter of taking appropriate measures” for spiritual growth (Willard 1988:153) or “an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective co-operation with Christ and his Kingdom” (Willard 1988:156). As is the case with all *askesis*, a turning from the world, in whatever form, is “immersion in an environment in which our capacities are reduced to nothing or nearly nothing and we are at the mercy of God to shape his will in us” (Peterson 1992:90). Ascetic practices are not important for spiritual life in the sense of expressing a negative attitude towards the material world. Rather, ascetic practices are used “to extend and develop basic prayer life into special areas” (Peterson 1992:108) or for remedial purposes, putting to rights something that had gone amiss in a person’s Christian life (Peterson 1992:108). Once they have accomplished what they were supposed to do, they are set aside until needed again. There is no merit in persisting with them when they have done their job. They are merely tools that are used when needed, and put away when not needed (Peterson 1992:110). The

mechanics of ascetic practices have no spiritual value in themselves. They are simply “good sense about life and, ultimately, about spiritual life” (Willard 1988:150).

This does not deprecate or slight the value and importance of monastic communities. It does, however, show the discipline practised in monastic communities to be a form of Christian life peculiar to a specific vocation (Willard 1988:141). Monastic life is not the norm for all Christian life. It should also not be simply understood as a contempt for the material world. There is much that is life-affirming and positive towards the material world in most of monastic spirituality. Thomas Merton is not alone in the monastic community when he states:

“True solitude is deeply aware of the world’s needs. It does not hold the world at arm’s length” (Merton 1965:19).

Though the Reformed tradition has done away with monastic life, we can point to some cases where a believer takes on a certain vocation from God that implies a partial *contemptus mundi*. A clear case in point would be persons called as missionaries. They have to contend with various abstinences and sacrifices that are part of accepting the particular vocation. Yet this does not remove them from the material realm or diminish their embrace of God’s created world in any way.

Not all ascetic practices of disciplines involve withdrawal from the world. Dallas Willard (1988:158) distinguishes between “disciplines of abstinence” (like solitude, silence and fasting) and “disciplines of engagement” (like study, service and fellowship). The latter category, obviously takes one into physical reality. But even his first category is, ultimately, life-affirming. It is viewed as “training” for a certain quality of life in the material world (Willard 1988:159), one that will bring our natural desires to their proper functioning in a God-made world (Willard 1988:160).

Spirituality, then, fully affirms the full value of life in the material world.

3.3 Discovering the unity between everyday life and a relationship with God

The phrase “making the connection” is substituted with the phrase “discovering the unity” in Van der Merwe’s formulation. The reason is that this way of stating it puts a stronger emphasis on the *inherent* unity between everyday life and the relationship with God. This unity is prior to the believer’s making the connection.

Van der Merwe's understanding of the relationship between everyday life and the relationship with God does not differ from this, but the reformulation prevents any misunderstanding. There is a unity between the life Christ gives us and the life we live every day. We cannot separate the contemplative or spiritual life from the active life. The task of spirituality is not withdrawal from everyday life into pure contemplative life, but discovering the inherent unity between our relationship with God and the material reality in which we are immersed.

There is a priority to the contemplative aspect of spirituality. Our relationship with God is the lens that sharpens our focus on the world we live in. It is the source of wholeness in life. Nevertheless, we are called to incarnate this life we are given by God. The shape of spirituality is, above all, a material shape; it is the shape our lives take as we go about our everyday tasks of sleeping, conversing, eating, working, loving, driving our cars. The contemplative life can be seen as "the one thing" (Lk 10:42) we need, without deprecating the importance of everyday life in any way.

In a very helpful meditation on the tension between the contemplative and the active life, Merton cites Thomas Aquinas (Merton 1948:414-9). Aquinas taught that there were three types of vocation: to the active life, to the contemplative, and a third to the mixture of both. He views the last as superior to the other two, but on condition that activity is undertaken as an overflow of love for God that finds its source in the contemplative life.

This is an important point for spirituality. Failure to see the connection between the contemplative and active life is the result of a failure to see the connection between the spiritual and the material. An emphasis on the contemplative, to the detriment of the active life, will turn into a world-denying asceticism that might be no more than a form of escapism. An emphasis on the active life, to the detriment of the contemplative, will turn into a worldliness that will differ very little from all-out secularism. For the health of both dimensions of spirituality, we need to pull the contemplative and the active life into each other. Spirituality is a process of discovering the connection between the relationship with God and everyday life - a connection that already exists.

4. A working definition of spirituality

Using the insights gleaned from the definitions of spirituality we have discussed above, this study will work with the following working definition of spirituality:

Spirituality is a life-orientation that presents itself as worship (communion with God) and as a continuous growth in understanding and ordering of the elements of our lives to a correspondence with the reality presented to us in worship.

We will now proceed to clarify the basic elements of the definition:

- ***“Spirituality is a life-orientation ...”***

This way of defining spirituality points to a comprehensive understanding of what it entails. It is not merely one component of Christian life among others. It is not *only a part* of a believer’s life. Spirituality refers to the total orientation towards life that a believer has; to that which determines the way he or she feels, acts and thinks. In biblical terms, it points to “your treasure”, to that which determines your life (Mt 6:21).

John Westerhoff speaks of faith as “perception”.¹² It can, of course, be spoken of as beliefs, attitudes or deeds. The fundamental understanding of faith, though, is that of perception. To repent is to change the way you see things.

Our description of spirituality as a life-orientation is very similar to that of Westerhoff. However, it does go one step further by adding the dimension of movement, an active ingredient: by depicting spirituality as “a life-orientation” it depicts spirituality as leaning in a certain direction, towards certain ways of thinking, acting and feeling. Though there is an interpretative framework behind it, spirituality is more than an interpretative framework. It is focused on something that exerts a gravitational pull on an individual or community.

This component of the definition reflects the gist of the definitions given by Thayer (2.3), Browning (the definition cited in section 2.3), and especially De Jongh van Arkel (2.4).

- ***“... that presents itself as worship (communion with God) ...”***

This part of the definition flows from the basic tenet we have advanced so far, namely that spirituality is rooted in a relationship with God. It refers to two things:

12. A remark during a lecture series on the history of Christian spirituality, delivered as part of the Summer School of 1995 at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia.

Firstly, it acts as a *qualification of the life-orientation* we refer to in our definition. If God is the fountainhead of spirituality and if spirituality develops from communion with Him, the essence of spirituality has to be found in an orientation towards God. In biblical terms believers should “offer [their] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (Rm 12:1); “seek first his kingdom” (Mt 6:33); “store up for [themselves] treasures in heaven” (Mt 6:20); “offer [themselves] to God” (Rm 6:13); “believe in the Lord Jesus” (Ac 16:31); “set [their] hearts on things above” (Col 3:1), etc. All these (and many other) different ways of speaking about the orientation of the believer’s life towards God express in different ways that a believer should live to honour God and to do his will - “to will one thing” (Kierkegaard 1938). The extent to which this is true of a Christian is the extent to which he or she will be able to nurture a cohesive and healthy spirituality.

This way of looking at spirituality takes up the basic drift of the definitions of Garner (2.1), Van Arkel (2.4), Holmes (2.5), Wainwright (2.6), Jones et al (2.6), and Richards (2.6).

Secondly, this part of the definition refers to *specific acts of worship*, such as public worship, prayer, practising spiritual disciplines and reading the Bible. If a person’s basic life-orientation is towards God, it becomes important for him or her to be in community with Him. It therefore follows that he or she will engage in acts of worship on a regular basis. Failure to do so would seriously challenge the claim to have a life-orientation towards God. Neglect of acts of worship would seriously jeopardise the priority a person might have given to God in his or her life at an earlier time.

This element of the definition approximates the definitions given by Garner (2.1), both definitions of Don Browning (2.2 and 2.3), and the definitions given in section 2.5, since all of them emphasise the importance of communion with God.

- ***“... and a continuous growth in understanding and ordering of the elements of our lives ...”***

A life-orientation that focuses on God is not something that leads to withdrawal from the world. It results in a different way of understanding the world, that leads to a different way of acting in it.

When we speak of *understanding* the elements of our lives, we refer to the interpretative framework we use in making sense of our existence. This interpretative framework emerges from experiences resulting from our life-

orientation. The fact that our lives are committed to God has a decisive impact on the way we interpret our context and our lives.

When we speak of *the elements of our lives* we intend it to be taken as widely as possible. This includes all of life: physical space, relationships, activities, worship¹³, work, play and so on. In the model presented in the next chapter, we have grouped the elements of our lives under four headings: those that deal with God as a phenomenon, with the believer himself, with others, and with the material world. Spirituality is a focus on God that leads to a refocusing of life and a transformation of all that touches the life of the individual. All the elements of life are reinterpreted through the reality of God. This leads to new ways of relating to oneself and to everything that relates to your life.

It is important to note that this *new understanding* and *re-ordering* of the elements of our lives is not something done once and for all. It is "*continuous growth*." Communion with God continuously sparks growth in perspective and leads to a further re-ordering of the elements of life. "*Semper reformanda*"¹⁴ can be taken as a rallying call for all who intentionally focus on God. There will never be full correspondence between our lives and the reality presented to us in worship, since we can never obtain full knowledge of God in this dispensation. What does remain, though, is to "press on to take hold of that" (Phlp 3:12), to approximate it as nearly as possible, to be committed to a process of "continuous growth".

This pervasive incompleteness should not be seen as a negative perspective on the Christian life. Indeed, it presents believers with a never-dulling challenge. As we have shown in our discussion of the difficulties in comprehending the transcendent dimension of spirituality, any understanding of God will always be partial. We will always be confronted with an overplus of meaning. There will always be a deeper understanding to be reached and an accompanying new transformation of our lives. Spiritual growth is a pilgrimage - to be "always on the road and under canvas, tenting like a pilgrim" (Johnson 1988:50). There is always more of God and more to life than we know of. Therein lies the joy and the challenge.

13. Note that we duplicate our previous point somewhat by mentioning worship as one of the elements of our lives, for we wish to emphasise that worship is also a concrete human act. We are called to worship by God, but we most often do this during regular events organised and run by human beings. When our perspective on God changes, this usually also leads to a re-ordering of and re-orientation towards our regulated acts of worship and devotion.

14. "Always reforming" - the motto of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

This part of the definition is deduced from the definitions given by Don Browning (the definition given in 2.3), De Jongh van Arkel (2.4), Holmes (2.5), and all the definitions cited in 2.6.

“... to a correspondence with the reality presented to us in worship.”

Communion with God presents us with a *new reality* that differs from the pseudo-reality we are indoctrinated with in the secular world. This new reality becomes the norm for understanding the elements of our lives and for restructuring our lives. It provides us with new perspectives to see the sin-warped world we live in for what it is. It strips away the illusions that we have learned to live by and creates awareness of the emptiness of existence according to the *schema* of this world. It provides us with new goals and a new life-style.

The essence of the new perspective on the material world presented to us in worship is the fact of God’s active presence in the world. The world of the Bible makes no sense *without* God. The world depicted in newspapers and the world offered to us in the social structures and institutions of secular society makes no sense *with* God. The perspective on God presented to us in worship, strips away the illusion of the modern world. It stimulates an awareness of God’s part in everyday events and in the larger scheme of things.

The implications of an awareness of God’s active participation in the world are endless. Therefore, worship is an extraordinarily subversive activity (Peterson 1989b:27-37; Brueggemann 1988:85-7). Every new encounter with God has the potential of leading to new perspectives on the world we live in and to a profound rearranging of the structures of the life of the faith community.

This new reality is *presented* to us. We cannot see it ourselves. It is the gift of God to open our eyes to see the glory of his kingdom and to understand its workings. It is revelation and not merely the fruit of research. This new reality is far more than an idealised extension of the reality we were born into. It is something completely and surprisingly new. It is the “firstfruits of the Spirit” (Rm 8:23), a first glimpse of the new Jerusalem (Rv 21), “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), the kingdom of God. Insight into this reality is not a complete vision we see all at once, but something we gain step by step as part of a life-long pilgrimage towards the light and the truth of God.

This perception of the reality of the kingdom of God is presented to us through *worship*. Worship is used here in the comprehensive sense, referring to all acts with which we focus on God. The truth of the kingdom of God becomes a reality to us when we speak to God and hear from Him in the acts of singing, prayer, listening to or reading the Word of God, and being directed by the body of Christ. Acts of

worship are, therefore, extremely important for us to maintain and grow in our sense of the reality of God's kingdom. Laxness in this regard will inevitably lead to a diminishing of our sense of the reality of the kingdom and result in difficulties of maintaining our orientation on God.

The essence of the last part of the definition of spirituality can be found in the definitions of spirituality given by Browning (the definition given under 2.3), Peterson (2.6), Robson (2.6) and that of Jones et al (2.6).

5. Summary

We started the chapter by pointing to the great divergence of definitions and descriptions of spirituality. We discussed the two factors responsible for this state of affairs.

The first factor is the fact that spirituality deals with the mystery of God. We alluded to the work of Rudolph Otto, Victor Turner, and Arthur Deikman to broaden our understanding of this fact.

The second factor is the particular cultural context of the late twentieth century. The late twentieth century is characterised by a growing turn away from enlightenment rationality. There is a resurgence of interest in spirituality in the wake of this epistemological revolution. The fact that this search for inner life has not led to an influx of seekers to the church is interpreted as an indictment for the way the church has come to be identified as part of the modernist world. We discussed the language problem the church is faced with - a problem of finding ways of articulating the gospel in the post-modern world in a way resonant with its transcendental aspects. We took up the suggestions of Brueggemann and Peterson that poetic language provides us with such a vehicle for meaning.

Our next two sections prepared the way for the construction of a working definition of spirituality. The first of the two organised a number of representative definitions of spirituality according to their main thrust. The following section gleaned the main components of spirituality from these definitions. We found three pertinent accents shared by most of the definitions, namely an emphasis on *knowledge of God as the source of life*, an emphasis on *embracing life in the material world*, and the concern to *discover the unity between everyday life and a relationship with God*.

Our final section proposes a working definition of spirituality. It breaks this definition up into its constitutive parts and discusses each of these parts, with reference to the particular definitions of spirituality from which they stem.

CHAPTER 2: THE MATERIAL DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY

Thus far we have identified communion with God as the source of spirituality. This does not exhaust our description of spirituality. Spirituality cannot be described simply as a collection of acts of worship. The very nature of God prohibits this truncated understanding of spirituality.¹ Spirituality has an important material dimension. Still, it is of the utmost importance to begin our thinking about spirituality with a recognition of God as the point of departure and source of Christian spirituality.

We can now proceed to a discussion of the material dimensions of spirituality.

1. Material factors that shape spirituality - preliminary remarks

Communion with God leads to a new understanding and a reordering of our lives in the material world. Yet, this does not mean that all Christians are shaped in the same mould or that the elements of our lives have no influence on the shape of our spirituality. Far from it. God takes full account of the nature of the material reality in which we find ourselves situated - of course, without glossing over sin. If we are prohibited to think about Christ in Docetistic terms we should not think about spirituality along those lines. The precise contours of spirituality are co-determined by the material reality of our existence. The interplay between worship and the various facets and components of the material world is an immensely complex process.

Our objective in this chapter will be to try to isolate at least some of the material factors that co-determine the shape of spirituality. We will not attempt to construct a comprehensive grid of these factors. Our goal is, simply, to establish the fact that our material context cannot be isolated from our spirituality. The material world provides the raw material with which our spirituality finds expression. On the other hand, it is also a major influence on the specific shape of spirituality.

One way of demonstrating this interrelatedness is through various typologies of spirituality. Behind each of the typologies we will discuss, is a specific set of factors that leads to the differentiation of different types of spirituality. Careful analysis of

1. To name but one aspect, the incarnation (as a revelatory action on God's part) reveals God as actively engaged and immersed in the concrete realities of the material world. This prohibits a kind of spirituality that refuses to take the material world with the same seriousness as God Himself does.

typologies of spirituality provides us with clues to the material factors we have to take into account when we speak about the shape and formation of spirituality.

The typologies we will refer to do not give us a comprehensive description of spirituality. Each of them tend to focus on spirituality from one specific perspective. A first glance at the various typologies might convince us that they have very different views on the subject of spirituality. This, however, should rather be seen as an indication of the complexity of the factors that impact spirituality. Spirituality is affected by the whole material context in which human life is lived. None of the typologies covers the full spectrum of human life. Taken together, though, these different theories can work together to give us a much more detailed and multifaceted account of the various material factors that influence spirituality.

The typologies we analysed have led us to distinguish four broad categories of elements that impact spirituality, namely *context*, *confessional tradition*, *narrative*, and *psychological make-up*. Some of the typologies cover a number of these categories. When this occurs, we will discuss them under more than one heading.

These four categories form a large part of the matrix² within which spirituality develops and functions in the material world. When we speak of the world, we do not perceive it as something apart from God, but as something that finds its existence only in the fact of God's existence and providence (Ac 17:25). Although the discussion that follows will view the four facets of material reality in isolation, it should not be misconstrued as positing the material world as something with an independent existence and a will of its own, set up against God. The interaction between spirituality and these four categories assumes that the structure of reality cannot be understood apart from the relation between all of creation and God.

Before we proceed with our discussion of the typologies, a disclaimer should first be made. It is not the intention of this section of the study to provide a full discussion of either the theories and typologies referred to or of the four categories of aspects of the material world. We will present only a very short summary of the various typologies. We will only make broad distinctions of the categories of factors from the material world, without trying to describe the dynamics of the processes of interaction between these factors and spirituality, or of the interplay between the categories themselves.

2. By "matrix" we mean "that by which, within which, and from which something takes form and develops." A matrix in this context typifies the personal, spiritual, temporal, social, and teleological structure in which spirituality is conceived, gestated, born, and sustained" (Johnson 1988:23).

This, in the mind of the researcher, would be a more than worthwhile enterprise, but it falls outside the scope of the present study. The aim of this section is to establish the fact that spirituality is codetermined by material factors and to give at least a preliminary idea of the kinds of factors involved. This allows for a view of spirituality that can take full account of the enormous impact of the material realities of life on spirituality, without budging from the insistence of the precedence of communion with God as the decisive factor.

One last observation needs to be made before proceeding. To point to material factors that have a decisive influence on the shape of spirituality does not “explain away” spirituality. This does not reduce it to merely a figment of human imagination, produced by the various stimuli described in the argument that follows. Claiming that these material factors explain *the shape* of spirituality does not mean that they explain *the fact* of spirituality. This argument can be adhered to without departing from our view of spirituality as a phenomenon that finds its source in God.

1.1 Context

“Spirituality is never politically neutral. Like theology itself, it is contextual. Christian discipleship and prayer occur within, and are shaped and modified by, sometimes crushed and defeated by, a specific social and political environment. The assumption that the life of the spirit is shaped and modified only by the interior struggles and tumults, the turmoil and upheaval of the inner world, arises from a false dichotomy between the dimensions of human existence” (Kenneth Leech 1987:9).

When we speak of “context”, we refer to the physical surroundings and the mixture of social, economic, and cultural conditions within which human life is conducted. All the typologies of spirituality that are discussed in this section, to some degree, base their distinctions on the way differences in context lead to different kinds of spirituality.

Society is more than a mere “neutral backcloth for the growth of the spirit” (Leech 1987:9). The inner world is not the exclusive domain of the religious quest. There is an unavoidable interaction between spirituality and the outer world. The inner world, also, is not unaffected by events in society. This fact becomes abundantly clear when one takes note of the way the various typologies of spirituality depict types of spirituality originating in diverging contextual conditions.

The problem is that this has not always been the opinion of even the majority of Christians. Gnostic tendencies that devalue the material world persist to this day and lead to a way of looking at growth in spirituality as something that is done in sharp separation and even animosity to material reality. In this way of thinking, spirituality is seen as an inner quest, something that should be unaffected by events in the external world. This view is commonly called “otherworldliness.”

There is, however, another way in which the same tendency towards otherworldliness can present itself in the church that emerges from a different root. One should not be too eager to ascribe all occurrences of otherworldliness to a Gnostic rejection of the material. Kenneth Leech (1987:10) states that we find two modern forms of otherworldliness that can exist side by side with an affirmation of the material world, without causing any tension.

He refers, *in the first place*, to the brand of otherworldliness found among the affluent, leisured classes, where spirituality is a valued part of the private sector of their lives. In this case otherworldliness leads to reinforce the socio-economical and political status quo.

In the second place, Leech also mentions the otherworldliness found in oppressed groups. This brand of otherworldliness provides a source of hope and vision for these groups and often becomes the seedbed for dissenting movements. It injects new vision and new possibilities into dejected and resigned people.

It should be obvious that the different contexts in which these groups find themselves have radically different effects on the way the otherworldly tendencies function in their respective spiritualities. Because of the difference in socio-economic context, their otherworldliness leads them to radically different lifestyles and behaviour and to radically different ways of viewing the world.

It is clear that both these forms of religious awareness, though presenting themselves as otherworldly, are heavily influenced by their social contexts and, in turn, release forces that impact the landscape of their context in quite dramatic ways: either by conserving or by rearranging the social structures. We further contend that neither of the groups would, typically, be aware of the decisive impact of their context on their religious views. They would tend to think that these views are pure and uncontaminated insights from Scripture, or some other source of divine revelation. They would, as a result, be particularly vulnerable to manipulation toward ideological goals.

The influence of context cannot be avoided, but a knowing relationship to these contextual influences would go far to safeguard Christians against this danger. Chapters 4 and 5 will discuss this issue in some detail. We can fully agree with Leech when he states:

“ If we are to maintain and deepen a spirituality which is Incarnational, redemptive, and oriented towards the Kingdom of God, we will need to reflect on the socio-political context in which that spirituality must be lived out” (Leech 1987:10).

This connection between spirituality and context is a necessary one if spirituality is to find visible form. Any attempt to dissolve this connection ends up in abstractions that have little to do with the kind of kingdom of God envisaged by Jesus of Nazareth. David Lonsdale (1987:82) points out the danger of the modern tendency to look for a kind of “generic spirituality” (a spirituality for all believers):

“It runs the risk of neglecting the fact that all spirituality is rooted in very particular experiences of God among individuals or groups in particular historical settings and that the historical context and experience influence the spirituality profoundly.”

He finds such generic attempts reductionist. He continues:

“Insofar as it is earthed in the particular experience of an individual or group, every spirituality is specific, and the search for a generic spirituality runs the risk of losing this vital root in experience and history.”

There is, then, a reciprocal relationship between spirituality and context. *On the one hand*, spirituality provides a lens for interpreting context and determines the way Christians relate to their context. *On the other hand*, context shapes faith. It may do this in an innocuous way, by determining the issues which faithful spirituality specifically addresses and the cultural colouring it receives. It can also do so in a heinous way, by tempting us towards infidelity, by blinding us to injustice, by usurping us with ideologies.

Jack Carroll (1988:44) refers to this as Christian congregations’ propensity to act like chameleons. He points out that this attribute of congregations is both a blessing and a frustration. It is a blessing, because it is this rootedness in concrete communities that enables them to minister faithfully to these communities. It is a frustration when Christian communities adapt so completely to their contexts that they become

virtually indistinguishable from them. In this case the transcendent power of the gospel is all but lost.

A number of typologies base their classification on the different ways that spirituality relates its context. We will discuss the typologies of Urban T Holmes, Geoffrey Wainwright (based on Richard Niebuhr's wellknown "Christ and culture" typology), James Fowler, and Douglas Walrath to demonstrate how context shapes spirituality.

1.1.1 Urban T Holmes

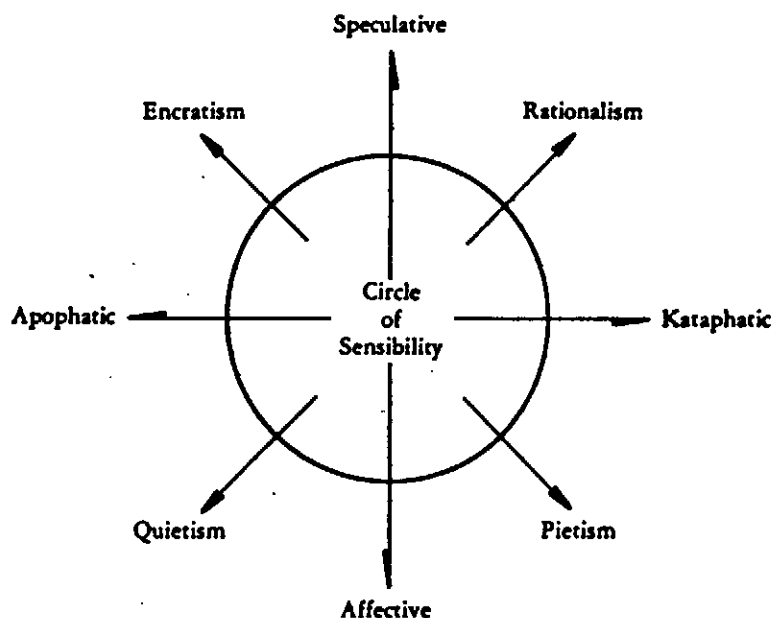
Urban T Holmes (1980) developed a typology of spirituality that has been reworked into a more popular format by Corinne Ware (1995). The typology juxtaposes two important factors for spirituality, namely the way a person (or group) goes about *knowing* and the way a person (or group) *conceptualises God* - i.e. an anthropological dimension and a theological dimension. He demonstrates a relationship between the various styles of devotional action and certain times in history, depending on the circumstances of these times.

The first (vertical) axis in his typology is called *the anthropological dimension* and has a speculative pole and an affective pole. *The speculative pole* represents a style of knowing that operates by emphasising logic and accumulated facts (Ware 1995:31). *The affective pole* represents a style of knowing that operates by emphasising instinct and intuitive feeling.

The anthropological dimension properly falls under the category of "psychological make-up" (1.4 of this chapter). Yet one could also make a point of showing that the specific practices of different faith traditions (1.2 of this chapter) are predisposed towards one or the other of the two poles.

The second (horizontal) axis is called *the "doctrine of God" dimension* and has an apophatic and kataphatic pole. *The apophatic pole* represents a way of conceptualising God in nonconcretised ways, as mystery (Ware 1995:32). *The kataphatic pole* represents a way of conceptualising God as revealed and knowable. This dimension is, more than anything else, a reflection of the confessional tradition of an individual.

Holmes explains his typology with the following diagram (Holmes 1980:4):



Holmes indicates that all four poles can be tied to certain historical conditions (Holmes 1980:8-11):

- *Kataphatic forms of spirituality* tend to surface during times of security and stability.
- *Apophatic forms of spirituality* correlate with periods where social institutions have collapsed. Insecurity and uncertainty characterise these times.
- *Speculative spirituality* is prevalent in times infused with a sense of power and political predictability.
- *Affective spirituality* occurs during times when there are fewer boundaries and roles.

Holmes points to certain periods where the four sets of conditions advanced in his theory led to the prevalence of certain types of spirituality. In the nature of all attempts to characterise certain periods in history under different umbrella-terms, he has to generalise quite a bit. All periods of history are usually a mix of all four types of conditions, depending on the locality and socio-economical group one finds oneself in. There are, however, dominant modes of consciousness in every era that accounts for various types of spirituality being dominant. Yet, there are always exceptions to the rule.

Holmes' model is more than useful in understanding the forms of spirituality in different *contexts*. Each of the periods of history he alludes to, brought about distinctly different physical contexts in which human existence was conducted. His analysis gives us an understanding of the way spirituality is affected by contextual factors such as the firmness of social institutions, a sense of power prevalent in one's social group, political predictability and the clarity of roles. These factors, though, are obviously dependent on one's socio-economical status and physical surroundings.

We would, therefore, contend that the types of spirituality in Holmes' model are rather the result of the prevailing contextual conditions of a certain era. We view these remarks as a refinement of Holmes' theory rather than a contending view.

The body of Holmes' book consists of brief pen-sketches of influential and representative figures in the history of Christian spirituality. These figures provide us with vivid demonstrations of the impact of these contextual factors on the shape of spirituality.

1.1.2 Geoffrey Wainwright/H Richard Niebuhr

Geoffrey Wainwright (1986:592-605) took the typology developed by H Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and culture* (1951), and applied it to spirituality. We will discuss Wainwright's typology, since Niebuhr did not describe spirituality as such, but intended to participate in a discussion of social ethics.

Wainwright's five types of spirituality (like Niebuhr's typology) describe five possible stances towards the cultural context of the day. This stance towards culture results in different kinds of spirituality. Wainwright discusses the choice for a particular stance *vis à vis* culture in terms of types of eschatology. For this reason we will also discuss his typology as one that describes spirituality in terms of confessional tradition.

In accordance with Niebuhr, Wainwright speaks of his 5 types of spirituality as spiritualities that present views of *Christ against culture*, *the Christ of culture*, *Christ above culture*, *Christ and culture in paradox*, and *Christ the transformer of culture*.

- *Christ against culture:*

This type regards the world as irredeemably warped by sin. The only possible stance towards such a world, from a Christian perspective, is to see it as a place to be "out of" (Wainwright 1986:592).

This withdrawal from the world can occur in various ways, depending on historical circumstance. In the earliest centuries of the church, it took the form of martyrdom. Spirituality did not view this merely as following Christ's example, but as sharing the sufferings of Christ and having a share in his glory (1 Pt 4:12-5:11). Martyrdom was seen as a "baptism of blood" and was popularly held to give immediate access to the heavenly feast.

After the advent of Constantine, bloody martyrdom (“red martyrdom”) gave way to the “white martyrdom” of monasticism (O’Laoghaire 1986:221). The growing monasticism of the fourth century should be interpreted as a protest against compromising heavenly citizenship through earthly entanglements (Wainwright 1986:594). Monasticism, at least in its communal form, did not isolate itself from the world permanently, but quickly returned to it to bear witness to an alternative way of conducting one’s life.

Protestantism has never had much use for monasticism, since it was viewed with suspicion as connected with works-righteousness. Yet we find world-renunciation present in various ways. Wainwright mentions the classical Lutheran vision where one’s vocation in the world was viewed as important, though not as salvific. This was in keeping with the radical doctrine of justification by faith alone (Wainwright 1986:594). Kierkegaard is mentioned as a typical representative of Protestant world-renunciation. Wainwright also points to the occurrence of *glossolalia* in Pentecostalism as a counter-cultural phenomenon, protesting against the rationalistic and materialistic language of late Western Christendom (Wainwright 1986:595).

- *The Christ of culture:*

This position represents the opposite extreme to the first type discussed. Together these two types form the extremes of the continuum on which the other three types also find themselves.

The ‘Christ of culture’ position is one of simplistic world-affirmation. The inherent danger of this position is that of absorption by political and social realities.

The premier example of this type of spirituality is found in Constantinian Christendom. At worst, Constantinian Christendom reduced Christ to a culture-hero, who served the sanctification of a value-system with roots in a soil quite alien and perhaps hostile to the character, teaching, work and destiny of Jesus (Wainwright 1986:596).

Another example of this type of spirituality is the spirituality of Puritan theocracy that attempts to sanctify society by means of legislation. The *Kulturprotestantismus* of Albrecht Ritschl is another example, especially in the degenerate form it slipped into in the *deutches Christentum* of Nazi-Germany. The latest form of this kind of spirituality that Wainwright points to is the spirituality found in contemporary liberalism that accommodates itself to various forms of modern consciousness. Harvey Cox is quoted as a clear example (Wainwright 1986:597).

- *Christ above culture:*

This view is on the Christ-of-culture side of the centre of the typology. It is also called the “synthetic” view (Wainwright 1986:598). It emphasises the positive elements of human nature and culture, but recognises that these elements need to be purified and lifted. Grace does not destroy nature and culture, but perfects them.

The spirituality corresponding with this view of the relationship between Christ and culture is strongly intellectual or aesthetic in character or both. Clement of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas may be mentioned as examples of this type of spirituality. Intellectual pursuits are deemed to be part of loving God with their whole mind, even when these pursuits are not directly theological. Knowledge that is gleaned in subservience to the wisdom whose beginning resides in the fear of the Lord, is, for this type of spirituality, part of the religious quest.

Icons can be cited as an instance of the aesthetic variation of this kind of spirituality. Here we find an appreciation of art that is not merely *l'art pour l'art*. The kind of art appreciated by this kind of spirituality is not the kind that has a protological feel to it, but rather that which nourishes an eschatological yearning; that which draws one towards a future completion.

- *Christ and culture in paradox:*

This type of spirituality, also designated as the dualist type, stands on the world-negating side of the centre, but not in the extreme way of the Christ-against-culture type (Wainwright 1986:599). This spirituality is one of paradoxes and conflict. Reference to the experience of Paul expressed in Rm 7:15-25 epitomises this experience of faith.

Martin Luther is a clear example of this kind of spirituality. Lutheran spirituality resonates to the polarities of law and gospel, wrath and grace, a God who reveals Himself in hiddenness and hides Himself in revelation, and the “two kingdoms” - the rule of God’s left hand (by which He judges or preserves humanity against the ravages of sin), and the rule of God’s right hand (by which He redeems and saves).

Two other examples of this kind of spirituality mentioned by Niebuhr and Wainwright are Dietrich Bonhoefer and Dag Hammarskjöld.

Another phenomenon that can be situated in this type of spirituality is the groups of Christians that put an emphasis on the view of 1 Cor 1:18-31 on “the folly of the cross”, those that see themselves as fools for Christ’s sake (1 Cor 4:10; 2 Cor 11-12). In this regard we may mention the holy fools of Russia and a group in modern Ireland called “Mary’s Followers of the Cross”. The followers of this last group go out of their way to do outrageously foolish acts with the aim of self-abasement and contemptibility.³ They see themselves as followers of Christ by being regarded as fools by the world.

- *Christ the transformer of culture:*

The spirituality consistent with this stance towards culture rests on the positive doctrine of creation and the incarnation, while admitting the radical corruption of humanity. This corruption is not viewed as intrinsic evil. It is, rather, a perversion of good. It needs conversion and rebirth, but this leads to real spiritual gains (Wainwright 1986:603).

This kind of spirituality maintains that faith and theology must be mystic as well as prophetic. It is strongly sacramental in character. This has the advantage of pointing us to a combination of passivity and activity that avoids the extremes of heaven-storming pursuit of the millennium and a quietist retreat from the world (Wainwright 1986:04).

Augustine and John Wesley are seen as representatives of this type of spirituality. In modern times, we can point to Gustavo Gutiérrez. Wainwright also mentions the mendicants and the militants, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, the Jesuits, the Salvation Army, and the kind of missionary spirituality that takes Christians to new lands for the gospel.

Wainwright’s typology is, clearly, concerned with context. Spirituality differs according to its posture towards culture. The five different postures lead to five divergent shapes for spirituality. Once again we find the impact of contextual factors to be important indicators for spirituality.

1.1.3 James Fowler

The stages of faith-theory of James Fowler presents us with a complex and nuanced approach to the various shapes that faith takes. It is clear that Fowler’s stages of faith cannot be ascribed to the shaping power of only one of our four major categories of

3. See (Wainwright 1986:601) for a more detailed account.

factors that impact spirituality. He describes the formation of faith as something that occurs in the interplay of faith with a number of factors: *traditions, group membership, the critical relations and experiences* arising from interaction in life (Fowler 1991a:17), and *development of certain new abilities*, such as the ability to think critically in Mythical-Literal faith (Fowler 1991a:18).

It seems, therefore, that we need to take account of Fowler's theory in our discussion of all four of the identified categories: We will discuss the effect of traditions as part of our category of *confessional tradition*, group membership as part of our category of *context*, and critical experiences arising from interaction in life as part of our category of *narrative*. The development of new abilities would fit neatly into our category of *psychological make-up*.

We will discuss Fowler's scheme in all four categories of factors we have identified as influencing spirituality. We will proceed to summarise his main thesis in this section and then, discuss what it demonstrates about the formative influence of context on spirituality. We will discuss the way his work demonstrates the formative influence of confessional tradition, narrative, and psychological structure under those headings.

Fowler's work is not without problems. Since the publication of *Stages of faith* in 1981, there has been various critiques of his work.⁴ Some of these will be mentioned in passing. In spite of the points of criticism that can be brought in against his theory of faith development, much can be learned from it. We are of the opinion that none of the critiques make the conclusions we aim to draw from his work invalid.

We will take account of Fowler's most important publications, starting with *Stages of faith*. There has been growth and refinement in the way he works with the stages of faith theory and how it is stated.⁵ *Weaving the new creation* (the latest statement of stages of faith-theory) shows signs of revisions in the light of some of the criticisms levelled at the theory. We will, therefore, prefer his latest work when such developments have occurred in his thought.

4. See Parks (1991) for a succinct summary of the critique of Fowler's earlier work emanating from various academic circles in the North-American context.

5. Fowler gives us an overview of the advances and refinements made in faith development theory in *Stages of faith and religious development* (1991b:27-33). Apart from the points Fowler himself mentions, there are also signs of refinements that flow from the critique mentioned by Parks (1991). This is especially evident with regards to critique from a socio-political (especially feminist) perspective. He presents a full discussion of Sally McFague's work in *Weaving a new creation* (1991a) and speaks of "the commonwealth of love and justice" in preference to "the kingdom of God".

The first thing we should take into account in understanding Fowler's theory is his definition of faith. He works with a conception of faith that has no specific religious dimension to it (Fowler 1981:4). Faith, as he defines it, is something that springs spontaneously from the need for "something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honour and respect that has the power to sustain our being" (Fowler 1981:5). Faith is used for the generic and universally human approach to meaning making (Fowler 1991a:118).

Stated differently: all human beings need a coherent "centre of value and power" (Fowler 1981:17) if they are to make sense of the world in which they live. They need a sense of value to be able to make sensible choices. They need a sense of power to have a sense of coherence and safety in a potentially threatening world. Therefore, they ascribe ultimate value and power to something - God, an ideology, material possessions, a nation, and so forth. Fowler calls this orientation towards a centre of value and power "faith."⁶ This is not something confined to the Christian faith, or even to religious persons as such. Even an atheist has this attachment to a centre (or centres) of value and power. Fowler defines faith as follows:

"Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose" (Fowler 1981:4).

Fowler's conception of faith deals with the "ultimate concern" in a person's life (Fowler 1981:4). This concern is a much more powerful matter than claimed belief in a creed or a set of doctrinal positions (Fowler 1981:4). It is the driving force behind all value-choices and gut reactions. This situates faith at the centre of human existence.

"Faith so understood is very serious business. It involves how we make our life wagers. It shapes the ways we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties" (Fowler 1981:5)

6. See Fowler (1981:16-23) for Fowler's discussion of the dynamics and way in which these centres of meaning and power are formed. An important aspect of centres of meaning and power is their triadic structure - they always include other persons holding the same views and values. They are derived from the perceived centres of value and power of significant others.

Fowler's definition of faith has clear similarities to our definition of spirituality as a life-orientation: When applied to the Christian faith, it refers to a life-shaping orientation towards God as *the* centre of value and power. When this orientation is operative it reshapes all of life and shows up as devotion to God. In Fowler's construction God also operates as the source of spirituality. It is clear that the various stages, with their different structures, are different because of the different ways of relating to God.

It is important to take cognisance of Fowler's theory about the origin of faith if we are to understand how he arrives at this understanding of faith. It will be explained in more detail later in this chapter. For now, it will suffice to point to the basic structure of this theory. Fowler contends that faith has its origin in a person's relationships, starting with the primary relationship with parents. Relationships have a covenantal pattern. They can be depicted as triangles. It is not only the parent and the baby involved in this covenantal pattern that evolves. The centre of value and power of the parent also comes into play, and is shared with the baby in all interactions. Later commitments to relationships share this pattern and always incorporate a "shared centre of value and power" (Fowler 1981:16-17).

Fowler speaks of two major kinds of growth of faith. *The first* is represented by his well-known seven-stage theory of faith development. This kind of faith has to do with the *structure* of faith. There is a development from the faith patterns of childhood to adult patterns of faith. It is a process of altering "the ways we understand, interpret, and commit to the images, meanings, and ethical imperatives of faith" (Fowler 1991a:91). It correlates with the processes of cognitive, moral and ego development in personal growth towards psychological maturity. This process does not take into account what the specific centre of value and power of a person is. It describes a developmental process that is universal, irrespective of the nature of a person's centre of value and power.

The second kind of growth in faith has to do with the *content* of faith. He refers to a more dramatic and radical recentering of faith than the development from stage to stage - i.e. conversion. Conversion is concerned with the focus or content of faith. It requires breaking attachments to false centres of value and power and giving up our efforts to be self-grounded persons. It leads to an attachment to God as source and centre of life (Fowler 1991a:93). We will give more attention to this kind of growth in faith in the section concerned with confessional tradition.

Before we launch into a description of the seven stages of faith, we need to clarify a few points about the overall dynamics of Fowler's seven stages.

Fowler's theory of stages of faith is not a strict typology in the same sense as the other typologies discussed in this section. It is a depiction of a series of seven formal, structurally definable stages in the ways persons compose and maintain their life-orienting systems of meaning and valuing. These stages are sequential and invariant and do not follow automatically. A person can arrest in a stage or a transition between stages, either for long periods of time or permanently. The various stages also interlace. One does not shed the carapace of one stage to enter the next. There is a carry-over from one stage to a next. Preceding stages are transcended, but also incorporated in new stages.

With these clarifications out of the way, we can now move on to a description of the stages of faith themselves. Fowler distinguishes seven stages of faith:⁷ They can be summarised as follows

- *A pre-stage: Primal faith*

This stage is normally encountered during infancy.⁸ This primitive form of faith is a prelanguage disposition. It takes shape as a total emotional orientation of trust that offsets mistrust. It is formed in the mutuality of the child's relationships with parents and others. Fowler views this amorphous disposition as a pre-stage of faith.

- *Stage 1: Intuitive-projective faith*

This stage is normally encountered during early childhood. Imagination comes strongly into play during this stage. It is not yet controlled by logical thinking. It is stimulated by stories, gestures, and symbols to combine with perception and feeling in creating long-lasting images that represent both the protective and threatening powers surrounding one's life.

This stage of faith corresponds with the awakening of moral emotions and standards in the second year of life. It also corresponds with the first awareness of taboos and the sacred. The first representations of God take conscious form. This process draws on the child's experiences of his or her parents and other adults to whom he or she

7. For detailed descriptions of the stages, see Fowler (1981:117-213; 1984:52-71; 1987:57-77; 1991a:17-8; 102-15). We refer to seven stages by also counting primal faith as a stage, though Fowler speaks about it as a kind of pre-stage and counts Intuitive-projective faith as the first true stage of faith.

8. We will indicate the age group where the type of faith referred to is most typical. This, however, does not mean that all persons in that age group can be expected to display the type of faith normally appropriate to it. As we have mentioned, some people arrest in earlier stages.

has grown emotionally attached in the first year of life. The God-image formed in this stage plays an important role in later life. When conversion-experiences occur in later life, these images have to be reworked in some important ways.

- *Stage 2: Mythical-literal faith*

This stage normally occurs during childhood and beyond. The newly-gained ability to think logically (concrete operational thinking) comes into play and helps the individual to order the world with categories of causality, space, and time. It also helps him or her to enter into the perspectives of others and to capture the meaning of life in stories.

The world of Mythic-Literal faith is a world of logical coherence and order. Fowler finds the attachment to a literal interpretation of the inerrancy of the Bible (the basic tenet of fundamentalism) to be a poignant instance of this kind of faith. It provides a foundation that fulfils both emotional and cognitive needs of persons in this stage (Fowler 1991a:107).

- *Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional faith*

This stage is normally experienced during adolescence and beyond. Formal operational thinking develops and opens the way for reliance upon abstract ideas and concepts for making sense of the world. This makes mutual perspective taking (seeing ourselves as others see us) possible. That, in turn, requires us to integrate diverse self-images (created by the many impressions of ourselves reflected in our various relationships) into one coherent identity.

These newly personal relations with others correlate with a hunger for a personal relation with God. People in this stage have a strong need to feel themselves to be known and loved by God in deep and comprehensive ways. Fowler relates case studies that show this aspect of Synthetic-Conventional faith to produce conversion experiences that lead into this kind of personal relationship with God (Fowler 1991a:108).

Parallel to the task of integrating the various images of the self as reflected in the eyes of others, is the task of forming a set of beliefs, values, and commitments that provide orientation and courage for living. This process feeds on role models that can capture and fund the imaginations of adolescents in this stage of faith with stories, ideals, belief systems, rituals, and disciplines. This process leads to a largely unreflected and

personal synthesis of beliefs and values that supports identity and unites a person in emotional solidarity with others.

- *Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective faith*

This stage is normally encountered during young adulthood and beyond. This stage is characterised by critically self-aware commitments in relationships and vocation. The way is opened for this by a variety of intra-personal processes: critical reflection upon one's personal beliefs and values, utilising third-person perspective-taking; understanding self and others as part of a social system; the internalisation of authority and the assumption of responsibility for making explicit choices of ideology and life-style.

Two important movements have to occur before all of this can happen:

The first movement is the move from reliance on an identity defined by roles and relationships to claiming what Fowler calls an "executive ego" (Fowler 1991a:109). He uses classical Greek theatre's use of masks to explain this. In classical Greek theatre one actor could employ several masks to play multiple parts. In much the same way a person involved in a number of different roles and relationships has to play multiple parts. This first movement is a movement towards identifying the "executive ego" - the "I" who "has" all these roles and relations and yet is not fully expressed by any one of them. The "individuative"- component of the name of this stage is deduced from this movement.

This claiming of the executive ego implies choosing a specific community one will belong to and excluding other options. This explains the either-or quality of commitments of this stage.

The second movement of this stage gives it the "reflective"-component of its name. It is a move from tacit (unconsidered, unexamined, uncritically approved) values and beliefs to explicit (consciously chosen and critically supported) commitments. Fowler calls this a kind of "de-mythologizing" (Fowler 1991a:109). This movement leads to faith being experienced as "owned" faith (Fowler 1991a:109). This movement gains precision in our understanding and articulation. At the same time, however, we lose some of our receptivity to the power of symbol, myth, and ritual to mediate our relatedness to the Holy.

- *Stage 5: Conjunctive faith*

This stage normally occurs during early mid-life and beyond. This stage is characterised by an embrace of polarities in one's life, an alertness to paradox, and the need for multiple interpretations of reality. This takes the shape of what Paul Ricoeur calls a "second, or willed naïveté" - a new appreciation for symbol and story, metaphor and myth (either from one's own traditions or from that of others) as vehicles for expressing truth. Having dealt with the propositional way of viewing traditions, one experiences a hunger for the deeper relationship to reality that the symbols of the tradition mediates. This translates into a receptive stance, that is conducive to learning from symbols and to contemplative approaches to Scripture.

- *Stage 6: Universalising faith*

This stage is normally encountered during mid-life and beyond. This stage moves beyond paradox and polarities to oneness with God (or "the power of being", when Fowler speaks in universal terms). The vision and commitments typical of this stage enable a passionate, yet detached spending of the self in love.

Fowler understands this stage of faith as the completion of a process of decentering from self that begins in childhood with the Mythic-Literal stage. Perspective taking starts in the Mythic-literal stage and enables us to begin seeing things from other people's points of view. As a person grows through the stages, we find a widening of this taking of others' perspectives. In the Universalising stage this process is carried to completion. In this stage a person can see and value *through* God rather than from self. This does not mean that the self is not valued. It is included in God's loving and valuing of all creation. The self, though, is no longer the centre from which one's valuing is done. It is now conducted from an identification with God.

People in this stage are devoted to overcoming division, oppression, and violence. Their lives are anticipatory responses to an inbreaking of the coming kingdom of God, or the commonwealth of love and justice. They live as though God's commonwealth of love and justice were already among us and, in so doing, they create "zones of liberation" (Fowler 1991a:115) for the rest of us.

The most obvious point where the connection between spirituality and context is demonstrated in Fowler's theory is in his theory of covenantal triangulation as the source of shared centres of value and power (Fowler 1981:16-17). Their very indication as *shared* centres of value and power points to their origin in a social context. Therefore we can safely state that this decisive element for the contents of faith is, in the words of Peter Berger, a social construct. It is derived from those

caring adults who were involved in relationships with the individual during his or her first years.

This impact of the social context on spirituality is extended in Fowler's discussion of the Synthetic-conventional stage (stage 3), where mutual interpersonal perspective taking has a decisive influence on the shape of faith (Fowler 1991:107-8). The possibility of seeing oneself reflected in others' perceptions of oneself initiates the conscious struggle for identity. This is described by Fowler as a struggle to integrate the multiple reflections of the self brought about by a whole range of different persons in one's social context, mirroring various views of one's self (Fowler 1991:108). Once again we find the social context to be a decisive formative influence of the shape of spirituality.

1.1.4 Douglas Alan Walrath

In Walrath's book, *Frameworks* (1987), he discusses the way our frameworks (socially shaped world-views) shape our perception of reality. He demonstrates the powerful influence of these social constructions, and then goes on to point out three clearly discernible frameworks in the context of the United States.

These three frameworks are prevalent in certain cohorts.⁹ They have their origin in experiences in late childhood and early adolescence, after the people in these cohorts psychologically "leave home" (Walrath 1987:37). In this stage of life individuals turn to peers and certain significant others for information about the larger social and cultural world. Certain dramatic events are experienced as "social traumas" in these years and imprint themselves on the minds of these people and shape the way they view the world (Walrath 1987:37). Cohorts interpret the world "through their own times" (Walrath 1987:36). This leads to a strong bonding with others of our own generation, who have had the same experiences.

The first framework he discerns is that of the *Strivers*.¹⁰ They are the group that went through the critical age of 13-22 during the turbulent years of 1919-1949, years dominated by war and depression. Therefore they have a strong attraction towards stability. They are defenders of the basic institutions of life. They view life as a series of black and white choices. The core of life, for them, is duties and obligations.

9. Cohorts are defined as "contemporaries who share experiences that uniquely and fundamentally shape them" (Walrath 1987:35).

10. The summary of the three frameworks that follow is taken from Walrath (1987:38-49; 74-83).

The second framework is that of the *Challengers*. They are the group that were in the critical age of 13-22 in the years of economic growth and stability, from 1950-1972. This period began with victory, dreams of general affluence, and optimism, but concluded with economic and social retreat and, for many, general disillusionment. Therefore, change and fluidity of social structures are normal for them. They are critical towards institutions and are out to correct social ills. They view life as filled with almost limitless options. Where Strivers focus on duties, they focus on personal needs, wants and interests.

The third framework is that of the *Calculators*. They are the group that went through the critical age of 13-22 in the uncertain times from 1973 onwards. During these years it seemed that only those who made wise choices thrived. Therefore they view erosion of social structures as normal. They tend to choose and pursue what they deem to be the best possibilities in life. Where Strivers tend to see life in terms of duties, they view life in terms of consequences. Choices made today will affect what happens in future. Choices made in the present can severely curtail life if they are not made with wisdom. Where Strivers focus on duties, they tend to deal with possibilities. "Living, for them, is the art of the possible" (Walrath 1987:83).

If we tend to interpret the world "through our own times", we also tend to believe "through our own times" (Walrath 1987:69). Their patterns for believing are consistent with their approach to living (Walrath 1987:83-4).

Strivers take God for granted and view Him as essential.¹¹ They view the church as essential and as a stabilising force. Their view of the Christian life is dominated by concern for morality. They expect to support the church and to be cared for by the church. They understand it to be their duty to be loyal to the church. The important thing for them is to belong to a church.

Challengers define God personally and view Him as optional. For them, the church is marginal and essentially a social institute. Their view of Christian life is dominated by a concern for ethics. They expect the church to support their needs and causes. They expect to find meaning for life in church. The important thing for a church member, to their minds, lies in his or her actions.

Calculators view God as essential for believers only. They have a wide variety of roles they expect the church to play, depending on the issues directly affecting them. Their view of Christian life is dominated by concerns for piety. They expect the

11. The summary of the spirituality of the three frameworks that follow is taken from Walrath (1987:83-7).

church to nurture and support them, and to provide resources for life. The church provides them with a way to survive.

The precise contours of Walrath's typology is not important for us. Both the strength and the limits of his typology lies in the fact that it is totally bound to the socio-political context of the United States. The situation in South Africa is, obviously, vastly different. One would also be able to identify Strivers, Challengers and Calculators, but we would unearth them in different time- and space-bound cohorts. In addition, the complexity of our socio-political past made for very different experiences of reality by persons living in the same time and in the same towns or cities.

What Walrath does provide is a valuable demonstration of the way spirituality is impacted by contextual factors. Walrath's analysis gives us clear connections between specific socio-cultural conditions and distinct types of spirituality. His theory makes it clear that we cannot view spirituality apart from the formative influence of contextual factors - specifically, the factors prevalent in the formative years of individuals and cohorts.

1.2 Confessional tradition

Our term, "confessional tradition", refers to the cumulative tradition of a religion or denomination that may be constituted by texts, symbols, oral traditions, music, dance, ethical teachings, theologies, creeds, rites, liturgies, architecture, the typical view of God, style of worship, style of leadership, formative history, and many other elements that convey meaning. All of this tend to form a coherent whole, so that one element of the tradition normally leads the others.

Richard Osmer (1992:22-7; 39-67), shows teaching for beliefs to be an important aspect of the church's endeavour to nurture faith. Believers' view of God influences the way they relate to Him (Osmer 1992:25). Therefore it is important that their concept of God be shaped by the definitive narratives found in the Bible and their description of God's faithful actions in history (Osmer 1992:26).

In addition, beliefs should also be formed in dialogue with the historic teachings of the church (Osmer 1992:26). This "collective wisdom of the church" (Osmer 1992:26) is found in the denomination's confessions, creeds, catechisms and doctrinal statements. They serve as important secondary guides to the meaning of the biblical narratives and as summaries of their basic beliefs.

So it is logical that many descriptions of spirituality view it from the perspective of the confessional tradition that shapes it, and specifically in terms of the doctrinal aspect of this tradition.

A number of typologies of spirituality use different elements of confessional traditions as the basis of their classification. We will discuss the typologies of Holmes, Johnson and Wainwright to demonstrate some of the ways in which confessional tradition shapes spirituality.

1.2.1 Urban T Holmes

Apart from describing the shape of spirituality as a reaction to historical circumstances, Urban Holmes' apohatic-kataphatic scale can also describe a confessional bias. It does not work with the full spectrum of what we understand as the confessional tradition, but only with the way in which we understand God. Holmes' apohatic-kataphatic scale plots the understanding of God on the two poles of viewing God as mystery (transcendent) and God as revealed (immanent). The apophatic side of the scale views God by way of emptying techniques of meditation, while the kataphatic side of the scale views God by way of imaginal techniques of meditation (Holmes 1980:4). We may safely assume that the techniques of meditation (or, for that matter, of worship) are heavily determined by the particular faith tradition one finds oneself in.

Certain confessional traditions (the Reformed tradition is a good example) have a definite leaning towards the *kataphatic*.¹² God is spoken of primarily in terms of his immanence and He is mainly experienced as revealed. These confessional traditions favour a style of worship that leans heavily towards exposition of the Bible in the sermon and in hymns heavily loaded with firm statements about God. Their style of prayer is highly verbal and concrete and their ways of preserving their tradition is concentrated around concepts and logical constructions in catechisms and theology.

Other traditions (the Orthodox churches can be cited as an example) can be placed on the *apophatic* pole. Their tradition is carried in liturgies and symbols. Their style of worship is characterised by rituals and silence with a pensive style of singing. These churches encourage contemplative styles of worship.

These characteristics of a specific confessional tradition may have had their origin in a certain historical period, but tend to get institutionalised and carried over to new generations in different historical settings. The specific tie with a historical setting is

12. See Holmes' discussion of the spirituality of John Calvin (Holmes 1980:127-8).

lost and the type of spirituality is rather seen in conjunction with the confessional tradition or a specific denomination.¹³ Followers of a specific confessional tradition no longer prefer an apophatic or kataphatic style of worship because of historical circumstances. They now do so on the strength of their denomination's endorsement of these views and because of their inculturation into the specific style of worship.

1.2.2 Ben Johnson

Ben Johnson (1988:68-73) works with a typology of spirituality that analyses spirituality in terms of six definitive questions:

“Where is this form of piety to be found - what is its setting? How is God mediated to human consciousness? How does this form of piety manifest itself in personal experience? What practices reinforce it? What type of personality would find it appropriate? What are its strengths and weaknesses?” (Johnson 1988:68)

The first four questions all pertain largely to confessional tradition. *The first question* is answered by pointing to denominational groups, broader traditions (such as the puritan or revivalist tradition or holiness movements) or strong interest groups with their own distinct tradition (such as peace or feminist groups). *The second question* points to the prescribed ways God is seen to be mediated by the tradition or movement. *The third and fourth questions* point to typifying expressions of faith and practices that are carried in the tradition of the pertinent group and taken over by individuals.

The typology offered by Johnson clearly demonstrates that the various confessional traditions conserved by groups can serve us in making distinctions for a heuristic typology of spirituality. His typology is represented in the illustration on the next page (Johnson 1988:69).

The types of spirituality he identifies may be described as follows:

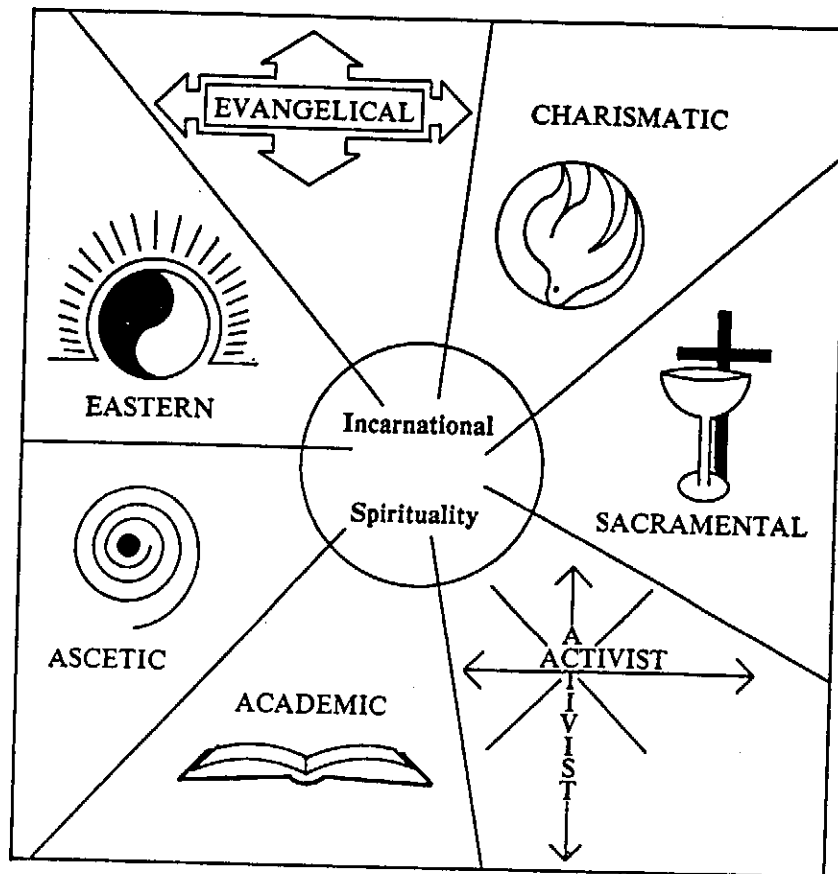
- *Evangelical piety:*

Evangelical piety (Johnson 1988:68-9) is found in conservative churches with a puritan or revivalist tradition. God is primarily mediated by the Word of God. It manifests itself in personal witness to others, using speech punctuated with references

13. See Tidball (1983:123-136) for a description of how historically determined religious experiences are institutionalised into confessional traditions.

to God and the Holy Spirit, with an aim towards the conversion or edification of the hearer.

The practices that reinforce this kind of spirituality are reading of the Scriptures, understanding the authoritative message, discerning the will of God, and doing the will of God. Evangelical spirituality develops in the closet, through daily disciplines of prayer and Bible-reading, including meditation of the Bible, fasting, and days of prayer.



- *Charismatic piety:*

Charismatic piety (Johnson 1988:69-70) is encountered primarily in Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and nondenominational congregations. It is also scattered throughout mainline denominations.

God is experienced in the immediate presence of the Spirit. This is mediated by the Bible, and also by study and sharing groups, praise services, and charismatic worship.

Charismatic spirituality manifests itself by its emphasis on the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's present activity in the body of Christ.

The practices typical of this kind of spirituality include demonstrations of the gifts of the Spirit and insider ways of speaking (for example, "Praise the Lord", "Hallelujah", "Thank you, Jesus", and so forth). Like evangelicals, they are dedicated to witnessing - not only to the lost, but also to other Christians who have not had the charismatic experience. They also study the Word and pray. They practice a prayer language known as "speaking in tongues".

- *Sacramental piety:*

Sacramental piety (Johnson 1988:70-1) is observed predominantly among Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Episcopalians. The presence of God is mediated through the sacraments and liturgy. Liturgical prayers and the celebrations of the church year also play an important role. It manifests itself in an emphasis on a sacramental life. Nature and history are viewed sacramentally as spheres where God's presence is mediated and God's plans are unfolded.

The practices of sacramental spirituality centre around worship, and especially public worship. The prayer book, private bidding prayer, and spiritual reading also play an important role.

- *Activist piety:*

Activist piety (Johnson 1988:71) is found predominantly in the left wing of mainline denominations and in religious issue-oriented groups. The church does not mediate God predominantly, but He is encountered in social service and political action. He is understood to be actively involved with the world, and the activist meets Him by actively participating in his providence. God is met in the historical arena and in the present moment. Activist piety manifests itself in social action, in the public sphere.

The practices found in this type of spirituality centre around issues, serving on a task force, challenging the establishment, and protesting the status quo. The activist draws strength from others involved in the same mission.

- *Academic piety:*

Academic piety (Johnson 1988:72) is can be perceived among scholars, theologians, teachers, and studious clergy. The encounter with God is mediated through rational

thought. God is loved with the whole mind. It manifests itself in a lifestyle of study, careful analysis of issues, reflection, and teaching. In academic piety the relationship with God is expressed through the mind.

The practices of this spirituality include reading, studious reflection, occasional papers, discussion of insights with a discerning mind, and the writing of books.

- *Ascetic piety:*

Ascetic piety (Johnson 1988:70) occurs among priests and nuns in religious orders. Some lay people may also ascribe to the disciplines and practices of ascetic spirituality. In its Protestant form it appears in world-denying holiness movements. God is mediated by the daily office, spiritual literature, and mental prayer. It manifests itself in the contemplative life and in self-denial as an expression of devotion to God. Simplicity is the key to the monastic life and it is exemplified in the threefold vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Practices of this kind of spirituality includes prayer, rest and work.

- *Eastern piety:*

Ben Johnson's discussion of Eastern piety lies outside the scope of this study and will, for this reason not be dealt with.

In Ben Johnson's diagram all the lines of the various types of piety lead into incarnational spirituality, which forms the centre of the wheel of differing types of spirituality. He defines this as an approach to piety "that draws upon each of the other types and combining them into a new creative whole" (Johnson 1988:74). It combines a concern for communal worship with times of private worship. It believes that God comes to an individual through external realities (such as history, the Bible and Christian tradition) as well as through the inner world of intuition and imagination. It combines the active and the contemplative life. It seeks to balance extroversion and introversion, sensation and intuition, thinking and feeling.

Incarnational spirituality recognises the importance of the biblical norms of an *evangelical piety*, the freedom of the Spirit to act directly on human consciousness of *charismatic piety*, the sacramental life and ordering of life in a sacred way of *sacramental piety*, the active engagement of real needs and issues in society of

activist piety, the development of the intellect of *academic piety*, and the need for periodic retreat for personal denial and self-examination as demonstrated in *ascetic piety* (Johnson 1988:74-5). He describes this style of spirituality as “holistic, balanced, corporate, and personal” (Johnson 1988:75).

Johnson’s typology is not a major component of his book, *Pastoral Spirituality*. Therefore, he does not elaborate much on the various types of spirituality. He does, however, provide us with enough to gain some insight about the interaction between confessional tradition and spirituality.

Ben Johnson does not seek to identify the causes of the various types of spirituality, but simply describes how the distinctive types of spirituality he identifies, answer the five questions. Yet our argument at the beginning of this section (that typologies uncover causal connections) seems to hold for this typology. His description of the various types of spirituality demonstrate clear connections with various confessional traditions. Each one of them displays distinctive characteristics that can be deduced from the tradition in which they are typically found.

Johnson’s typology does point to some types of spirituality that transcend denominational boundaries. The major formative influence, in these cases, might not be denomination, in some cases, but rather a movement or interest-group that spans denominational boundaries. An especially clear instance of this is Academic piety, that finds its energy in a unique approach to the Christian tradition and in a pool of books and other publications. The specific interests of this group is not bound to a particular denomination, but occurs in cross-sections of a number of denominations. The same might be said of Activist and Charismatic piety.

1.2.3 Geoffrey Wainwright

In accordance with Richard Niebuhr, Wainwright speaks of 5 types of spirituality: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. He demonstrates that each of these stances towards culture corresponds to a particular view of eschatology.

- *Christ against culture:*

The kind of eschatology that accompanies this type of spirituality is “an eschatology of the ‘not yet,’ perhaps even an eschatology of the ‘never’” (Wainwright 1986:595). This is so, since the world seems to be beyond redemption from this perspective. As a corollary of this perception of the world, we often find a kind of “over-realised”

eschatology, where extracted believers are already fully the kingdom of God (Wainwright 1986:595). The dualism incipient in this brand of eschatology actually leads to two distinct types of eschatology - one for the evil and irreparably warped world and one for the pure followers of Christ. Wainwright points to the so-called “sleepless ones” (the group of monks dedicating themselves to a full-time psalmodic vigil) and the “enthusiasts” of the Reformers’ days as examples of this kind of eschatology.

- *The Christ of culture:*

This kind of spirituality suffers from the fatal flaw of a “secularised eschatology”, which is, in fact, no eschatology at all. It is a contradiction in terms to speak of an eschatology that sets its own constitutive realisation entirely within the present *saeculum* (Wainwright 1986:597).

This curious twist is the result of the fact that the Christ-of-culture position has an insufficient view of the fallenness of creation. If there was no fall, there is also no need for redemption. Therefore, this spirituality remains at the stage of protology, at the level of the “ordinances of creation.”

Puritanism presents us with a most curious instance of this kind of eschatology. The rigid predestination found in Puritanism swallows up eschatology in protology and lands it in the company of some unlikely companions in the “Christ of culture”-fold.

- *Christ above culture:*

This type of spirituality finds a genuinely eschatological support in the Christ event - in particular in the incarnation and in the resurrection of Christ. The incarnation and resurrection are interpreted as having a universal meaning: These events infused the whole human race with divine life. This view of the “sanatation” (healing) of the whole body of humanity leads inevitably to a favouring of the “already now” over the “not yet” (Wainwright 1986:598).

- *Christ and culture in paradox:*

The greatest strength of this kind of spirituality is that it strikes the apocalyptic note of conflict, which a scriptural eschatology will never lack. To Wainwright’s mind, though, the distinctions and paradoxes are drawn a bit too sharp. There are aspects of the “already now” that will be consummated in the “not yet” (Wainwright 1986:602).

- *Christ the transformer of culture:*

The eschatology of this type of spirituality confirms the inherent corruption of humanity. Corruption, however, is understood as the perversion of good and not as intrinsic evil. Conversion and rebirth are essential. This is not mere purification (as the Christ-above-culture position would have it), but not as severe as replacement, which is the view of the Christ-and-culture-in-paradox position (Wainwright 1986:603).

When the pattern of death and resurrection displayed by the incarnate Christ is repeated in history by a spirituality of dying to sin and living to God through Christ, we have at least the beginning of a transformation of human life and culture. The *simul justus et peccator* cannot be maintained as a strict and irresolvable paradox. The consummation will eternalise the real spiritual gains inaugurated in the present life (Wainwright 1986:603).

Wainwright's use of Niebuhr's typology demonstrates how a specific element of confessional tradition (eschatology) leads to different types of spirituality. He demonstrates convincingly that each of Niebuhr's five possible stances of the church towards culture are rooted in a specific type of eschatology. Wainwright helps us to understand that not only confessional traditions as a whole, but even individual elements of confessional traditions, have a decisive impact on the shape of spiritual life.

1.2.4 James Fowler

Fowler describes his stages of faith as a universal human phenomenon, not confined to the Christian faith. He offers it as a scheme applicable to any way of making meaning, be it Christian, secular, Buddhist, even secular humanism (Fowler 1991:99). Human beings have to take some centre of value and power for their own if they are to make sense of the world they live in. The process of making meaning with the help of some centre of value and power is called "faith" by Fowler, irrespective of what that centre of value and power is. It almost seems as if he is saying that it does not really matter *what* you believe in; what matters is *that* you believe. In dogmatic terms: it seems as if he is saying that the *fides quae* (*what* we believe) is of little consequence if the *fides qua* (*that* we believe) can be asserted.

This causes considerable uneasiness among Christians, who are used to reserve talk of “faith” for faith in the Christian God. This universalising way of speaking about faith, therefore, is one of the main points on which Fowler’s work is criticised (Parks 1991:110). In Protestant circles, especially, the suspicion is often aired that faith development theory takes too little account of sin and the Fall when it claims faith as an inherent human potential (Parks 1991:110). It is also seen as a potentially relativizing view of faith.

The last point of critique is important for our discussion of the impact of confessional tradition on spirituality. At first glance it seems as if Fowler is saying that the specifics of the centre of value and power do not make much of a difference. All centres of value and power would lead to a person going through the same stages of faith in the same way. If that were true, we would not learn anything from his theory about the relationship between confessional tradition and spirituality.

Nevertheless, this is a vast simplification of what Fowler intends to say. He speaks of faith in two ways (Fowler 1991:118). When he speaks about the generic and inclusively human approach to meaning making, he generally uses the term “faith”. When he seeks to speak about life “in Christ” and in active loyalty to God, he uses the term “vocation”. Vocation, in Fowler’s view, is “to find a purpose for one’s life that is part of the purposes of God” (Fowler 1991:120).

Added to this, we also have to keep in mind that he speaks about growth and change in Christian faith in two ways (Fowler 1991:91-5). *The first way* is connected to the stages theory he propounds. It refers to the process of gradual maturation and change of faith that takes place in conjunction with the seasons in an individual’s life cycle. This process is one where we alter the ways we understand, interpret and commit to images, meanings, and ethical imperatives of faith. It is, therefore not directly influenced and formed by the confessional tradition, but is also not unattached from it.

The second way in which he speaks about growth and change in Christian faith refers to a more dramatic and radical process of recentering our lives, a process of conversion, leading to the transformation and intensification of faith. This process is a deepening and intensification of our commitment to Christ. The “deep emotions, the deep virtues or strengths that make it possible for us to be disciples of Christ” (Fowler 1991:92-3), have their source in this kind of growth. The process requires breaking with false centres of value and an attachment of our souls to God alone. This way of speaking about growth and change in Christian faith deals extensively

with the specific centre of value and power we pledge allegiance to. The *fides quae* finds its place in Fowler's theory at this point.

Fowler views faith development as "a dance that has these twin movements" (Fowler 1991:94). In Christian faith, progression from one stage of faith to the other cannot be imagined without progression in commitment to God. There is an inevitable interplay between these two ways of growth in faith. The goal of life is not to reach the stage of Universalising faith, but to open yourself, as radically as possible - within the structures of your present stage - to "synergy with the Spirit" (Fowler 1984:75). The normative element in Fowler's theory is not growth through the various stages, but growth towards God as one's ultimate centre of value and power.

Fowler offers no explicit discussion of the impact of various confessional traditions on faith. He does, however, provide us with prolonged probes into the way our metaphors for and views of God impact our faith.¹⁴ If God is viewed as the true centre of value and power for Christian faith, it stands to reason that anything that affects our views of God would have a huge influence on spirituality.

The various confessional traditions within the Christian faith can thus be seen as having an enormous impact on the spirituality of their adherents by funding their imagination with metaphors for God. Fowler describes religious faith as "the personal appropriation of relationship to God by means of a religious tradition" (Fowler 1991:100). Religious traditions act as ways of giving forms and patterns for the shaping of faith (Fowler 1991:99-100).

Each confessional tradition has its particular way of viewing God and his relation to his followers. There is certainly much more that the various confessional traditions hold in common than points of difference, but there are also unique facets to each one's view of God. Fowler's theory of the importance of shared centres of value and power helps us towards an understanding of the way confessional traditions contribute towards the specific shape of the spirituality of their adherents. If faith is to centre more on God, it needs to be informed about God. This occurs through encounters with and reworking of the confessional tradition we share with a specific faith community.

In conclusion we feel compelled to draw one further consequence of the interplay between spiritual growth and confessional tradition. Certain confessional traditions are more at home with certain stages of faith. They would tend to idealise the forms

14. We are referring to his discussion of our metaphors for God, centred around the work of Sallie McFague (Fowler 1991:56-87).

of spirituality characteristic of such a stage. Therefore they attempt to develop persons towards this stage and then to freeze them at this point in their spiritual journey.

Many adherents of these confessional traditions comply with the pressure exerted on them. Many, however, grow past these stages. They discover themselves feeling less and less at home in their congregations and often become more and more confined to the fringes of the group. They either move on to other confessional traditions, often with considerable guilt, or opt out altogether. These processes that become clear with the help of Fowler's grid need to be taken into account in congregational practice.

1.3 Narrative

“To be a person is to have a story” (William Bausch 1984:171).

“... [A]uthentic spirituality, i.e., genuine communication with God, is never removed from the seasons, turns, and crises of life. ... Relationship with God is not immune to the surprises and costs of our daily life” (Walter Brueggemann 1984:168).

Human beings make sense of their lives by way of narratives. We mean this to be true of two kinds of narratives. *In the first place* we refer to the personal narratives individuals construct according to their centres of value and power. They construct this narrative by the process of selecting certain events of their lives and ordering them in a coherent plot. The selection and the ordering is determined by their interpretative keys. Interpretative keys are “guiding events, incidents, and relationships” (Osmer 1992:114). Interpreting our lives with the help of these interpretative keys invest them with the meaning imparted by the particular keys.¹⁵ Change in personal identity occurs primarily when important alterations take place in these interpretative keys (Osmer 1992:115). This brings us to the second way we speak of narratives.

In the second place we speak of narratives as the paradigmatic narratives from outside our direct experience that shape our personal narratives by providing new and more adequate interpretative keys. For Christians the Biblical narrative provides such a paradigmatic narrative (Osmer 1992:116).

15. Osmer provides the lucid instance of the way the meaning of Jesus' life was interpreted by the faith community with the interpretive key of his passion.

When our personal narratives are reinterpreted by the Biblical narrative, the Biblical narrative becomes peculiarly interwoven with our own narrative. The Biblical narrative is, in fact, experienced as a narrative that expresses our particular identity. At the same time, our personal narrative is newly perceived as a God-story, a narrative in which God is a primary actor.

Walter Brueggemann's *The message of the Psalms* (1984), gives us clear insight into the manner in which important guiding events of a person's or a community's life shape spirituality. He divides the Psalms into three distinct groups, namely *psalms of orientation*, *psalms of disorientation*, and *psalms of new orientation*, according to the narrative that finds expression in the psalms.

Psalms of orientation are expressions of a narrative where coherency and order is the guiding metaphor. The formative experiences in these pray-ers' lives are likely to be experiences articulating stability and coherence.

Psalms of disorientation find their source in a different kind of narrative. They occur when coherency is shattered and life becomes threatened. They express bewilderment, pain and anger. They are rooted in "the anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death" (Brueggemann 1984:19).

Psalms of new orientation have their genesis in the surprising advent of hope, grace and salvation at a juncture where disaster was expected. They express a new coherency and a sense of the goodness of God. This, however, is not the same as the equilibrium of the Psalms of orientation, for they have their roots in a different narrative. When they conclude that God is good, we are dealing with a hard won verdict.

Brueggemann never refers to these three types of Psalms as expressions of various types of spirituality, but the divergences are quite clear. Our discussion of this interpretative framework in Chapters 4 and 5 will make it clear that they represent three widely divergent angles of approach to both God and life. In terms of our working definition of spirituality, they represent different approaches to worship and different arrangements and interpretations of the elements of life. We find them, therefore, to provide us with a particularly clear instance of different contextual factors leading to different narratives that, in turn, lead to divergence in spirituality.

We could argue that these distinctions are wholly the result of contextual factors and not of narratives. There is, of course, a very close connection between personal narratives and contextual factors. Yet, this connection is far from mechanical. It

seems that the interpretative keys of two persons can lead them towards totally different interpretations of the same subject-matter in their life narratives. In that case, their interpretations would reflect *their interpretative keys* and the centre of meaning behind these keys rather than the concrete contextual factors they have had to deal with. Brueggemann's scheme helps us to understand the way this takes concrete shape when we realise that both disorientation and new orientation can be found in the same external circumstances. Psalms of new orientation might be instances of the "evangelical nevertheless" in the midst of duress (Brueggemann 1984:51). The orientation and, concomitantly, the resulting spirituality seems to be more the result of *the interpretation* of the circumstances of one's life than the immediate result of the circumstances themselves. The way we tell our stories (to ourselves in the first place) will co-determine whether we find ourselves in disorientation or in new orientation.

A number of typologies of spirituality use the way various types of personal stories interact with spirituality as the basis of their classification. We will discuss the typologies of Hopewell and Fowler to demonstrate some of the ways in which narrative shapes spirituality.

1.3.1 James Hopewell

James Hopewell (1987) uses a literary typology to describe congregational identity in terms of narratives. His extensive field work led him to the conclusion that members of Christian congregations tend to express their identity in narrative form and not as abstract propositions. These narratives present structural logic to the coherent systems that are congregations (Hopewell 1987:xii). The narratives that express congregational identity have two dimensions, namely *world-views*¹⁶ and *ethos*¹⁷. The corporate world-views of congregations form the *setting* for their narratives, while the ethos of a particular congregation is bound to the *character* of the narrative. World-view and ethos are, therefore, inextricably bound together in the form of narrative.

Taken together, we take Hopewell's understanding of world-view and ethos to refer closely enough to what we called a "life-orientation" in our definition of spirituality. For this reason we apply Hopewell's insights to the field of spirituality though he

16. Hopewell defines world-view as "a community's perceptions and suspicions about what is happening in life" (Hopewell 1987:56) or "the perspective we use to make sense of our total life" (Carroll et al 1986:32).

17. Ethos is understood as "the values and dispositions that the group maintains" (Hopewell 1987:56).

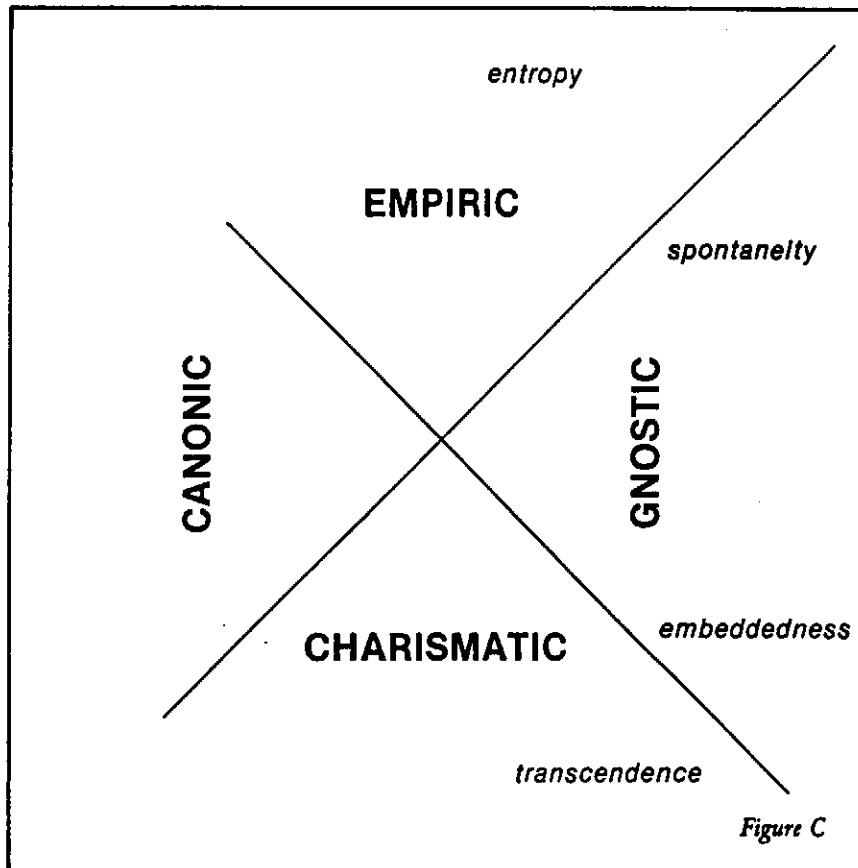
does not specifically use the word. Furthermore, though Hopewell's concern is with congregations, most of his field research was carried out as guided interviews with individuals, questionnaires, and participant observation. He drew his data from individuals, placed them on his grid (see below) and took the areas where the most members of a particular congregation are as an indication of the congregation's identity (Hopewell 1987:88-99). His typology is just as valid in the case of an individual as it is in the case of a congregation.

Hopewell makes use of Stanley Hauerwas' description of the Christian community as a "story shaped community" (Hopewell 1987:104).¹⁸ He follows Hauerwas in distinguishing four links between narrative and social character (Hopewell 1987:104). Narrative *recounts* social character - i.e. it expresses the character of the community. Narrative *informs* character - which means it changes group identity, modifies self-understanding and alters corporate behaviour. Narrative *accounts* for social character - that is, it provides a clue to the operative paradigm of the community and thus provides the basic ways in which a society values and interprets its life. In the Christian community the community is embedded in the Christian story that *transforms* the group character by judging and redeeming the other actions of their communal narrative.

Hopewell gives us a clear picture of a dialogical relationship between narrative and social character. We will come back to this important aspect of his work when we discuss his view of the negotiation that takes place in the shaping of an individual's world-view.

We now come to Hopewell's typology of narratives. He uses Northrop Frye's division of literature into four basic categories, namely *comedy*, *romance*, *tragedy* and *irony* (Hopewell 1987:58). He orders these four categories spatially with the help of the "semiotic square" used by structural analysts of literature (Hopewell 1987:69-73). They should be seen as arranged at the four points of the compass, beginning at the eastern point and moving clockwise to the northern point. This places comedy and tragedy, and romance and irony at opposite points of the compass. Any of the four options can combine in a particular narrative, except the opposites on Frye's grid. He changes the names given by Frye to *gnostic* (for comic), *charismatic* (for romantic), *canonic* (for tragic), and *empiric* (for ironic). He maps the possibilities for types of world-view as follows (Hopewell 1987:77):

18. See Hauerwas (1981:9).



The four orientations may be described as follows (Hopewell 1987:58-62; 69):

- *Gnostic* (comic):

This orientation operates from the intuitive assumption of harmony. The complications of life are deemed to be illusory. It strives towards union with the divine Being and the divine order of things..

- *Charismatic* (romantic):

This orientation involves a quest and adventure that pits protagonist against antagonist. Life is interpreted as a struggle that results in some priceless reward. It requires a hero or heroine who leaves the safe and the humdrum for the fringes of human existence and uncommon blessings. It operates from a personal encounter with a transcendent Being.

- *Canonic* (tragic):

This orientation is the opposite of the gnostic orientation. Instead of a view of life that seeks to harness power, it views authentic life to result in the loss of autonomy.

It operates from reliance on external authority, often experienced as God's revealed will or Word. This external authority defines one's essential life. Unlike the gnostic orientation that strives for union with this external authority, this orientation subordinates selfhood to it. Like the charismatic orientation, it also involves a hero or heroine, but in this case his or her heroic deeds lead to decline.

- *Empiric (ironic):*

This orientation (the opposite of the charismatic orientation) has no heroes or heroines. Life is interpreted as a movement from strange uncertainties and uncommon blessings toward a uniform, natural explanation. The orientation relies upon data objectively verifiable through one's own five senses. This leads to viewing integrity as realism that rejects the supernatural. Much is made of the camaradie and fraternity of equally fallible non-supernatural human beings.

A word needs to be said about the dynamics of the scheme presented by Hopewell. The dynamics of the semiotic square works from the understanding that meaning is attributed to a narrative by rejecting one position, accepting its opposite and implicating a third position. One arrives at a particular world-view and ethos by a complex negotiation between differing points of view. This, in turn, shows how dependent personal belief is on the existence of other world-views in its context (Hopewell 1987:73). It is shaped by other perspectives in the process of negotiation, in which it rejects certain proposals, articulates itself in opposition to these proposals, and discovers itself to be partly in accordance with other proposals.

Hopewell gives us an insight into the dialogical relationship between spirituality (as an existing life-orientation) and other orientations that differ from it in varying degrees, or confirm it either partially or as a whole. This negotiation is conducted in narrative form, by comparing stories and by continuous perspective-taking on one's own narrative.

At this point one needs to refer to the important work done in the field of sociology of knowledge which describes the processes which primary socialisation¹⁹ uses to

19. "Primary socialization" refers to the processes by which significant others transmit their world-views to children. This is done by simply acting "as if" the world-view is true. This process has immense power due to the fact that it comes to a person with no own world-view, as yet. There is, therefore, no process of negotiation between different world-views. The world-view presented to the child seems to be the only one available. It therefore has a sense of being, simply, "the way things are", and not one of a number of possibilities (Berger & Luckmann 1966:149-57).

provide the genesis of world-view. It falls outside the scope of the present project to give a full description of this process.²⁰ Suffice it to say that the world-view of the significant others among whom a person grows up has a self-evidence that makes it the natural point of departure for this intricate negotiation process that lies at the heart of this important aspect of spirituality.

This brings us to another point that is always present in Hopewell's work. He does not describe the ethos, world-view and stories of isolated individuals. The mere fact of negotiations for world-view demonstrates that it is always something shaped in community. The spirituality or world-view prevalent in a particular community is much more than the aggregate or median of the world-views or spiritualities present in the group. It is the result of negotiation, in the same way that the individual spirituality and world-view of each member of the group is a negotiation within the boundaries of the stories, world-views, variations of ethos, and different spiritualities offered to him in their particular context. Spirituality, as we may learn from Hopewell, is a communally shaped phenomenon. This aspect of Hopewell's theory takes us back to the importance of *context* for spirituality.

In conclusion: Hopewell helps us to understand that narratives shape spirituality. They shape the way we interact with our world and with God. They shape the way we interpret the events of our lives. Spirituality cannot be understood apart from our personal narratives and the narratives of the communities to which we attach ourselves. Christian spirituality needs to be shaped by the judging and redeeming activity of the biblical narrative.

1.3.2 James Fowler

Fowler's theory evolved out of structured interviews in which people were asked to talk in depth about their centres of value, their images of power, and the guiding stories of their lives. Fowler describes what they did as follows:

“We have been asking people to tell us something of their lives and pilgrimages, their journeys, giving us access to how they have formed and are forming their particular ways of making meaning” (Fowler 1991:102).

More than 500 transcripts of interviews were analysed (Fowler 1991:102). The importance of personal narratives as the form in which people explored and communicated their faith (in Fowler's definition) is obvious. The stages of faith are not merely the result of the progression of time and the ripening of certain human

20. A good description of this process may be found in Berger and Luckmann (1966:149-82).

traits. They build on one another. Experiences in one stage unlocks the door to the next stage. Persons arrive at certain points in their faith journeys by way of a string of experiences that they invariably express in narrative form.

One should note, though, that the ability to capture the meaning of life in stories only develops at the Mythic-Literal stage (stage 2). Only then does a person have the ability to order his or her world with categories of causality, space, time, and number and can he or she sort out the real from the make-believe (Fowler 1991:105).

Fowler's theory helps us understand that faith (and, by inference, spirituality) is expressed in narrative form. Persons asked about their faith told stories. They ordered the events and elements of their lives into a coherent whole according to their deepest centre of value and power. Analysis of the narratives enabled Fowler's team of researchers to unearth the underlying belief-structure of the individuals they questioned. Personal narratives do not explain the advent of faith. Once articulated, though, they act as paradigms and have a decisive influence on the way life is understood and lived.

This brings us to the second aspect of narratives important for any discussion of Christian spirituality, namely the Biblical narrative. Fowler addresses the influence of the Biblical narrative under the rubric of *conversion*. He speaks of two movements in the life of Christians. The first is a movement along the line of the stages he describes, where the stages act as a set of predictable movements and changes that provide us with something like a set of "every person's stories" that provide the framework within which the second movement takes place. The underlying task in the second movement is that of transformation from self-groundedness toward vocation (Fowler 1984:138). The second movement is what Fowler calls conversion. Conversion, for him, is not a dramatic experience of conviction and release that occurs only once. It is,

"... [A]n ongoing process - with, of course, a series of important movements of perspective-altering convictions and illuminations - *through which people (or a group) gradually bring the lived story of their lives into congruence with the core story of the Christian faith*" (Fowler 1984:140).

Fowler's theory juxtaposes the lateral growth through stages connected to growth in psycho-physical aspects and contextual changes with a growth in congruence with the core story of the Christian faith. The Biblical narrative shapes the personal narrative in decisive ways towards acceptance of a vocation. Taking up a vocation is answering a call from God and acting in partnership with him (Fowler 1984:144).

Fowler describes the growth of a sense of vocation through the stages from merely a dream to a decisive deepening and purification during middle adulthood and to a stage where we become witnesses and guarantors of vocation (Fowler 1984:141-7). The guiding force for this growth in vocation is the Biblical narrative. Without it individuals would not be able to transcend self-groundedness.

1.4 Psychological make-up

The last category of factors that shape spirituality covers a broad and diffused field of enquiry. By “psychological make-up” we mean to indicate the aggregate of personal attributes that makes a person distinct from others. In this regard we think of attributes like temperament, intellectual abilities, personality type, preferred ways of making decisions, and so on. The scope of possibilities for distinctions in this field is virtually endless. None of the typologies of spirituality referred to in this section attempt to cover this extensive field. This does not disqualify them for our use, since we merely intend to point to the interconnection between spirituality and the field of factors lumped together in the category of psychological make-up.

The most obvious difficulty we are presented with in this category is that we may be hard put to distinguish some aspects of it from our concept of “life-orientation” as a description of spirituality. Psychological make-up refers to the internal reality of a person’s being, as does spirituality. The two shaping forces occupy the same space. If spirituality is to be integrated into our total existence, it will indelibly stamp our inner reality. What then of our psychological make-up? Is it obliterated by our spirituality? Is it engaged in a tug of war for the soul? Or does it determine the final shape of spirituality?

We can hardly deny that we are not clean slates upon which the Spirit writes. Many aspects of our being should actually be viewed as part of “the elements of our lives” (in the language of our definition of spirituality) that should be reordered and that have an independent influence on our spirituality. Spirituality is shaped in a process of interaction with the psychological structures of individual believers. This will become clear during our discussion of the typologies in this section. We will discuss the typologies of Holmes, Johnson, and Fowler to demonstrate some of the ways in which psychological make-up shapes spirituality.

1.4.1 Urban T Holmes

Holmes’ typology has an explicit anthropological dimension to it. The vertical axis of his typology (the speculative/affective scale) is based upon the question whether

the style of worship emphasises the illumination of the mind (speculative) or the heart or emotions (affective). The choice of styles of worship reflect different ways individuals prefer to make observations and gather information (Holmes 1980:4). We take this preference to be an expression of the psychological make-up of the particular individual. This axis makes a distinction between persons whose psychological make-up predisposes them to emotional or intuitive ways of making observations and interacting with their contexts, on the one hand, and persons who prefer to do this in a rational way, on the other hand.

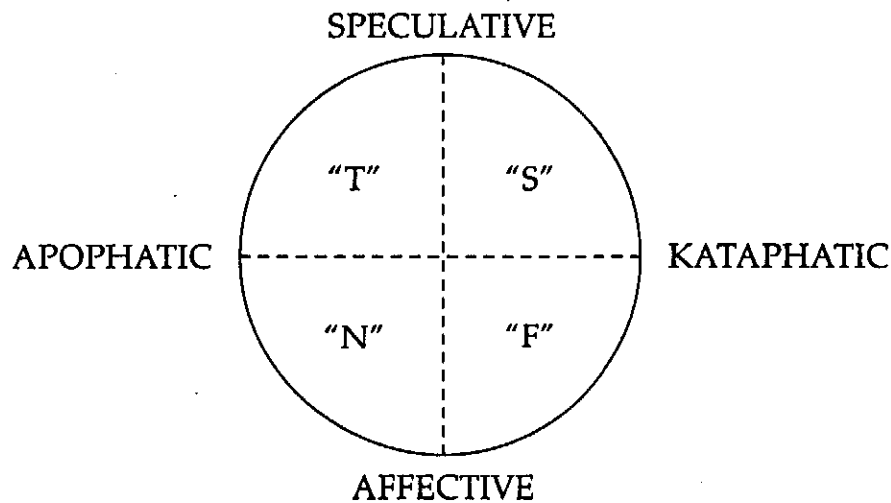
The elaborations of Holmes' scheme in Ware (1995) and Westerhoff (1994:53-63) makes the anthropological dimension of the typology even clearer. Both connect the typology with the well known Myers-Briggs personality inventory.

Corinne Ware (1995:32-33) mentions the Myers-Briggs inventory, but is extremely cautious to make too much of possible connections between it and Holmes' theory. She does see resemblance between Holmes' vertical speculative-affective axis and the thinking-feeling (T-F) functions in the Myers-Briggs inventory. She also points to some parallels between the Myers-Briggs' intuitive-sensory (N-S) preferences and Holmes' apophatic-kataphatic axis. But she is careful to point out that the resemblance is, at best, tenuous. She limits her use of the Myers-Briggs inventory's functions to the four we have mentioned.

Westerhoff also limits his use of the Myers-Briggs inventory to the four functions Ware used. However, he is much more positive about the fit between these functions and Holmes' typology. He finds attempts to link comprehensive combinations of the Myers-Briggs categories to the four quadrants of Holmes' typology unsatisfactory. He returns to a scrutiny of Carl Jung's work, on which the Myers-Briggs inventory is based, and finds that Jung only viewed the stronger of the two middle traits (Sensate-intuitive and Thinking-Feeling) to be a useful indicator of behaviour. According to this insight he indicates only four categories: T (Thinking), S (Sensate), N (intuitive), and F (Feeling). He finds each of these categories to be the dominating trait of persons in each of the four quadrants of Holmes' typology: speculative-apophatic = T; speculative-kataphatic = S; affective-apophatic = N; affective-kataphatic = F (Westerhoff 1994:61). He plots this with the diagram on the next page.

Holmes' typology provides us with a clear indication of the way spirituality is influenced by elements in the psychological make-up of an individual. His discussion of the concrete historical instances of spirituality identified with either of the two poles amply demonstrates the importance of taking these elements into consideration. Of course, he only refers to a small (though vitally important) segment of the field of

the psychological make-up of human beings, namely to the rational and emotional/intuitive aspects of human nature. In spite of this, we may rightfully assume that similar patterns of influence exist between the shape of spirituality and other aspects of the human psyche.



1.4.2 Ben Johnson

We referred to Ben Johnson's typology of spirituality in connection with confessional tradition. He develops his grid with the help of five questions. His fourth question is specifically pertinent for our discussion of the influence of psychological structure on spirituality. He asks, "What type of personality would find it [this kind of spirituality] appropriate?" (Johnson 1988:68). He answers the question as follows:

- *Evangelical piety:*

This type of spirituality has a strong appeal to the sensate, extroverted type of personality. These personalities like to have things spelt out in black and white (Johnson 1988:69).

- *Charismatic piety:*

Charismatic piety appeals to the intuitive, feeling type of person. It has more appeal to extroverted than to introverted persons (Johnson 1988:70).

- *Sacramental piety:*

Sacramental piety appeals to the sensate, thinking type of person (Johnson 1988:71).

- *Activist piety:*

Activist piety appeals to extroverted, intuitive, feeling persons (Johnson 1988:72).

- *Academic piety:*

This type of piety appeals to an introverted, intuitive, thinking type (Johnson 1988:72).

- *Ascetic piety:*

Ascetic piety appeals to introverted, sensate types (Johnson 1988:73).

We hardly need to comment on Johnson's typology. It pays full attention to the prevalence of certain personality types in certain types of spirituality. He uses the terminology of the Myers-Briggs personality type indicator. Each of the types of spirituality he discerns, appeals most to a different personality type. We would surmise that this is so because this type of spirituality is the expression of faith that best fits the natural shape a person's spirituality would have taken if given full freedom of expression. Johnson's typology, therefore, indicates a causal relationship between spirituality and personality type.

1.4.3 James Fowler

Fowler's description of the progression of stages demonstrates the impact that the emergence of various cognitive and emotional abilities have on the specific shape of spirituality. His description of the stages of faith provides us with a grid for understanding the ways in which people in various seasons of life relate to the gospel and to God (Fowler 1984:138). Growth in vocational conversion takes place within the parameters provided by the seven stages. The stage in which an individual finds himself or herself, provides the psychological structure for growth.

Fowler's description of the stages of faith depend heavily on growth of psycho-physical psycho-social abilities. He makes extensive use of the developmentalist work of Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget (Fowler 1981:41-116). This is especially true of the transitions in the earlier stages. New stages become possible because of new cognitive and emotional abilities. Each new stage presents a new inner framework that shapes and expresses spirituality in a different way.

As we have pointed out, the goal of life is not to reach the stage of Universalising faith, but to open yourself, as radically as possible - within the structures of your present stage - to “synergy with the Spirit” (Fowler 1984:75). Spiritual growth is something that takes its shape *within* a particular stage - a stage determined by psycho-social and psycho-physical maturity. Fowler’s theory provides us with a vivid depiction of the dynamic interaction between this aspect of psychological make-up and the shape of spirituality.

1.5 Conclusion

Before discussing what function the analysis of the first part of this chapter has, we need to make one very important remark. Our analysis of the various factors that influence spirituality may be misconstrued to mean that this is a one-sided process. This is far from the truth. Spirituality is embedded in these factors from the material world, but it is not unilaterally determined by them. Spirituality is, of its own right, a powerful shaping force in particular contexts, confessional traditions, narratives and the psychological structure of human beings. We would prefer to speak of a reciprocal relationship between these factors and spirituality²¹, but then a reciprocity where precedence is given to the shaping force of the reality of God.

Our working definition, developed in the previous chapter, was careful to preserve this prerogative of God. God’s precedence, however, does not cancel or diminish the reality of social and intrapersonal forces in any way. God impinges on this world in a way that does not minimise our material realities. This fact will receive full treatment in the following chapters. The analysis of the material matrix of spirituality of the present chapter deliberately stressed its formative power to expel the fallacy of viewing spirituality as something that is unilaterally determined by spiritual reality. We need to take full account of the whole range of forces that impact spirituality if we are to understand it in a more than superficial fashion.

Our analysis of the matrix of spirituality serves a number of functions:

- *Firstly*, it prevents us from viewing the dynamics of spirituality in a simplistic way. It helped us arrive at a more comprehensive view of the field of interactions in which spirituality takes shape, by identifying the factors of context, confessional tradition, narrative and psychological make-up.

21. A good description of this process is found in Robert Schreier’s *Constructing local theologies* (1985), especially in Chapter 4, *Theology and its context: Church tradition as local theologies*.

We suspect that these four factors do not do full justice to the complexity of the issues we deal with. We can safely assume that we could arrive at even more factors that influence spirituality. The selection of the typologies we analysed was random, and the limitation set by our specific goal (merely to establish that material factors *do*, in fact, influence spirituality) precluded a more comprehensive analysis.

We should also note that the categories used are very broad. To use a word like “context” can be somewhat vague, due to the broad and multifaceted reality it refers to. It lumps together vastly different phenomena, such as social structures, physical surroundings, economical status of one’s group and so forth.²² The same could be said of the categories of “confessional tradition” and psychological make-up.

The number of subdivisions we could conjure up if we undertook the task of a more comprehensive description of each of the four main categories is almost endless. Since it is not within the scope of this study to undertake such a description, the rough lines drawn above will have to suffice. It has served its purpose if it has succeeded in establishing the fact that spirituality is impacted by other “non-spiritual” factors and if it has succeeded in giving us a broad intimation of the complexity of the issues we are dealing with. It will also have proved itself useful by providing us with a rudimentary scheme for the rest of our argument.

This understanding of the dynamics of spirituality protects us against a simplistic or reductionist view, that ascribes causality to just one factor and attempts to explain everything in terms of this single factor. An understanding of the complexity of the force-field in which spirituality is shaped and shapes its world, aids us in developing more comprehensive approaches to spiritual formation - approaches in keeping with the specific factors that affect it, but also comprehensive enough to cover more than just one or two of these factors.

- *Secondly*, this analysis uncovers the fact that spirituality is shaped in a complex system of interactions. The four factors isolated above are all in interaction with one another. This can be deduced from the fact that quite a number of the typologies we discussed can be placed in more than one of the four categories.

A pertinent example of this phenomenon is the typology Geoffrey Wainwright appropriated from the work of Richard Niebuhr. Wainwright demonstrates a close correlation between the stance towards culture that a particular Christian or group chooses and the kind of eschatology we find in the kind of spirituality that appears in

22. See Carroll et al (1986:48-80) for an analysis of the many aspects of context a congregation (and, by inference, an individual Christian) has to take into consideration.

conjunction with this view of Christ and culture. It is impossible to determine which of the two - stance towards culture or eschatological view - is the source of the other. We seem to be stuck with the ancient chicken and egg problem.

Some of the typologies make explicit cross-references between two or more of these categories of material factors. Holmes' typology points to an interrelation between context, confessional tradition and psychological make-up. His types of spirituality are actually different combinations of these factors and not merely grades of one factor or polarities within one factor. Johnson's typology demonstrates a consistency between confessional traditions and psychological make-up.

Though the point will not be elaborated further, it is safe to say that the complexity of interactions between spirituality and particular factors we have pointed out in our analysis, is compounded further by this interrelation between the four factors we have discerned in the matrix of spirituality.

- *Thirdly*, the understanding of the reciprocal relationship between spirituality and the components of its matrix prevents any kind of dualistic view of spirituality. It will not do to think that a kind of "pure, uncontaminated" spirituality can spring up in isolation from the material world. This is very important for the argument put forward in this study.

If the reality of this reciprocity is suppressed it does not, for that reason, cease to exist. It simply operates at a subconscious level. These factors still exert their influence. This obviously could lead to a lot of muddled and wrongheaded thinking about spirituality and spiritual formation. Many ethical norms and traditions from the cultural context can then find their way into the ethos and life of the church without being detected. Many tacit norms and views that had their origin in any of the factors from our material existence, still co-determine the shape of spirituality. The church can become the unwitting accomplice of the world's mischief if it does not recognise these influences for what they are.

On the other hand, a clear understanding of the interaction between these factors in material reality and spirituality can lead to faith that not only stands firm when the world tries to subvert it, but that can be effective in transforming the world it lives in. Christians that are aware of these dynamics do not isolate themselves from the world, but can get involved without losing their identity. They can be the salt and leaven that God uses to bring about his kingdom on earth.

- *In the fourth place*, an understanding of the specifics of the matrix of spirituality may lead us to a clearer understanding of the concrete specifics of the processes involved in spirituality formation. The following brief comments on each of the four factors in the matrix of spirituality gives us an indication of the course this may lead us to:

Christian spirituality engages its *context*. It is actively engaged in social criticism. It is prophetic, in the sense that it grieves for the church's entanglement with the false securities of the world, and for the world's God-bare view of reality. It is also prophetic by providing an alternative reality. Our context presents us with the temptation of acculturation, of compromise towards accepting the state of things as they are. We understand the prophetic task as the commission "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (Brueggemann 1978:13).

This prophetic task can only be accomplished from within an active engagement with our context. All authentic Christian spirituality has this dimension of social engagement and social criticism. Without this it would either end up in otherworldly escapism and "righteous" indignation or in thisworldly accommodation. Our realisation of our embeddedness in the world prevents us from being strident and world-denying in our criticism. We are, rather, positively engaged in the world as the arena where God is working out his purposes.

Christian spirituality is rooted in a distinct *confessional tradition*. This confessional tradition is explored and appropriated, but not in an uncritical way. Right at the outset the confessional tradition *is* appropriated in an uncritical way as "the way things are". It is simply "the only game in town". Eventually a person comes into contact with alternative views within the broader Christian tradition. With growing maturity (spiritual and psychological) the confessional tradition is continuously reworked and reincorporated into the individual's spirituality.

This process of reworking and reincorporating confessional tradition is essential for authentic Christian spirituality. This process is conducted in conversation with other confessional traditions, either enriching one's own with insights gleaned from them or reinforcing one's preference for one's own tradition by the rejection of opposites.

Awareness of the influence exerted by our confessional tradition point us towards the importance of communal identity and fidelity. The temptation a confessional tradition presents us with is that of formalism. Formalism renders a confessional tradition harmless by burying its meaning under the rigidity of forms, formulas and empty rituals. The tradition is, unwittingly, traded for the external conventions that

developed around it when we fail to distinguish between what Jaroslav Pelikan calls “the living faith of the dead” and “the dead faith of the living”.²³

Fidelity can only be maintained if a confessional tradition is continuously being reworked and rediscovered. This is a communal task and one that leads towards the development of a communal identity which provides support and reference points for faithfulness for the spiritualities or the individuals that find their home in the particular faith tradition. Authentic Christian spirituality pays attention to its confessional tradition and is involved in the communal task of rearticulating, reformulating and rediscovering the energies that led previous generations to develop a specific confessional tradition.

Christian spirituality finds expression in the form of *personal narrative*. This is accomplished in two ways: by reinterpreting one’s personal life-narrative in the light of the gospel narrative. It is also achieved by finding the gospel narrative to resonate with one’s own experience. In other words, by claiming the gospel narrative as one’s own.

An awareness of the role of narratives points us towards the importance of maintaining our personal identity and commitment to God. We are continuously in danger of being co-opted by narratives from outside our faith traditions, which stand in tension with God’s larger narrative. The “powers of this world” usurp our energies and commitment by claiming their narratives to be constitutional for our narratives. Attention to our own narratives and bringing them under the shaping power of the narrative of God unmasks alien narratives and strengthens our personal identity and commitment to God. Authentic Christian spirituality attends to its memory and finds it shaped and interpreted by the narrative of God (Osmer 1992:106-47).

Growth in Christian spirituality occurs in collusion with *psychological maturity*. Spiritual integrity is inextricably bound to the psychological maturity and developmental tasks appropriate to the season of life one finds oneself in. Spiritual growth may be hampered by psychological problems and, conversely, spiritual growth may facilitate growth in psychological maturity.

An understanding of the influence of psychological structure alerts us to the importance of psychological maturation for spirituality. Spirituality’s continuous rearranging of the elements of life points us Godward, but in a way that leads us to discover our created potentialities and true human nature. If we are serious about our designation as human beings created in the image of God, we will not fail to see the

23. Quoted by Keck (1993:45).

convergence of our destinies as human beings and as Christians. Fowler speaks of this discovery of vocation and human destiny with the graphic formula of “finding your bliss” (Fowler 1991:125). All authentic Christian spirituality is concerned with development towards psychological maturity as an integral part of our God-given vocation.

2. Diversity and boundaries for Christian spirituality

“There are no dittos among souls” (Friedrich von Hugel),²⁴

It is an inescapable fact that there are widely divergent types of spirituality. When one takes account of the complex force-field within which it exists it is not hard to understand why this is so. Individual Christians and different groups of Christians have very different contexts, confessional traditions, stories and personality structures. In addition, all these factors interact in various ways among themselves, to provide an endless variety of types of spirituality and variations within these broad categories.

Before proceeding to our proposal of a model for spirituality, we need, at least, to take cognisance of the problem that the fact of diversity presents us with. The major problem is one of boundaries: If spirituality is influenced by such a wide variety of factors, and these factors combine in so many different ways, how does one determine the boundaries of Christian spirituality? When does it stop being *Christian* spirituality?

We have to begin by conceding that no single type of spirituality can be seen as normative. One cannot simply impose one form of spirituality (like that of William Law or of John Calvin) into another era and cultural context. David Lonsdale (1987:90) is certainly correct when he states that spiritual fundamentalism has the same weaknesses as biblical and moral fundamentalism. The heart of spirituality is faithfulness toward God. This can lead to many different faithful acts, depending on the specifics of one’s location in time and space.

There are, however, two normative points among the factors indicated, which provide us with rough parameters for Christian spirituality. They are (1) our experience of God and (2) our confessional tradition. There are enormously complex questions arising from these two factors that preclude us from using them in a simplistic

24. Friedrich von Hugel, *Letters to a niece* (London: JM Dent & Sons, 1958), quoted by Peterson (1992:108).

manner - questions that relate to our view of revelation, our notion of God, our view of the role and status of tradition, our ecclesiology and so on. The way to clarification of the boundaries of spirituality will always have to be along the route of dealing with the important issues of how our confessional tradition and, specifically, the Bible is to inform our spirituality and how God makes Himself accessible to us.

Though these are complex questions, the broader Christian church has gained enough insight in them to provide a clear enough indication of what we can maintain as forms of Christian spirituality and what we cannot defend.

While there are still many aspects of these questions where there are seemingly insurmountable differences between confessional traditions within Christianity, we have to concede that some differences must be accepted as immutable. The various confessional traditions will have to agree to differ. This is not necessarily a problem. It may be counted part of the richness in the texture of the Christian tradition that these differences can, in fact, persist side by side without threatening the essence of the gospel. We would do well to see this multiplicity of Christian spiritualities in the light of the complexity of the mystery of God rather than as some defect in God's self-revelation.

When we approach the various confessional forms of Christian spirituality from this perspective we can affirm the validity of each one while simultaneously admitting to the relativity of each without ending up in relativism. We can still hold onto the confession that God has revealed Himself to us without falling into the need to conform all Christian belief to our specific view. We can only do so if we maintain our sense of the mystery of God as a balance against the human propensity for arrogant claims about our knowledge of God.

What this all amounts to is that we need to do two things in tandem:

In the first place we need to know and affirm our own particular faith tradition, our "little tradition" (Carroll et al 1986:26). We need a faith tradition to provide a firm foundation for our spirituality. We need the accumulated wisdom and clarity that adherence to a specific faith tradition provides.

This study is coloured by a Reformed perspective, with its emphasis on spirituality as life lived *coram Deo* (before God). The writer grew up in this faith tradition, came to know God in this tradition and has been steeped in the precepts and liturgical style of this tradition. The study, however, does not limit itself to insights gained only from

the Reformed tradition, but it has to acknowledge it as the integrative centre for reflection.

In the second place we need to affirm the validity of other confessional traditions within the “great tradition” (Carroll et al 1986:26). In doing this we open ourselves to fruitful conversation with other traditions and can supplement our own tradition at points where we are weak. This could only benefit the study of spirituality if it is carried out from a clear confessional base of one’s own. We will have to find “unity through diversity” (Cullmann 1986:16), a unity that is more than mere uniformity and where each tradition can preserve its valuable elements (Cullmann 1986:15). We would like to add our own voice to Cullmann’s plea:

“To be sure, Protestants will remain Protestants, Catholics will remain Catholics, and Orthodox will remain Orthodox, but not for their own sake - for the sake of the community (*koinonia*) of all Christians willed by Christ” (Cullmann 1986:83).

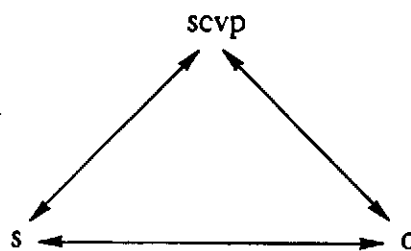
A firm grip on one’s own tradition seems to be the prerequisite to constructive ecumenical dialogue. If one borrows from other traditions without a clear understanding of one’s own tradition, one tends to end up with a kind of eclecticism with no clear integrative principle or, even worse, with a tacit ideology as integrative principle.

The various confessional traditions have an important role to play towards one another. Each is a guardian of an important part of our larger faith tradition. Holmes (1980:5) speaks of a “circle of sensibility” in his typology - a circle that represents the boundaries for healthy spirituality. These boundaries keep the different types of spirituality in touch with one another, so that they may curb one another’s excesses and act as correctives on one another’s biases. This circle of sensibility also applies to ecumenical exchange. Open dialogue among the various Christian confessional traditions will do much to keep all of us within the boundaries of Christian spirituality as we face new challenges and situations.

3. A model of spirituality

Spirituality can only be observed as it presents itself in concrete acts. These acts may all be described in terms of relationships. We will point to three basic relationships that summarise the acts by which spirituality takes concrete shape in the material world. These are *the relationship with God*, *the relationship with the other*, and *the relationship with creation*.

Fowler (1981:16) points out that faith always has a covenantal pattern - it always finds expression and is always transmitted in relationships (Fowler 1981:18). Parents bring their way of viewing the world and of being in the world into their relationship of care and nurture with their child. They bring their “centres of value and power”, which constitute the meaning of their lives into play. This means that the pattern of interaction between child and parent is, from the beginning, a triad (Fowler 1981:17). It is more than merely a relationship between parent and child. The flow of interaction between the parents (“o”, for “others”) and child (“s”, for “self”) is in terms of a *shared centre of value and power* (“scvp”) of the family. Fowler plots this triadic nature of the family with the following diagram (Fowler 1981:17):



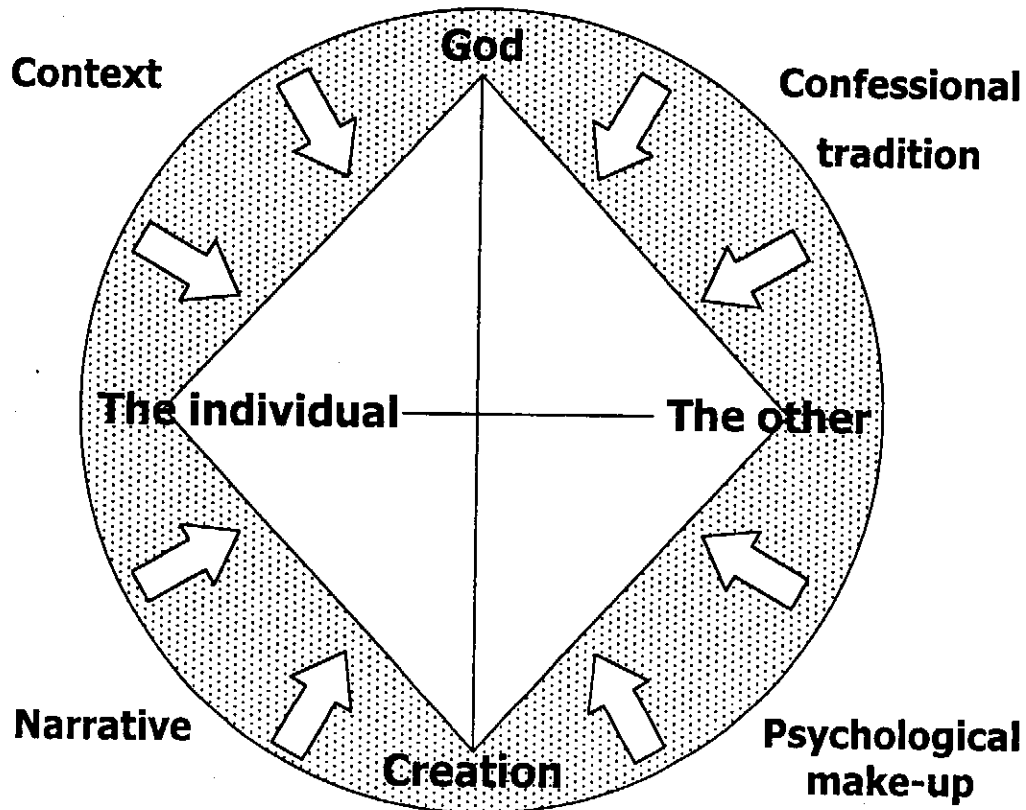
The triad consisting of a child and his or her parents is the original faith triad one enters. The rest of one’s life is determined by such triads. Our commitments and trusts shape our identities and determine (and are determined by) the communities we join (Fowler 1981:18). Our relationships with other persons who enter our lives are determined by these faith-triads. We also choose to enter into relationships on the basis of perceived shared centres of value and power.

“[W]e are members of many different faith-relational triads. In each of the roles we play, in each significant relationship we have with others, in each institution of which we are part, we are linked to others in shared trusts and loyalties to centers of value and power” (Fowler 1981:18-19).

Our model substitutes Fowler’s shared centres of value and power (scvp) for a relationship with God in our understanding of the relational dynamics of Christian spirituality. We would then have a triad consisting of *God, the individual* and *the other*.

Our model extends the triad by adding another element to it. The growing concern for environmental issues among Christians has led us to the insight that a believer’s

relationship with creation is more than a peripheral issue.²⁵ There is a relational dimension to man's orientation towards creation that has to be incorporated in our scheme. For this reason we extend the triad in our model by adding another triangle below it and joining the poles that represent God and creation. The lines between the four poles of the web of interaction signify the reciprocal relationship between them. This more comprehensive view of the web of interaction that Christian spirituality engages in, may be represented by the following diagram:



The spatial arrangement of the four elements is also significant. The placement of God above the other three elements signifies God's primary significance for the dynamic of the model. We will elaborate on that shortly. The individual is placed on the same level as the other, while creation is placed at a lower level - not to be exploited, but so that it could be ruled over by man as God's representative. The significance of the spatial arrangement that places creation at a different level than that occupied by the other means to indicate a different type of interaction.

We have also added the matrix in which spirituality develops and finds expression. It is symbolised by a circle that envelops the interactions in which spirituality occurs. We have added the four elements of this matrix we have discerned in our analysis of

25. See Guinness (1973:206-209), Dorr (1990:12-38), Roxburg (1993:75-92), Conradie (1996).

the various typologies of spirituality. Their placement in the diagram is of no significance.

One aspect of the interaction between the matrix of spirituality and the web of interaction deserves comment. The fact that God is taken up as one of the elements in the web of interaction and placed inside the matrix should not be misconstrued to constrict the presence or activity of God. God transcends the matrix. One could extend the diagram to propose God as the broadest matrix for spirituality, that extends beyond the material factors indicated in both time and space. God is both inside the scheme and outside it. This is in accordance with a scheme proposed by Ben Johnson. He depicts the journey of faith as something that occurs within the matrix of a relationship with God (Johnson 1988:23).

This web of interaction, together with the matrix in which it occurs, constitutes our proposal for a model of spirituality. The model proposes a systemic view of spirituality that attempts to take the fullest possible account of the dynamic system in which it is imbedded.

We will now proceed with some comments to clarify our understanding of the three relationships the individual believer is involved in, and of the web of interaction proposed by the model.

4.1 Relationship with God

Fowler's conceptual tool of relational triads provides a particularly clear way of speaking about the primacy of our relationship with God and vital role it has in the shaping and development of spirituality. We should not misconstrue the triad (or, in our case, the square) to mean that all relationships, represented by the lines joining the various poles, are of the same nature and carry the same weight. The relationship with God is the primary and most meaningful relationship in the whole field. It shapes and determines the nature and extent of all the other relationships we belong to. This was established in the previous chapter. This is also articulated by Fowler:

“Our commitments and trusts [to centres of value and power] shape our identities. They determine (and are determined by) the communities we join. In a real sense, we become part of that we love and trust. ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’” (Fowler 1981:18).

However, this pride of place taken in by our relationship to God is seldom as simple as the model suggests. We are members of many different faith-relational triads, each

with its own particular shared centre of value and power. In every role we play, in every significant relation we are committed to, in every institution of which we are part, we are linked to others in terms of shared centres of value and power. These centres of values and power are seldom of a piece. They can, in fact be widely divergent. Our identity and faith must integrate these (often) diverse roles, contexts and meanings into an integrated whole (Fowler 1981:19). It is quite possible to make choices that places trust in finite centres of value and power. Fowler identifies this as idolatry (Fowler 1981:18).

Fowler (1981:19-23) discusses three possible ways of dealing with the different centres of value and power of the disparate triads one is involved in.

The first option is the *polytheistic* pattern where the individual has many “interests” in many minor centres of value and power but lacks an integrative perspective. This pattern could also appear as a continuous shift of interests and commitments from one centre of value and power to the next. Fowler contends that most of us are more polytheistic than we might like to think, especially in a consumer society with its dominant myth “that you should experience everything you desire, own everything you want and relate intimately with whomever you wish” (Fowler 1981:20).

The second possibility is the *henotheistic* pattern in which one invests deeply in a single, but inappropriate centre of value and power. Fowler describes this as making an idol of something that is not of ultimate concern (Fowler 1981:20). This concern might be anything from one’s work, sex, money and the like, to something seemingly noble, such as nations, churches, universities, political parties, philosophies, ideological movements and the rest.

The third option is *radical monotheism*. Fowler defines this pattern as,

“... a type of faith-identity relation in which a person or group focuses its supreme trust and loyalty in a transcendent center of value and power, that is neither a conscious or unconscious extension of personal or group ego nor a finite cause or institution. Rather, this type of monotheism implies loyalty to the *principle of being* and to the *source and center of all value and power*” (Fowler 1981:23).

When a centre of value and power of this order is in place, other centres of value and power are not negated, but they are decisively relativised and ordered. A person will be able to participate in groups centred around potentially henotheistic centres of value and power, without getting caught up in henotheistic patterns.

An understanding of the difference between these three patterns of interaction with centres of value and power makes it clear that the particular pattern we adhere to is of

great importance. If our relationship with God is as crucial as the model suggests, this pattern will have a determinative impact on the whole web of interaction. It is not a case of “any centre will do”.

The diffusion of the henotheistic pattern will cause disparity in the individual’s interactions with the other and with creation, as well as in his or her interaction with the factors in the matrix of spirituality. Likewise, a choice for the henotheistic pattern will provide one with a centre that will not hold, and that leads one into destructive patterns of relating with the other and with creation. The ecological impact of the henotheistic patterns of Western materialism is a particularly graphic illustration of this.

We contend that the only pattern that will hold when confronted with all the permutations that the web of interaction and our matrix can throw at us, is the monotheistic pattern. We further contend that not just any monotheistic pattern will do. Our discussion of the Psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation in the following chapters will demonstrate how particular views of God may prove insufficient in a new set of circumstances and may stand in need of re-negotiation. The fact of commitment to God as a centre of value and meaning focuses our lives on a being much larger than our comprehension can ever fathom. To return to our theme of the previous chapter, we are constantly being confronted by an overplus of meaning, by the numinous, by the liminal character of our encounters with Him.

4.2 Relationship with the other

We need make only a few remarks on this element in our model. What the model intends to communicate is that this relationship is affected by all the other relationships and by the elements in the matrix and *vice versa*. Changes in the matrix of spirituality or in the other two relationships will result in different ways of interacting with the other. Changes in the relationship with the other will have an impact on the way we relate to God and creation and will change our relation to the elements in the matrix of spirituality.

The model depicts the relationship with God as determinative of the relationship with the other to a far greater extent than any other of the elements in the system. We live in God’s world. Having God as our final point of reference means viewing all the other elements of the model, including relationships with other human beings, in terms of God. God’s character, as expressed in his acts towards us and our world, becomes the norm for our behaviour towards fellow human beings. As we shall see in our study of the Psalms, God’s character becomes known to us through his deeds of justice and caring. This sets the standard for us. If we are to act towards the other

in ways congruent with our relationship to God, a concern for equity should stamp our acts.

The model also explains the inner dynamic of fellowship (*koinonia*). The difference between friendship with someone outside the community of believers and someone who is a fellow-believer lies in their respective choice of centres of value and power. There will obviously be far greater congruence between two believers, since their worlds are ordered by the same final reference point.

There can, of course be friendships between Christians and non-Christians. Friendships are always *about* something (Lewis 1960:63). Christian's lives are filled with interests and passions which they share with people who do not share their seriousness about God. There is more than enough material for friendships to evolve. As Fowler has indicated in his discussion of the pattern of radical monotheism, choosing God as our transcendent source and centre of value and power does not obliterate less universal or less transcendent centres of value and power. God transcends them. He relativises and orders them, but He does not remove them from our field of interest. Our relationship to God as the ultimate source of meaning does not require denial of our participation in groups with more limited final points of reference (Fowler 1981:23). In the final analysis, though, the interests about which these friendships develop, will stand in a different relationship to the rest of one's own life than the case will be in the life of one's non-Christian friends.

This is not the case in the community of believers. Though they may be widely divergent in interests, their shared centre of value and power brings about a convergence of the way they view life that makes for close ties. A healthy faith community will facilitate far deeper relationships than that which is possible in the mixed bag of differently oriented people in, say, a tennis club.

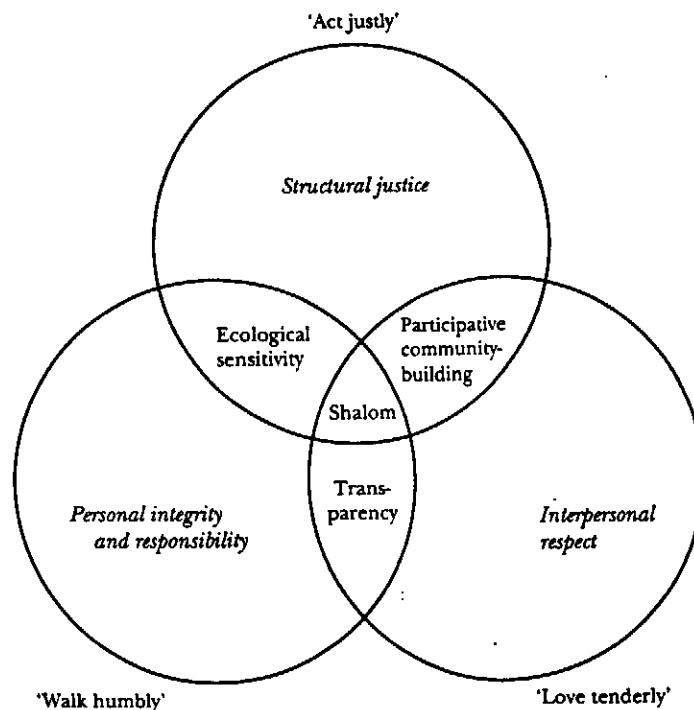
4.3 Relationship with creation

“When everything else has gone from my brain - the President's name, the state capitals, the neighbourhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length the faces of my friends, and finally the faces of my family - when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that” (Annie Dillard 1987:3).

Our choice of terminology is deliberate: “creation” is a relational term. It implies a relation between God and the material world in a way that the word “nature” does not. “Nature” can either be a secularised term (when it is used in a modernistic

materialist fashion) or an idolatrous term (when it is given an independent life of its own as “mother nature”).

Donal Dorr (1984:8-18) promotes a holistic view of spirituality by combining the three things Yahweh asks of us in Mi 6:8, namely to “*act justly*” (the public aspect of spirituality), to “*love tenderly*” (the interpersonal aspect of spirituality), and to “*walk humbly*” (the aspect of personal integrity). He makes use of the diagram below in which these three aspects of holistic spirituality is depicted as three interlacing circles (Dorr 1990:1-11). He refines his original theory by exploring and naming the areas where the circles overlap. The area of interest, for our present concerns, is the view of ecological sensitivity as an overlap of concerns for public justice (“act justly”) and personal integrity (“walk humbly”).



Dorr elaborates on this interface between our concern for structural (public) justice and personal integrity in a chapter called “*Down to earth spirituality*” (Dorr 1990:12-38). For us, the important thing to notice is the way Dorr demonstrates the connections between creation and a concern for the other (by viewing ecological sensitivity as a product of a concern for structural justice) and between creation and God (by viewing it in the light of providence). Solidarity with other human beings (Dorr 1990:12-14) and sensing yourself to be in God’s care (Dorr 1990:19-22) leads to caring and responsibility in our interventions in creation. *Vice versa*, caring for

creation results in the protection of resources for future generations and for the poor, while coming into touch with unpolluted creation results in “walking humbly” before God - that is, coming to realise that I am not the only important thing in the world (Dorr 1990:23).

We need not elaborate further. The literature on the subject of a Christian view of creation is vast. The important thing, for our present study, is to note the interconnection between nature and all the other aspects of our model and to acknowledge a concern for creation as part of integrated spirituality.

4.4 A web of interaction

None of the relationships in the model can be isolated from any of the others. One cannot isolate one’s relationship with the other, with God, or with creation from any of the other relationships one is involved in. One can also not view any of these relationships without reference to the matrix in which spirituality develops. This brings about a complex web of interaction that can never be reduced to simplistic formulas. The following brief remarks do not intend to provide a full treatment of the web of interaction, but only to give some idea of the complexity of these interactions.

These relationships between God, the individual, the other, and creation represent the *outer reality* of spirituality. Spirituality attains its outer reality in relationships - relationships to God, to others, to the material world. The foundational relationship in this relational complex is the one with God.

The *inner reality* of spirituality is the life-orientation of the individual (see our working definition of spirituality) that encompasses his or her world-view. This life-orientation acts as a kind of lens that shapes and colours the way the individual views his or her relationships with God, others and the material world. This lens is not something static. It is changed by what it sees. The interactions a person is involved in shapes and colours this lens. This is especially true of interaction with God.

Thus far in this chapter, the emphasis has been on the formative influence of the matrix in which spirituality develops. The opposite is also true. There are complex processes of give and take in the relationship between spirituality and its matrix. Spirituality, in a certain sense, produces and shapes its own matrix.

Let us first take the reciprocal relationship between spirituality and *context*. In the complex interplay of social exchanges the individual, as well as society as an organic

unit, produce social artefacts, institutions and traditions.²⁶ The sum total of these social constructions, together with the physical reality produced by the activities of individuals form the context the individual finds himself or herself immersed in. The context plays a vital role in shaping the world-view of the individual.

At the same time the person's world-view is not totally determined by his or her context. He or she may interpret this context in various ways. He or she can act proactively instead of reactively. He or she is an acting part of this negotiation process and can alter his or her context in decisive ways. This means that the same context could act on various individuals in different ways, depending on their perspective on reality.

In as much as this "world-shaping activity" (Berger) is carried out from the perspective of the reality of God, a *confessional tradition* takes shape. This confessional tradition finds its physical expression in the written forms of the traditional confessions, creeds and books, in liturgies, hymns, social norms and in the institutions and buildings of the visible church. An individual's confessional tradition can act in a powerful way to shape the way he or she perceives reality and acts in his or her various relationships.

While this is certainly true, the individual is not simply the product of his or her confessional tradition. He or she can interpret and understand the various components of the confessional tradition in different ways. Confessional traditions are seldom unambiguous. They usually incorporate various polarities and offer space for a broader range of diversity in terms of world-view than commonly acknowledged.

In the course of the individual's interaction with God, others, creation, his or her context, and his or her confessional tradition, a *narrative* takes shape. The narrative is much more than a simple compendium of all the details of what has happened to him or her. It is an interpretation and arrangement of a selection of occurrences in the person's life according to some norm or principle of arrangement. The plot and approach to the arrangement of the various components of the narrative is made in accordance with one's centre of value and power - in Christian spirituality this would be our perception of God. This motif is incorporated into the world-view of the individual.

26. For an extensive description of the way reality is constructed in social interchange, see Berger and Luckmann (1967).

As with context and confessional tradition, the relationship between world-view and narrative is also reciprocal. Though narrative is shaped and constructed along the lines prescribed by world-view, the opposite also takes place. Plots thicken, unexpected turns of events open up new perspectives. This leads to anomalies within a person's world-view. He or she is faced with the choice of either suppressing the anomalies and persisting with the particular world-view or of discarding or adjusting the guiding motif and world-view. This inevitably leads to a reinterpretation of his or her narrative. Again we find the traffic moving both ways. It is not simply a matter of either the narrative or the person's spirituality or world-view exerting a dominant influence.

The last factor that impacts the inner reality of spirituality is the *psychological make-up* of the individual. There is a veritable mountain of published material in the field of psychology trying to come to grips with the phenomenon of human personality. There is a growing consensus that we can speak of a basic personality structure of a person that enables us to predict his or her actions with reasonable accuracy. This personality structure is the result of an intricate interplay between hereditary and socio-physical factors.

But here, too, one's spirituality may reshape aspects of one's character. The biblical picture of spiritual growth speaks not only of external actions, but also of growth in inner qualities (Gl 5:22-23). Certainly, a characteristic personality structure will persist. But spirituality will impact it in many ways that may be clearly noted. Once again we can point to a reciprocal relationship between the world-view and the psychological make-up of a person. Changes in the one precipitates changes in the other. Spirituality is impacted by the personality structure of the individual and vice versa.

To summarise, we may note that an integrated view of spirituality has a complex character. It takes us into a maze of interconnections and reciprocal relationships. Many of these interconnections and relationships have been studied. On the basis of our analysis we contend that a study of spirituality that does not acknowledge the existence of the complex web of interaction within which spirituality exists, will always be open to grave misconstruals.

4. The spiritual and the material: towards closing the great divide

“The fault of much pietism is that it sought to save the soul apart from the world. The fault of much of liberalism is that it sought to save the world apart from the soul”
Edwin Gaustad (in Keck 1993:117).

Christian spirituality finds its source in the existence of God, the Supreme Being, the source of all that is, the one unoriginated and independent entity in the entire universe, the One who cannot be compared to anything or anyone else. Spirituality comes into being when human beings perceive the existence of this God and live with this as a key to their understanding of the universe and the way they deal with material reality.

But spirituality is worked out in a web of interaction with other persons, creation and a complex of outer and inner realities. It is never a purely “spiritual” matter, in the sense that it can have an existence apart from material reality. Trying to separate these two aspects of spirituality is much like the age-old problem of trying to imagine the sound of one hand clapping.

However, the fact that Christian spirituality has its beginnings in a focus on God, a focus that takes a transcendent reality as starting point, makes it susceptible to other-worldliness from the outset. The opposite could also be the case. If it loses contact with its roots in the reality of God it quite comfortably regresses into various forms of materialism and a partial secularism. Both these options are aberrations of the way the Bible views the relationship between the spiritual and the material. A view of spirituality based on biblical revelation has to take account of both the material and the spiritual, but in a way that does not separate them. It has to resist both secularising and spiritualising tendencies.

With this said, we still have to maintain that the starting point of biblical spirituality in God would place a biblical metaphysical scheme in the same philosophical category as certain types of idealism, especially objective and personal idealisms (Erickson 1991:524-5). We have to affirm that the most fundamental fact of all of reality is its spiritual dimension. This fact is affirmed without denying either the reality or value of the material world. What it does mean for our view of the material world, is an affirmation that everything is derived from God, both as to origin and nature (existence and essence), that everything is dependent upon Him, and that everything is subject to his ultimate control and direction (Erickson 1991:525).

This view may be defined as “idealism that is antinaturalist without being antirealist” (Erickson 1991:525). The material world is taken as real in its own right, though in a contingent way, as dependent upon the reality of God. God is not only transcendent, but also immanent. He cares and directs all of creation. All of history is moving toward a goal determined by God.

Our next three chapters will explore the Psalms to determine to what extent this view of reality may be found in them. If this view is found in the Psalms, their unique ability to function as prayers make them particularly potent as ways to stay attuned to this God-permeated character of reality.

5. Summary

The first part of this chapter consists of an analysis of a number of typologies of spirituality with the purpose of determining the factors that are responsible for divergence in types of spirituality. The way the typologies of Holmes, Wainwright, Fowler, Walrath, Johnson, and Hopewell lead us to four main groups of material influences on spirituality, are analysed and discussed. These groups of influences (context, confessional tradition, narrative, and psychological make-up) are posited as the matrix within which spirituality takes shape.

The second important section of the chapter develops a model of spirituality. It claims that spirituality finds concrete form in a network of reciprocal relationships between God, the individual, the other, and creation. The relationship with God is posited as the determinative element in the model. The complexity of this network of relationships and its relationship, together with its matrix, is explored to impress the fact that spirituality can only be viewed as a complex phenomenon with both immanent and transcendent aspects to it.

CHAPTER 3: THE INTEGRATED SPIRITUALITY OF THE PSALMS

Our first two chapters took a phenomenological view of spirituality. These chapters argued that, seen from a phenomenological perspective, spirituality has both a material and spiritual dimension. It grows out of a human being's focus on God. It also grows out of a human being's concrete existence - *contextual factors*, the *faith tradition* he or she grew up in, his or her *story*, and his or her *personality structure*.

We now turn to biblical perspectives on spirituality and congregational strategies. This chapter lays the groundwork for the next three chapters. It chooses two approaches to the Psalms that are likely to be the most fruitful for our specific concern. It narrows our focus on congregational strategies down to the strategy of utilising the Psalms as prayers.

1. Introductory remarks

Up to this point we have limited our remarks to the shape and development of spirituality in the individual, without express reference to the role of the educational strategies of the congregations to which these individuals belong. The rest of this study is concerned with congregational practice and strategies. More to the point, it is concerned with congregational strategies which lead to the growth of a kind of spirituality that attends to both the spiritual and material dimensions of reality in such a way that they are not separated.

The study does not attempt to offer a comprehensive congregational strategy. It believes that if this kind of spirituality is to flourish in a congregation it will not depend so much on developing new strategies as on the way a congregation goes about its basic functions - the business of preaching and teaching, praying and worshipping, conducting its communal life, and ministering to the world. It will depend on the manner it carries out the basics of being a congregation in the body of Christ. If the manner in which a congregation does this conveys a seriousness about both God and everyday life, then new members and children will be drawn into this approach to Christian life. The spirituality of the congregation will develop more and more in this direction. Believers will be strengthened in their way of thinking about life as God-permeated and about God as committed to terrestrial existence.

If one should point to one area in a faith community's life that is a critical juncture for the shaping of spirituality, more than some of the other areas of congregational concern, the prayer life of a congregation immediately springs to mind. Prayer both

shapes and expresses spirituality in decisive ways. Prayer changes the way we view our lives and the way we view God. It also provides clues to the faith community's prevailing views of God and how they attend to the issues of life.

We will now concentrate our attention on one strategy for the stimulation of a kind of prayer life in a congregation that will hold together the sacred and the secular. This strategy is simply to use the Psalms as prayers in both corporate and individual worship. It is one of many possible strategies, but we believe it is a time-honoured one. The last chapter will attend to the rich tradition centred around the praying of the Psalms in the Christian church.

This focus on a specific strategy does not go against our view that congregations should look at the way they do the basics before they start looking for strategies to facilitate new directions. It will be evident that the Psalms offer us a particular way to go about one of the foundational activities of a congregation, namely to pray. We will argue that the Psalms are prayers that take both God and life with the utmost seriousness (Chapters 4 and 5). A congregation where the Psalms are prayed regularly will develop a way of thinking about God and about life that keeps them in strict conjunction. We will make some suggestions in Chapter 6 about specific ways to introduce the Psalms into the prayer life of a congregation.

The present chapter will state the basic perspectives for our approach to the Psalms. Not just any approach will make the Psalms fruitful as prayers and, even more so, as prayers that ground our faith in the reality of both God and our concrete context. We have singled out two approaches to the Psalms that we have found particularly fruitful in this regard.

The first approach we are going to utilise, is that of Walter Brueggemann in *The message of the Psalms* (1984). The literary analyses developed by Gunkel and others, that dominated the field of Psalm studies in the twentieth century, provide wonderful material for academic life, but limited insights for liturgical devotional life. This is where the scheme provided by Walter Brueggemann constitutes a major advance. He builds on the insights of Gunkel, Westermann, Mowinckel and other critical scholars, but works at the interface of the world of faith we encounter in the Psalms and those experiences common to all of humanity (Brueggemann 1984:10). The heuristic grid he developed for the interpretation of the Psalms, provides us with a helpful tool with which to get an overview of the way the Psalms relate to both the quest for God and the quest for a meaningful life. It also helps us to reach an understanding of the manner in which these two aspects of spirituality relate to each other.

Before considering the advantages of Brueggemann's scheme for liturgical and devotional life, we should first of all clarify what we do understand to be constitutive of liturgical and devotional life.

In attempting to understand the liturgical life of a congregation we find the work of Don Saliers most helpful. He views effective and transforming liturgy as something that appears at the juxtaposition of *the ethos of God* and *human pathos*:

“Christian liturgy transforms and empowers when the vulnerability of human pathos is met by the ethos of God's vulnerability in word and sacrament.” (Saliers 1994:22).

In accord with Saliers' understanding of liturgy we contend that liturgical prayer cannot be satisfactory if it fails to include both a focus on God and relevance to concrete matters in the congregation's everyday life.

The same could be said about prayer in the devotional life of the individual. If we argue from the working definition for spirituality we developed in Chapter 1, we have to maintain that personal prayer should also have this double-dimensional focus. It should be focused on God and be relevant to the elements in the life of the specific individual.

The second perspective we will utilise is the approach that utilises Brevard S Childs' views on the Psalter as canon¹, especially as it finds expression in the work of Gerald Wilson and James Mays.² This approach attends to the overall structure of the Psalter, the underlying relationships between individual psalms and the relationship of individual psalms to the whole. It takes the final form, as imposed by editorial insertions and arrangement, as determinative of the meaning of the whole. It seeks out structural elements that provide us with clues to the meaning of the whole. It interprets the individual psalms in terms of their context within the whole.

This approach also provides us with some valuable clues to the Psalms as prayers that promote seriousness about God and life. It will be made clear that a concern for both God and human existence is formative for this editorial shape of the Psalter.

1. See Childs (1979; 1985)

2. See Wilson (1985; 1992) and Mays (1994a; 1994b).

These two approaches will be elaborated in this chapter. The next two chapters will then utilise them to demonstrate the Psalms' focus on God (Chapter 4) and on life in the material world (Chapter 5).

2. Walter Brueggemann: Orientation, Disorientation and New Orientation

Brueggemann's approach represents a further development from that of the dominant stream of interpretation of the Psalms for most of the twentieth century. Whereas most of the modern approaches to the Psalms have a decidedly objective stamp, concentrating on factors such as literary form, liturgical context and origin, Brueggemann takes as his point of departure the three typical seasons of human existence - times of equilibrium and stability (*orientation*), times of disarray and instability (*disorientation*), and times of surprising new life (*new orientation*). His approach provides us with an existential key to the Psalms and their use. He describes his approach as "post-critical", building on the work of critical scholars, but drawing further lines towards the meaning of the Psalms for human existence. His main interest is pastoral (Brueggemann 1984:10, 17-19).

The immediate danger of such an approach is to impose an existential key on the biblical text in such a way that God is siphoned out of consideration and that all that remains is terrestrial existence. This does not happen, though, since Brueggemann's basic concern is for the various ways Israel dealt with *God* in times of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. His main question is how the fact of God is to be understood in these three basic human experiences.

He is also careful to point out that the scheme came from an extensive study of the subject-matter of the Psalms themselves and is not an imposition on the Psalter (Brueggemann 1984:10).

His work is extremely pertinent for the present study. His approach consists of relating God and his activity to human experience. The categories of interpretation he develops provide us with important tools with which to demonstrate the Psalms' inclination towards the kind of spirituality we aim to promote. They will, therefore, be used as the basic framework for the following two chapters.

In our approach we will set up the two chapters exploring the two dimensions of the Psalms (Chapters 4 and 5) as mirror images of each other. The reason for this is to demonstrate how all types of psalms *simultaneously* take both God and life seriously. First we will take all the subdivisions of the three basic types of psalms Brueggemann

proposes and determine whether they demonstrate seriousness about God (Chapter 4). We will then do the same to determine whether these same psalms demonstrate a seriousness about life (Chapter 5). We will demonstrate that all the Psalms under discussion are utterly serious about both these concerns, without separating them. One cannot “take one’s pick”. Seriousness about the God of the Psalms is impossible without taking life seriously. Conversely, the seriousness about life found in the Psalms is not replicable without taking God seriously from the first. Efforts to attain the first kind of seriousness, is idolatry. Efforts to attain the second, is crank philosophy - at least, in the paradigm for spirituality which the Psalms provide.

If it can be proven that all of these subdivisions have both these focuses, we may safely assume that we have grounds for utilising them for integrated spirituality. The discussion in the following two chapters will also provide us with some clues as to the nature of the relationship between these two aspects of the Psalms.

3. The canonical structure of the Psalter

The *subject-matter* of the Psalter gives us ample evidence of the way the spirituality of the faith community from which it originated, kept the quest for God and the quest for life together. Brueggemann’s three categories provide us with a way to demonstrate this.

The second approach to the Psalms is not so much concerned with the subject-matter as with *the shape of the whole* of the Psalter. The attention to both God and life is not the quaint eccentricity of only some of the psalms, but the inclination of the whole. A look at the editorial arrangement of the Psalter will demonstrate this fact.

The Psalter is not a random collection of independent units. There is much evidence of careful editorial activity. The shape of the Psalter is purposeful and not accidental. This is true of the coherent blocks of material that may be distinguished in the Psalter as well as of the Psalter as a whole (Wilson 1985:199; 1992:129).

This editorial activity gave us a final arrangement of the Psalms in which each psalm can be understood as part of a harmonious whole and not merely in terms of its peculiar subject-matter. The structure of the Psalter strings the individual psalms into a whole that provides us with an extensive picture of life in the presence of God. This structure is not immediately evident as, for instance, in a historical book such as Judges. Indeed, some of the structural elements are quite ambiguous as to their function. We do, however, have enough to be able to demonstrate the final form of the Psalter’s concern with God and everyday life.

The work of Brevard Childs is seminal for this second approach to the Psalms. Childs' approach centres around his view that one should focus on the final form of the text at hand (Childs 1979:74). Interpretation works with this text, taking into account the specific community of faith and practice for whom it served a particular theological role as possessing divine authority (Childs 1979:74, 75). Childs' approach takes account of historical critical reconstruction of earlier layers in the development of the text, but uses it to aid understanding of the final text (Childs 1979:76). Childs' work makes us aware of a 'canonical intentionality,' which is coextensive with the meaning of the biblical text (Childs 1979:79). Our contention is that this 'canonical intentionality' strengthens our case. We will, therefore, explore some of the features recognised as clues to editorial activity, to give us an idea of the canonical intentionality of the Psalter.

Our approach will differ from that utilised in the section that uses Brueggemann's three categories. In the previous section, the two chapters exploring the two dimensions of the Psalms (Chapters 4 and 5) are mirror images of each other. The approach in the current section (that will be elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5), does not follow the same lines. We did not replicate all of the structural elements pertaining to seriousness about God (Chapter 4) in our discussion of the structural pointers to seriousness about life (Chapter 5).

The reason for this is that this part of our discussion approaches the Psalter as a single whole. It argues from the acceptance of a unified editorial approach for the Psalter, along the lines of the approach of Brevard Childs. This does not mean to impose a single formula or theme upon the whole.³ It does, however, take seriously any signs of editorial activity and arrangements that provide clues to the canonical intentionality of the whole.

Beginning with the assumption that the final stage of the text is authoritative, does not mean that the historical dimension of the text is lost.⁴ Childs takes full account

3. Childs has serious reservations about the so-called "kerygmatic exegesis" of Von Rad, Wolff, Westermann and others, that did just this. They attempted to discover the central intention of a writer and link it with a reconstruction of a historical situation that allegedly evoked this kerygma as a response. Childs' major criticism of their approach is aimed at what he calls "... the extremely subjective, reductionistic method in which the form-critical method has been extended beyond its original function to derive a theological message" and "... the heavy dependence upon critical theories which bear less and less weight ..." (Childs 1979:74-5).

4. Childs is critical of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics that focuses on what lies "ahead" (*devant*) of the text at the cost of what lies behind (Childs 1979:77). This may develop towards a situation where the text becomes a conglomerate of free-floating metaphors, to be appropriated in Rochard test-style.

of the discussions about the origins of the parts and of the process of development towards the final whole. He asserts that the shape of the biblical text reflects a history of the encounter between God and Israel. The canon describes the relationship between God and his people and defines the scope of its history. The final text does not deny the historical reality of that encounter, but makes critical, theological judgements about this process (Childs 1979:75-7). The meaning of the parts is determined by intentionality of the final form of the text and not by its earlier history.⁵ Our argument will be that this intentionality demonstrates an integrated spirituality, such as we have hypothesised. We will point to different parts of the editorial activity in Chapters 4 and 5, assuming them to be parts of the same multifaceted canonical intention.

We will now direct our attention to some of the more pertinent features of editorial shaping of the Psalter which we intend to employ in arguing our case.

3.1 Focus on God

The Psalms face upwards. They draw our attention to God. They demand with passion that God should be taken into account at all times, in all spheres of reality, by all creatures. This proclivity of the Psalms finds expression in the structure of the book itself. It is woven into the very fabric of the Psalter. We will use the following structural elements - that act as indicators of Childs' 'canonical intentionality' - in the Psalter to demonstrate this inclination:

- *Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction:* Chapter 4 will discuss how the first two psalms, which function as an introduction to the Psalter, articulate this concern for God.
- *The division into five books:* We will find the subdivision of the Psalter into five books to be a hidden clue to its identity as a book of responses to God's initiative.
- *A development from lament to praise:* The last three clues to the Psalter's concentration on God is found in its distribution of the materials. Firstly, there seems to be a movement from lament to praise. The first half of the Psalter is dominated by lament. This gives way to abundant praise in the last two books, with a deliberate five-fold doxological ending in Psalms 146-150. This development presents us with a particular view of God as the one who hears the cries of his people and who acts in liberating ways to transform the laments of his people into doxology.

5. For an extensive discussion of the relationship between text and canon, see Childs (1979:84-106).

- *A development from delighting in the torah to praising God:* If all attention remained fixed on the first psalm's delight in the *torah*, concern for corporeal existence could quite conceivably have dominated the Psalter. The predominance of praise in the latter part of the Psalter precludes such a reductionist focus. Our gaze is inexorably lifted Godwards. We are led into praise, into the recognition of God's overriding reality, into modes of prayer that finds unencumbered praise and adoration the only fitting response to God's acts of liberation in the world.
- *A development from human kings to Yahweh as king:* The first three books of the Psalter pray within the safety provided by human kings - the Davidic dynasty, to whom God has given his promises of protection and guidance. Psalm 89 ends the third book with a lament at the failure of the Davidic dynasty. It asks why God has not delivered on his promises to David. The fourth book provides the answer by holding up God as the true king of Israel, the One in charge of their destiny. Therefore Israel can find new resolution and hope. This is abundantly demonstrated in the last part of the Psalter's preference for praise. The key to this resolution and hope is the renewed focus on God - specifically on God Himself as the king of Israel. Even David's prayers can, once again, be taken up as part of Israel's praise.

3.2 Focus on life

Now we turn our attention to the Psalter's unswerving concern for life. The Psalter's concentration on God does not lead to a neglect of matters of everyday life or to otherworldliness. The prayers in the Psalter are thoroughly immersed in the concerns of human existence. They are earthy, sensitive to the depths of meaning of life at the extremes and in the mundane progression of everyday life. The following structural elements that are carriers of meaning, we will contend, for the canonical intentionality of the editors of the Psalter will demonstrate this proclivity:

- *Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction:* As we have stated, Psalms 1 and 2 function as an introduction to the Psalter. The themes introduced in these two psalms run through all of the Psalms. The subject-matter of this introduction will be elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5. For now it will suffice to say that the two psalms are full of meaning for concrete human existence. Psalm 1 offers a key to individual human existence through its focus on delight in the *torah* - God's instruction for living. Psalm 2 is concerned with public life by affirming God's rule on earth in the face of the menace of human power.
- *The development from lament to praise:* The first part of the Psalter has a high density of lament psalms. The last part has a high concentration of praise. We will

argue that this development of subject-matter is an intentional arrangement that follows the lines of earthly existence. There are no shortcuts to the resolution of conflict and pain. The fact that the psalms of disorientation are prayed *before* psalms of new orientation, demonstrates a seriousness with the painful aspect of human existence on the part of the Psalms. No part of existence is bypassed, no matter how disturbing or painful.

- *The headings*: The last structural element of the Psalter under discussion, is the headings supplied to the various individual psalms. We submit that the headings serve the function of anchoring the Psalms in concrete reality. By linking psalms (somewhat loosely) to historical persons and occurrences, a concrete context for these psalms are provided that make them applicable to the concrete life of the pray-ers of these psalms. “If David reacted in this manner to circumstances like these, so should I,” would be the argument. We will argue that this view of the Psalms’ function is also transferred to the Psalms without superscriptions.

An analysis of the final shape of the Psalter thus leads us to the conclusion that the Psalms juxtapose a focus on God and human life. They are equally serious about both and they never separate them. They find their source in a spirituality where seriousness about God and seriousness about life is two sides of the same coin. In the next two chapters we will have a closer look at these two dimensions of reality.

4. The Psalms as world-making and world maintenance

Before moving on to a fuller discussion of the way the Psalms turn us toward God and life, we wish to add a brief sociological perspective on the function of the Psalms in the community of faith. We will limit ourselves to the widely used concepts developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.⁶

Their work in the sociology of knowledge centre around the way human perceptions of reality are *formed* and *maintained*. They contend that the view an individual holds of reality is a social construction. They speak of “worlds” that are shaped by piecing together into one coherent whole the various impressions we get from observation.

This process of *world-making* is accomplished according to clues received from “significant others”, such as parents, family and friends, with whom one is involved

6. See Berger and Luckmann (1967), Berger (1967; 1969; 1979; 1992). For a summary of their work, see Ludik (1992:99-105). Brueggemann (1988) offers us a vivid example of the way Berger and Luckmann’s categories can be put to use in opening up new understanding of the Psalms.

in socialisation. A distinction is made between “primary socialisation” and “secondary socialisation.”

Primary socialisation is the interaction with persons at the outset of life. These persons convey first impressions, and assist in the construction of first and basic world-views. Their views on reality, conveyed in words and patterns of acting towards the person in question, are not perceived as their particular views, among a variety of views. They are simply taken as “the way things are”. They are not compared to other world-views, since none are available at that stage of life. These impressions fall, as it were, on a blank page. They are soon “reified” - i.e. believed to have an independent existence, separate from the persons articulating them (Berger and Luckmann 1966:106). This explains the pervasive strength of primary socialisation.

Secondary socialisation refers to social interactions conveying world-shaping meaning in a situation where a person already has a more or less settled world-view. This accounts for the weaker force exerted by secondary socialisation. If the impressions conveyed are at odds with this settled world-view, they are not accepted with the same simple certainty of those conveyed in primary socialisation. They are not immediately taken to be “the way things are” in the naive way associated with primary socialisation. They might be accepted as true, but the knowledge of the existence of competing world-views gives them much less impact than the impressions brought home during primary socialisation.

A world-view can lose its sense of reality. It cannot be taken for granted that, once settled, it will survive and determine a person’s perspective for the rest of his or her life. It may still be adhered to in a nominal way and receive ample lip-service, while a person has long since made telling adjustments to it and no longer acts according to it.

For a world-view to survive as a reality, it needs what Berger and Luckmann call a “plausibility structure”. A plausibility structure is a social group who articulates and confirms this view of reality. It does this in such a consistent way that persons belonging to the group can persist in viewing their world in terms of the structure of the group’s world-view and are influenced to act in accordance with its perspective. We are constantly being buffeted on all sides by competing world-views. This may soon cause us to lose our sense of the reality of our own world-view if it is not regularly confirmed by a social group or, in Berger’s terms, if it is not supported by a strong plausibility structure.

This is especially true of the modern and particularly of the post-modern situation where pluralism is such an inescapable factor. Berger is of the opinion that pluralism is the single most pervasive aspect of modern society. It erodes all truth-claims and tends to make them all seem equally tenuous as perspectives for life. Pluralism relegates all truth-claims to the level of personal opinion. A world-view becomes a matter of choice, susceptible to factors of personal convenience rather than that of self-evident truth.

It is easy to see that all of this has far-reaching implications for Christian faith. In an age of pluralism, Christians' grasp on the truth of the gospel and the life-shaping reality of their convictions, is severely threatened. Add to this the aggressive marketing of competing truth claims of materialistic and individualistic ideologies and the impact of religious pluralism, and one understands the tenuous position of the modern-day Christian. Berger and Luckmann's analysis argues strongly for the importance of the church as a vital factor for the maintenance of a Christian world-view. The community of saints acts as a plausibility structure that articulates and affirms the faith of the individual members. Small group meetings, informal conversations, testimonies by believers and church services and the like, serve a vital role in keeping Christians in contact with, to use Eugene Peterson's phrase, "the Real World" (Peterson 1998:109).

This brings us to the connection between the function of the Psalms in the Christian community and the modern-day context of the church. Brueggemann (1984:26; 1988:4) connects the insights of Berger and Luckmann to Mowinckel's early work on the creative power of public worship. In *Israel's Praise* (1988) he demonstrates the powerful impact of the Psalms in a context of worship. They function in a process of alternative world-making (Brueggemann 1988:1-28) in accordance with *Yahweh's* character and identity (Brueggemann 1988:29-53). This world-making process is, however, not always conducted in a way faithful to God. False world-views arise from vested interests and the power-struggles between human agencies. "Truth" is then made to serve the interests of those in power. When this happens, it is the task of worship to dismantle these ideologies (Brueggemann 1988:55-87). When these ideologies find their way into the church they tend to legitimise themselves with disfigured images of God. They produce idolatries. It is also the task of worship to nullify these ideologies and to offer, instead, a truthful representation of *Yahweh* (Brueggemann 1988:89-121).

Brueggemann's concern is particularly with the world-making and world-nullifying power of the praise-psalms. This is most evident in the praise-psalms, but can be said to be the effect the whole of the Psalter has when it is utilised in worship. We

will argue in the next chapter that the Psalter has a structure characterised by its development towards praise. All the psalm-types can be related to the hymns of praise in some way or another. The Psalter may even be faithfully summarised by its Hebrew title, תהלים (praises). The hymns of praise represent the full flowering of the world-making and world-nullifying power of all the psalms.

We are concerned with the need for a particular type of spirituality - one that departs from the secularist dualism of modernistic ideology; one that departs from the privatised idol of modernistic religion. Humanly speaking, the odds are stacked against such an enterprise. The pluralism of modern-day society erodes the truth-claims of the church in this regard. The secularist ideology and privatisation so much in evidence in our time, seems set in concrete and both have found expression in publicly acclaimed types of spirituality. It will take a force as powerful as that exerted by Christian worship to dismantle these forces and reinstate a spirituality that takes God to be the decisive factor in private and public life and to be the deity in evidence both in the sacred and the secular sphere.

The Psalms have proven themselves to be peculiarly powerful in terms of world making, world maintenance, and nullifying false worlds. The reasons will not be hard to see if our main argument in the next two chapters is followed. They are concerned with the most basic aspects of the world of faith, namely the fact of God's overpowering existence and his relation to human existence. As such the Psalms deserve an important part in the life of the church. This was the case in the past. Something clearly needs to be done to reinstate them as a basic part of Christian devotion. We will end each of the following two chapters with a short discussion of the way the Psalms create world-views that take God seriously (Chapter 4) and take life seriously (Chapter 5).

5. Disclaimers

Before launching into the last three chapters, one important disclaimer needs to be made. The following two chapters do not claim to offer a comprehensive treatment of the Psalms. Chapters 4 and 5 simply have the purpose of gathering *enough* evidence for the basic premise of this study - that the Psalms present us with an integrated and passionate concern for both God and human life. Based on this evidence, Chapter 6 makes a number of proposals about the way the Psalms may function as a congregational strategy that instils this dual focus in the spirituality it sponsors. We hope the proposals will be conclusive, not by being comprehensive, but, once again, by opening up *enough* possibilities for ministry to facilitate prayer of a holistic nature.

In saying this, we do not mean to excuse sloppiness or ignorance of important research. We do, however mean to narrow a very broad field of research down to a manageable size.

6. Summary

Chapter 3 started out by broaching the matter of congregational strategies for the facilitation of spiritual growth. Prayer was emphasised as a particularly crucial part of any congregational strategy. The importance of a prayer life that pays equal attention to God and human life, and which keeps the inherent interconnections between these two aspects of reality together, was emphasised. Praying the Psalms in communal and individual prayer was put forward as a congregational strategy that would attain this.

Two approaches to the Psalms were suggested. *The first approach* is to view the subject-matter of the Psalms with the help of Walter Brueggemann's interpretative categories of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. *The second approach* is to take clues to the meaning of the Psalter from its canonical shape. Both of these approaches confirm the contention that the Psalms provide us with prayers that can assist a congregation in cultivating the kind of spirituality we have stated as our concern.

The chapter closed with the sociological perspective of Berger and Luckmann on the way world-views come into being and are maintained. This analysis was used to point to the importance of the community of faith and its worship. When used in Christian worship, the Psalms function as tools for world-making and for dismantling competing world-views. Finally, a summary was made of Brueggemann's use of the categories of Berger and Luckmann to elaborate on this function of the Psalms.

CHAPTER 4: TAKING GOD SERIOUSLY

“Angels, I read, belong to nine different orders. Seraphs are the highest; they are aflame with love for God, and stand closer to him than the others. Seraphs love God; cherubs, who are second, possess perfect knowledge of him. So love is greater than knowledge; how could I have forgotten? The seraphs are born of a stream of fire issuing from under God’s throne. They are, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, ‘all wings,’ having, as Isaiah noted, six wings apiece, two of which they fold over their eyes. Moving perpetually toward God, they perpetually praise him, crying Holy, Holy, Holy.... But, according to some rabbinic writings, they can sing only the first ‘Holy’ before the intensity of their love ignites them again and dissolves them again, perpetually, into flames” (Annie Dillard 1977:45).

This chapter examines the way in which the Psalms take God seriously. The Psalms are characterised by a profound and stubborn resistance to any notion that God is either not real or not an active participant in the events of life on earth.

We will begin by using Brueggemann’s three interpretative categories of orientation, disorientation and new orientation to provide an overview of ways the subject-matter of the Psalms views the reality of God and the way He interacts with human existence.

We will then move on to investigate how the psalmists’ grounding in the reality of God determined the final shape of the Psalms.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the social relevance of the Psalms for the faith community. We will argue that the Psalms provide us with the possibility of resistance against the secularising tendency of the modern-day context of the church.

1. Orientation: Praying the Psalms in times of equilibrium

Walter Brueggemann provides us with two important perspectives on the function of the Psalms. In *The message of the Psalms* (1984), he developed a threefold interpretative scheme for the Psalms. His scheme reflects the full range of human experience. The Psalms, seen from this perspective, *express* all aspects of human existence before God. This slots in well with our working definition of spirituality. The Psalms bring human existence before God in prayer. There is a sense in which life can only be affirmed if it is first brought into the sanctuary. Worship is a primary

activity if one is to live wisely and well. Proper perspectives for life are gained only by bringing the elements of our lives before God.

If the Psalms can bring “the elements of our lives” into our times of worship, they would obviously tend to shape them in accordance with the reality that worship presents us with. In *Israel's praise* (1988), Brueggemann explores the Psalms from a second perspective - they also *shape* human experience and spirituality. We will come back to this at the end of this chapter.

On first consideration Brueggemann's scheme seems to be useful only for a discussion of the Psalms' seriousness about life. This is not the case, as we will demonstrate below. Though Brueggemann's scheme consists of existential categories, it is concerned with life *before God*. The Psalms are instances of prayer and liturgical activity in all the various seasons of life. As such, they do not give human existence precedence over prayer and focus on God, but place worship in the context of concrete human existence. Brueggemann's categories will be utilised in this chapter to establish the total seriousness with which God is taken under all the different sets of conditions in life.

We now come to the first of Brueggemann's three categories of psalms, *the psalms of orientation*. There are times when life is characterised by coherence, stability and well-being. During these times God is known to be reliable and trustworthy.

The psalms of orientation give expression to this faith in God's reliability. Brueggemann discerns five types of psalms of orientation (Brueggemann 1984:25-49). They correspond roughly with Westermann's descriptive hymns (Westermann 1980:81-92; 1981:116-42). They perceive life as good and well-ordered and claim that this state of affairs will endure. The five types of psalms of orientation Brueggemann distinguishes all focus sharply on God. Each type speaks about God's reliability and care for the world in different ways:

1.1 Types of psalms of orientation

1.1.1 Songs of creation (Pss 8, 33, 104, 145 etc.)

Songs of creation concentrate on the created world and life's regularities and affirm that they are ordained and sustained by God (Brueggemann 1984:28). The constancy and rhythms of the world and of life are considered to be his way of bestowing blessings upon us.

It is easy to see that these psalms keep us serious about God. They prevent us from falling into self-sufficiency and from marginalising God during times when crises do not remind us of our reliance upon him. They keep us serious about God when we might be particularly susceptible to other loyalties or when we might be tempted into secularising God into the margins of life.

1.1.2 Songs of *torah* (Pss 1, 19, 119, 15, 24 etc.)

Songs of *torah* extend the view of the order of creation with their view of the *torah* (Brueggemann 1984:38). God's power, faithfulness, and graciousness is not only observed in the reliability of creation, but also in his gift of the *torah*. The *torah* is understood not simply in terms of morality, but as God's will and purpose. It opens up the possibility to live in a peaceable world where social interaction is carried out in accordance with God's will and purpose. Such a social world is seen as of one piece with the ordered creation. Glad and thankful obedience to the *torah* is understood as the way to respond to and fully honour God's well-oriented world.

These Psalms prevent obedience to the law from falling into legalism and so to lose sight of the Law-Giver and his intentions. Obedience to the *torah* is never simply a case of adhering to the rules. It is always obedience to *God*. Receiving the benefits of obedience to the law is never viewed as the fruit of human accomplishment, but always as a gift that reminds us of God's care and reliability. These psalms keep us serious about God when we might easily slip off into a kind of humanist ethics that is more concerned with human potential than with God.

1.1.3 Wisdom Psalms (Pss 37, 14 etc.)

Wisdom Psalms bear some resemblance to the songs of *torah*. They are related expressions of a well-ordered, reliable world (Brueggemann 1984:42-45). Old Testament wisdom writings make the theological point that well-being depends on knowing the order of creation, especially as it is experienced in the community as social structure. These psalms have an instructional purpose. Their aim is to induce socially acceptable modes of behaviour in the young.

These psalms present us with a view of wisdom that takes God seriously. The benefits reaped by society when life is conducted along the lines of wisdom are understood as a confirmation that this is God's world. Where God is absent there are no norms, no boundaries, no structure. In such a world a person has only himself or herself to rely on and has no supports beyond his or her own limited resources. Living according to wisdom bases life on the resources God provides. Deviation

from the tenets of wisdom places one at risk because it isolates one from the safety of God's reliable sustenance.

1.1.4 Songs of retribution (Pss 111 and 112)

Songs of retribution are closely related to wisdom psalms. They make the unqualified statement that the world is ruled by God with moral symmetry (Brueggemann 1984:45). The world is structured in such a way that persons always inherit the consequences of their actions. Good deeds are rewarded. Evil is punished.

These psalms do not doubt the decisive significance of God's activity in the world. They perceive righteousness in the world because of God's character. He is a righteous God who assures that justice is done (Brueggemann 1984:46). Life can only be lived satisfactorily if it takes this moral structure of the world into account.

1.1.5 Psalms for occasions of well-being (Pss 131, 133 etc.)

Psalms for occasions of well-being speak of the orderliness and reliability in the way society orders itself as an outflow of God's orderly management of creation (Brueggemann 1984:47-9). These psalms comment on the quiet, unobtrusive sustenance of God in the daily pattern of life in the family, household, and tribe. They also refer to regularity in the predictable occurrences of birth, marriage, death, seed-time, and harvest.

The regularities in social life and creation are not viewed as something that can be taken for granted, but are interpreted as reflections of the Creator's character of steadfastness and reliability. These psalms claim that God's goodness finds concrete expression in these blessings. Though God is nowhere visible, He is discerned as "the guarantor of the critical points through which life is affirmed and enhanced (Brueggemann 1984:47). Once again we find the psalms of orientation ultimately interested in God. The regularity and structure of life is depicted as having its origin in God and not in human proficiency.

1.2 Insisting on God's goodness as seriousness

One of the most important threads that run through all five types of psalms of orientation is their interest in God. They are God-talk in good times. They experience order and well-being as proof of God's order in the world and not primarily as a result of human proficiency.

The writers of these psalms could just as well have fallen into the easy temptation of forgetting God in the good times and lapsing into self-sufficiency. They could just as well have settled for a kind of lip-service to God that perceives no connections between the fact of God and the plenty and stability in life.

Instead, these psalms teach us to refer to God in these times. They affirm God as the source of *shalom*. They function as reminders of our dependence on God at all times. They do this by identifying God as the source of the goodness with which we are surrounded. Instead of replacing God as our primary points of focus, these blessings become reminders of and pointers to God.

Praying these psalms in times of equilibrium and stability helps us to remember the source of these blessings. We are taught to decipher the constancy and reliability of life as a pointer to God's goodness. We learn to respond to God in gratitude for his blessings and to take him into account continuously.

2. Disorientation: Praying the Psalms in times of disarray

“[The Psalms] do not permit us to ignore and deny the darkness, personally or publicly, for that is where new life is given, whether on the third day or by some other uncontrolled schedule at work among us” (Brueggemann 1984:12).

Life is seldom a smooth procession of happy occurrences. There are times when we are faced with harsh realities and when the moral coherence that is so self-evident in times of equilibrium seems to have disappeared completely. Two issues are pertinent in these times of disarray.

The first is the questions raised about God's character and presence. How is this state of affairs to be explained in the light of God's covenantal love and irresistible power? This issue will be the main subject of the rest of this section.

The second issue is intimately linked to the questions about God, but concerns the subject of the next chapter. It is the issue of the choice between a “False Self” and candor. The “False Self” is a psychological category gleaned from object-relations theory, that describes the pattern where a person does not have the ego-strength to be committed in a mature relationship. The person suppresses his or her own feelings and only allows himself or herself positive responses as a pattern of discourse. Applied to religious discourse, it means that only doxology is practised. Lament is

not allowed. Candor is suppressed. Guilt and fear characterise the relationship and a coerced pattern of self-deceptive or resentful obedience is established (Brueggemann 1995:103-4).

This coping manoeuvre seems quite pious at first glance. It seems like unswerving faith in the face of adversity - "praising the Lord anyway". In fact, it might be nothing but a lack of candor towards God, stemming from a lack of trust and a lack of covenantal communication. There are no short-cuts from orientation to disorientation. Any coping strategy that refuses to make the raw facts of life part of the covenantal conversation jumps the biblical track and can at best produce a warped spirituality. This issue of a "False Self" and candor will be under discussion in the next chapter.

This section deals with the candid prayers of Israel in times when stability and safety were threatened or had fallen into disarray. We are particularly interested in the way these prayers focus on God. We will begin with a discussion of the types of psalms of disorientation which Brueggemann (1984) distinguishes. We then move on to the various coping strategies we find in these psalms. It will become clear that these coping strategies take full account of God as the major factor in times of crisis. We close with a discussion of candor as an act of faith.

2.1 Types of psalms of disorientation

A large number of psalms are psalms of lament, protest, and complaint about the disarray and incoherence experienced in the world. In fact, they are the most abundant of all the psalm types.

The remarkable thing about these psalms is that they are addressed to God. One could be induced to think that a collapse of the well-ordered world of the psalms of orientation would have led Israel to give up its belief in God. Instead, these psalms represent an insistence on God in the face of adversity. These psalms demonstrate how, instead of causing them to give up their belief in God, their new situation in life led them into new ways of thinking about God. Each of the types of psalms of disorientation under discussion demonstrates a Jacob-like tenacity in clinging to God, even if it means revision of previously held notions about him.

2.1.1 Personal lament (Pss 13, 35, 86 etc.)

These psalms constitute a considerable part of the Psalter. The issue here is that something is amiss in the relationship with God, and that it cannot stay that way

(Brueggemann 1984:58). The psalmists often give quite vivid descriptions of their experience of concrete problems. Yet their final analysis of the problem stresses the *theological* dimension - the problem is seen as one that concerns their relationship with God. They do not merely seek solutions and answers to their problems. They seek repair in their relationship with God. The crisis in their relationship with God is the root of their external crisis in the world. These psalms never separate theological and physical crises (Brueggemann 1984:59). This aspect of the personal laments clearly demonstrates their concern with God.

A second element in these psalms that point us to their orientation towards God, is the fact that they usually conclude in doxology. This is not a kind of pious cover-up of the hard facts of life. The doxologies in no way diminish the candor in troubled times. The fact that these doxologies occur in this specific context make them all the more remarkable as statements of trust in God. These doxologies speak of God's character, and this is perceived as the ground for their hope. The doxologies also speak of assurance of being heard and of God's propensity to act on behalf of his people. There is hardly any need to comment on the fact that this doxological element demonstrates a full acknowledgement of God as the overriding factor in situations of disorientation.

It is evident that the personal laments demonstrate a seriousness about God in times of trouble. They do so without playing down the psalmists' problems in any way, and this makes this affirmation of God all the more remarkable.

2.1.2 Communal laments (Pss 74, 79, 137 etc.)

Whereas the personal laments concentrate on personal crises, the communal laments concentrate on public calamities. The important point, for this chapter, is that these psalms think *theologically* about public events of loss (Brueggemann 1984:67). In a similar way to the typical structure of the personal laments, these psalms connect public loss with loss of *Yahweh's* favour. Yearnings for restitution of losses are connected with yearnings for God, for Zion, for the temple (for example Psalm 137:5-6). Though these psalms centre around public calamities, their true focus is on God. The calamity is turned into an occasion for a public turn towards God.

These psalms, like the personal laments, present us with a more complex picture of God than that of the psalms of orientation. On the one hand there is talk of his wrath, anger, vengeance and power. This is invoked against enemies. It is also said that this anger has been stirred up against Israel by their disloyalty towards him. On the other hand, these psalms focus on God's compassion, salvation, deliverance, forgiveness

and attention to the cries of the helpless. Israel places its hope for deliverance on these aspects of God's person. Here we meet a mysterious God in whom we have a juxtaposition of vengeance and compassion (Brueggemann 1984:72). It is precisely to this God that Israel turns in its public calamities. They take him seriously as a God who decisively influences the shape of public events.

2.1.3 Two problem psalms (Pss 88, 109)

The two psalms Brueggemann singles out from the rest of the laments are not different in subject-matter, but in intensity. They may be described as "a full descent" into the pit (Brueggemann 1984:77-8). Psalm 88 is concerned with the silence of God (Brueggemann 1984:78-81). Psalm 109 is concerned with total vindictiveness towards other human beings who have seriously violated the speaker (Brueggemann 1984:81-88). They form a negative pair in contrast with the two great commandments in Mk 12:28-34. They provide prayers in extreme situations of disharmony with God and man.

Because of their unique intensity, they present us with unique theological questions. When they speak about God, they speak about the silence of God. Psalm 88 addresses unanswered pleas at an empty sky - or so it seems. But this does not deter the psalmist. The point we should not miss is that this experience does not lead him into atheism. The faith of Israel is such that this experience of God's silence leads them to more intense address. *Yahweh* must be addressed, even if *Yahweh* does not answer (Brueggemann 1984:79). Seriousness about God is not abolished when He seems to remain silent.

When Psalm 109 spews out its rage at God in fifteen passionate verses, it does this in the conviction that God is a God of vengeance, who will work his way with such people as his enemies.¹

"This is not a soft, romantic god who tolerates and forgives, but one who takes seriously his own rule and the well-being of his partners" (Brueggemann 1984:85).

1. We are well aware that Brueggemann's interpretation of vv 6-19 as imprecations aimed at the psalmist's adversaries is far from settled. Many commentators (among others, Kraus, Weiser, Zenger) and many translations (including the 1983 Afrikaans translation and the NRSV) support the view that the psalmist is, in actual fact, repeating the imprecations his enemies utter against him. The original text does not indicate whose words these are. One should, though, keep in mind that, even if Brueggemann's interpretation is incorrect, the problem of imprecatory psalms still persist. There is enough imprecation left in Psalm 109 (see v 29) to necessitate an explanation. Many other psalms are characterised by harsh imprecatory statements. Therefore we repeat Brueggemann's comments on Psalm 109. They are of value for the whole problem of the imprecatory psalms.

God is entrusted with the rage of the psalmist, because it is believed that God will act. To be sure, He will act in his own unique way, as Jonah found out to his dismay (Jnh 4:2). Entrusting this rage to God also means relinquishing it, turning it loose into the hands of God. When God says, "Vengeance is mine" (Dt 32:35; Rm 12:19), He implies, "and not yours." Psalm 109 is an unburdening of the responsibility of vengeance. It is, therefore, above all, an act of submission to God; an act of faith. It is also a recognition of God's governance (Brueggemann 1984:87). It speaks from the conviction that God upholds a moral universe in which unjust acts do not go unnoticed.

These psalms may be an embarrassment to conventional faith, but they represent the extreme point of Israel's seriousness about God. The psalmists have come to the extreme limits of endurance and they experience only the silence of God and the relentless pursuit of enemies. Still they resolutely refuse to abandon their reliance on him.

2.1.4 "A second opinion" on the disorientation (Pss 50, 81 etc.)

These psalms give "a second opinion" on disorientation by looking at the situation from God's angle. God Himself speaks about the reasons for disorientation. This is a logical development in Israel's religious thought, since their relationship with God was viewed as a covenantal relationship. Matters that concern one of the partners also concern the other. This is especially pertinent in situations of disorientation, since they are viewed as problems in the relationship between God and Israel and not simply as passages of life or as faceless situations (Brueggemann 1984:88). The covenant assumed that God would provide a well-oriented life if Israel acted from trust and obedience. When orientation collapses, the trouble is with one or the other of the parties, except in instances where a third party (the enemy) is responsible for the skewed situation. Israel often assumed that the trouble lay with God. In cases where the trouble was caused by human agents, God was also seen as the court of appeal. God was then taken up on his offer of protection from enemies.

These psalms find the root of the problem in the relationship between God and Israel in Israel's apostasy. They provide God's point of view on this situation. God speaks out against his people and calls them to repentance so that the covenant may be restored.

These psalms take God with total seriousness by opting to listen to him in times of disorientation. They take him seriously enough to receive the abrasive truth about themselves, so that the matter may be dealt with and the covenant restored.

2.1.5 “The seven psalms” (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143)

These psalms distinguish themselves from the other psalms of disorientation by their readiness to concede guilt and by their high degree of intimacy. It is as if all formal approaches have been tried and found inadequate for the intensity of the issue at hand. All that remains is to be transparent about their guilt (Brueggemann 1984:94-5).

The focus on God is total in these psalms. The psalmists are preoccupied with the relationship with God, more than with the disorientation itself. They are aware that the issue of guilt can only be solved by God Himself. For this reason they take recourse to direct and intimate struggle with Him, in the hope that He might bring about something new.

2.1.6 After the deluge - Thou! (Pss 49, 73, 90 etc.)

This last group of psalms functioning in times of disorientation, appear to be more reflective statements than the previous types discussed (Brueggemann 1984:106). They are somewhat removed from the first shock of disorientation. The issue is still very real, but there is evidence that the situation has been worked through and they have come to terms with it. This does not mean that the disjunctive realities are accepted as normative. There is evidence of a confidence that God is a reality who will finally override the duress that seems so decisive in the present. There is a stark realism about the disfunctionalities faced, but it is a reinterpreted realism that is made provisional by God’s sovereignty (Brueggemann 1984:106).

The seriousness about God that epitomises the psalms of disorientation seems to have won the day here. It has now led the psalmist to a point where the reality of God overrides the reality of suffering and unease. These psalms are squarely focused on God, but with no denial of the extent of the disorientation.

2.2 Coping strategies

Times of disarray stimulate a completely new set of questions about God. Approaches to life that worked well in times of orientation will not suffice. It is no longer possible to cope by persistently maintaining that one need only to live in

accordance with the *torah* and the inherent structures of life and then expect things to turn to your advantage. Creation and social reality now seem far less reliable and the modes of God's reliability need reinterpretation if they are to provide any sense of coherence.

The psalms of disorientation demonstrate a very specific way of facing the reality of God in new ways when the stability of life is shattered. What follows is a summary of the way the Psalms brought the overall pattern of Israel's thought to speech in times of disorientation.

2.2.1 Turning to God

The first thing that we should notice is that the psalms of disorientation are in essence a turn to God. Israel had an acute sense that they were not left to their own devices, but that God could introduce new, unimaginable possibilities into their situation.

This move is the direct result of the hold that covenantal thinking had on Israel. Their relationship with God was, above all, a *covenantal* relationship - it placed obligations on both partners. This understanding made God part of their struggle to cope under these new circumstances. Walter Brueggemann (1995:105) finds the following pattern of thought behind the manner in which Israel made this turn towards God:

1. Things are not right in the present arrangement.
2. They need not stay this way and can be changed.
3. The speaker will not accept things as they are, for the present arrangement is intolerable.
4. It is God's obligation to change things.

The system they have put their trust in up to this point has broken down. There is nothing to do but to turn to God. Brueggemann points out that the lament can follow two different directions at this stage of the argument:

On the one hand it can move into *an appeal to God addressed against a neighbour or enemy* who is the cause of the disarray (Brueggemann 1995:105). Psalm 109 may be cited as an extreme case of this move. God should ensure that justice is done, even if it means obliterating the enemy.

On the other hand, the complaint can be *addressed to God against God* (Brueggemann 1995:106). Psalm 88 may be cited as an extreme case. The crisis is viewed as fundamentally at odds with the expected conditions under the rule of God. God is reminded of his covenantal promises.

One should also point to a third direction prayer takes in the Psalter in situations of disarray. It can also be *addressed to God as penitence for transgressions*. The seven penitential psalms (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) are the prime examples of this. Psalm 51 is the clearest example of this move.

These options constitute a dramatic departure from the uncomplicated world of orientation. The next three sections take a closer look at these three moves.

2.2.2 Accusing God

The most daring move Israel makes in its laments is to put the blame for the situation on God. The psalmists confront God with the painful state of their disorientation and remind him of (a) the covenant with Abraham and the resultant history of allegiance between Israel and God, and (b) their innocence in matters pertaining to their crisis. The clearest example of this strategy found outside the Psalter, is in the book of Job. Job protests his innocence in the face of his friends' persistence on sin as the explanation for his distress. He faces God with demands for equitable treatment.

The psalms in which this move is made, have a desperate ring to them. They find God strangely silent. They ask if the present state of affairs means that God has discontinued his past way of acting towards them (for instance in Psalms 44 and 77:9). Yet they push on, remembering the past and trusting God to be true to Himself. Sometimes they articulate a variety of possible explanations for God's seeming absence, almost as if they are testing them to see which sounds right. Psalm 44 gives us a clear example of this:

“But now you have rejected and humbled us ...” (Ps 44:9).

“You gave us up to be devoured like sheep ...” (Ps 44:11).

“Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?” (Ps 44:23).

“Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?” (Ps 44:24).

Psalm 44 tries out various explanations for God's seeming reluctance to make good on his promises: He has rejected and humbled them; He has given them up; He has fallen asleep; He has ignored them and forgotten their sorry state.

This kind of talk may seem blasphemous at first. Upon closer examination, though, we should recognise it as thoroughly covenantal. These psalms stolidly refuse to accept that God would not honour his commitment to Israel. This faith in God's fidelity is not based on meritorious behaviour by Israel, but on God's faithfulness to his own nature. What they are saying to God, in essence, is that they stake all on their covenant with him and on his character. They cannot accept the present state of affairs, because this would not be worthy of God. They remind him of his own nature and petition Him to prove these possibilities to be false.

From this perspective these prayers prove themselves as taking God extremely seriously - to the point where they take the risk of confronting him and of making bold claims on the strength of the covenant. They come to God in their extremity and pound on his chest with covenantal passion.

These psalms provide us with prayers with which we can vent our hurt and feelings of abandonment towards God in a constructive way. When we are at the end of our tether, anything less than this will verge on atheism. Docile acceptance of fate would attest either to a lack of seriousness about God's promises, or to a warped view of God that takes little or no account of his fundamental commitment to his promises and to justice and liberation.

2.2.3 Selfaccusation

The second possible move in situations of extremity is the move to selfaccusation. The predicament the psalmist faces is understood as the outcome of sin. Sin is not viewed in the abstract. It is seen as concrete deeds, with concrete consequences. These consequences are faced and the psalmist turns to God for a resolution of the problem.

The dysfunctional social or physical situation caused by sin is not the primary focus of the Psalms. They view sin as, first and foremost, a theological problem. The most telling blow sin strikes is in its disruption of the relationship with God. Therefore restoration of this relationship is the key to finding our way out of the present mire.

This does not mean that the relationship with God is ever viewed as *merely* a way to get things smoothed out. The skewering of the relationship with God is experienced

as by far the biggest deprivation in the disoriented situation. There is to be reconciliation at all costs. The prospect of permanent severance from God is feared far more than any other prospective loss. Therefore we find that these psalms almost disregard other troubles at times or, at other times, place the yearning for the restoration of the relationship with God ahead of seemingly more pressing crises. In the midst of crisis and pain, Israel is constantly concerned with the theological dimension of their suffering: "Does this painful situation mean that we are at odds with God? Does this place the covenant in jeopardy?" These concerns receive full attention when they become convinced of their own sin and sloth.

This situation poses new questions about God: Will He honour the covenant, in spite of Israel's infidelity? Will He contain his rage against Israel - the rage evidenced in their unfortunate situation? Will He extract judgement or will He be merciful? The answer these psalms come up with is not one that is to be had without much anguish: God is found to be the unique One, the One who is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps 103:8-10). God's faithfulness to his covenant is greater than his wrath at sin and infidelity. He is approachable for those who show a contrite spirit. These psalms are filled with the evangelical certainty of God's ability to forgive and heal.

This move, once again, points to the Psalms' passionate concern with God. Even when the psalmists have full reason to be taken in by their own miserable situation, they place priority on the theological aspect of their plight. Their focus is, first and foremost, on restoring the relationship with God. The rest of their plight is seen to be the result of this relational problem and will follow suit, once things have been put right with God.

2.2.4 In the face of my enemies

The third possible move the Psalms may make in situations of disorientation is to lodge a complaint against the neighbour, who is identified as the source of misfortune. Sometimes this move can entail unrestrained vehemence. It is often hard to reconcile this unbridled hate with the New Testament call for love of one's enemies.

Yet these psalms abound. The talk about enemies in the Psalms is only surpassed in frequency by talk about God. Much of this vehemence is directed against the surrounding nations, who always posed a threat to Israel's existence. But many of these psalms were addressed against fellow-Israelites - slanderers, scoffers and the

like, those who had falsely accused them in court, those who had gained the upper hand economically and politically and used their position to perpetrate injustice.

The first (and most important) attribute of the enemy-psalms is that they are directed at God. If we miss this point, we will be hard put to explain their presence in the Bible.

Though some of these psalmists are clearly aggravated when they lay this problem before God, some others demonstrate serene confidence: This is God's problem. He will see to it that justice is done, as He has done so often in the past. These psalms may contain some desperate calls for vengeance, but they demonstrate an overall certainty that evil is contained by God. The present state of affairs is only temporary. Justice - God's justice - will prevail.

Some enemy-psalms are less serene. When enemies seemed to gain the upper hand, questions about God's providence and protection came to the fore. Most of these questions revolved around the covenant. Did God not enter a covenant with Israel that promised protection from enemies? What of God's well known covenant fidelity (ἰσχυρὸς)?

In many of these psalms God's past saving deeds are retold as reminders of his nature as a god who can be trusted to take the part of his covenantal partners. When this is put alongside their present predicament, they find themselves at a loss for an explanation. Their situation is aggravated by their questions about God. Has He dropped off to sleep? Has He given up on his covenant with Israel? Has his nature changed? Has He turned his back on them? Is the present state of affairs the result of his anger at them?²

Though Israel place the blame for their misery squarely on the shoulders of their enemies, these psalms demonstrate that they knew that any resolution for the situation had to start with God. He was part of the situation, even if they could not understand what his part was. Even if their enemies were the cause of their troubles, they would not have been able to do what they had done without God at least allowing it. The crisis of human enemies was also a *theological* crisis. Such was the price paid for Israel's persistence in disallowing the severance of the ties between God and even the smallest part of reality. However, this very fact also allowed for complete resolution of the problem of enemies and the quenching of the resultant anger.

2. See our discussion in section 2.2.2 of the present chapter.

This brings us to *the second attribute* of the enemy-psalms. It is clear that, in spite of the vehement rhetoric, the lust for vengeance is not acted out. Vengeance is left in God's hands. After venting all of these feelings, God is entrusted with the issue of justice. Pet hates are given up in the firm belief that God will see that equity is reached and the past dealt with. Once again we have a clear case of total commitment to the fact of God as the overriding factor in life. God is depicted in these psalms as the court of appeal in matters of injustice.

One should note that ceding the responsibility for justice to God is a much more incisive act than would seem at first glance. It is more than merely recruiting him as a kind of cosmic "big brother" to put the bullies in their place. They leave the whole matter in God's hands, in the full knowledge that He might do as it pleases Him. They know full well that God is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jnh 4:2). They know that He might relent, as He did in the case of Nineveh, but they also accept that this is what it means to stake all of existence on God. Therefore they turn to God in an act of relinquishment, with the knowledge that they are submitting the matter to God's free action (Brueggemann 1984:86).

Brueggemann (1984:86) describes this as a "vitaly faithful" act. It takes full account of God's nature and is willing to submit to Him, even if it means letting go of rightful claims to vengeance. The irony is that this costly submission to God's way turns out to be not only vitaly faithful. It is also "healthily human" (Brueggemann 1984:86). It steers the pray-er away from the two destructive possibilities of repression (that inevitably destroys the victim) or violent retaliation (that destroys the perpetrator). This costly faithfulness leads to release of the drive for vengeance to the governance of God.

In summary then, we find the enemy-psalms to be utterly serious about God. They take him seriously enough to open their hearts to him - even if it means revealing their worst thoughts and most repulsive wishes. The next subsection will deal more fully with the way candor discloses faith in God. The abrasive utterances in the enemy-psalms are instances of total candor towards God. They also take him seriously enough to refrain from taking matters into their own hands. They leave vengeance to Him, even if it might lead to a reprieve for their enemy.

2.3 Candor as faith

"[T]he laments show clearly that biblical faith, as it faces life fully, is uncompromisingly and unembarrassedly dialogic. Israel and Israelites in their

hurt have to do with God, and God has to do with them. The laments are addressed to someone!" (Brueggemann 1995:68).

Brueggemann points out that the modern failure to insert the element of lament into our liturgy and prayer leads us to be seduced into nondialogical forms of faith. The only dialogical forms allowed in modern liturgical life are those that are "polite and filled only with gratitude" (Brueggemann 1995:68). This leaves no room for the expression of anger and pain.

Brueggemann elaborates on this in *The costly loss of lament* (Brueggemann 1995:98-111). He points to two losses with far-reaching consequences for the faith community.

The first is the loss of genuine covenant interaction. The second party in the covenant has become voiceless. God is surrounded by "yes-men and women." The result is denial, cover-up, and pretence (Brueggemann 1995:102), psychological inauthenticity (Brueggemann 1995:111). A "False Self", bad faith develops (Brueggemann 1995:103). A religion of coercive obedience becomes the only possibility (Brueggemann 1995:104).

The second loss is the stifling of the question of theodicy (Brueggemann 1995:104). By "theodicy" he does not refer to abstract questions about evil, but to the "capacity to raise and legitimate questions of justice in terms of social goods, social access, and social power" (Brueggemann 1995:104). This loss, according to Brueggemann, has more to do with questions of *justice* than with questions of *God*. Losing the capacity to ask questions about theodicy takes spirituality out of the public realm, where questions of justice dominate. It leads to social immobility (Brueggemann 1995:111).

The first of these losses concerns us in this chapter. It is self-evident that nondialogical forms of interaction do not take God seriously - at least not the covenant God of the Bible. Dialogue with God lies at the heart of biblical faith. If this dialogue is to be a true dialogue, that is, a dialogue where both partners can speak for their own selves, lament has to have an important place. Without lament vast tracts of human experience are left unsaid. Any holding back from the human partner in the covenant would amount to a reduction of the covenantal relationship.

This brings us to the issue of candor. The coping strategies explored in the previous section are all instances of complete candor. It takes very little candor to apportion blame to enemies. It does, however demonstrate a remarkable amount of candor to

offer God the deep feelings of hate and revenge we find in some of the enemy-psalms. It takes an even greater degree of candor to admit one's own fault when things turn against one. Human beings are not known for their tendency to freely admit when they are at fault.

The most remarkable instance of candor, however, is found in the psalms that accuse God. This kind of candor represents a terrifying risk. It may be that the questions and accusations addressed to God can result in the final verdict that God is either non-existent or that He does not care. This is the question asked in passages such as Psalm 77:8-11: Has God changed his ways? Is He still the God of old, or has He turned his back on us?

These are hard questions, questions where all is put at risk. This very fact should lead us to recognise that these questions are, as such, bold acts of faith (Brueggemann 1984:52). They are not acts of despair, but acts of hope (Brueggemann 1984:65). They believe firmly enough in God to put their beliefs to the test.

Unquestioning subservience may, at first glance, seem to represent boundless faith in times of disorientation. In fact, it may rather be a demonstration of a "False Self". It may be the result of an unwillingness to take the risks of candor. It may be no more than a human defence mechanism that avoids putting real weight on one's faith in God's providence.

Therefore the candor in these psalms should not be viewed as inappropriate speech. They issue from a deep trust in God. They believe that his דָּוָם will endure the present crisis. They also demonstrate a willingness to bring all of life to speech before God. No part of life is withheld from the conversation with God. Questions of theodicy are not held back. This demonstrates a total commitment to God and total trust in his fidelity (Brueggemann 1984:52).

If one proceeds from this insight, it is clear why the psalms of new orientation are so overwhelming in their joyous exuberance and trust in God. The psalmists have risked all and found their God to be the God of the exodus, the God of their forefathers - true to his covenant and loyal to his people. This is more than "a lucky break". It affirms a trustworthy structure to reality by inserting an almighty and caring God. Placed after the laments, as they are in experience, the hymns of praise and psalms of thanksgiving have an "I-told-you-so" quality about them. They represent a faith tested to the limit and found abundantly sufficient.

2.4 Clinging to God as seriousness

Overall, we find the psalms of disorientation singularly serious about God.

Where the temptation is to forget God in times of equilibrium and to concentrate on human proficiency and on the blessings of these times, times of disarray confront us with the complete opposite temptation. We are tempted to give up on God. We are confronted with the possibility that God has either turned away from us or that He had never been there in the first place. We are presented with the possibility of total despondency.

The psalms of disorientation stubbornly resist any such notion. They become angry, vengeful; they plead, cajole, reason. But all of this is directed at God Himself. Even a thoroughly depressed prayer like Psalm 88 is still, above all, *a prayer*. It is addressed to God and arises from the conviction that God is there, that He is a conversation partner. Even an explosion of vengeful bile like the closing part of Psalm 137 is said in the presence of God.

Praying these psalms in painful and unsettled times teaches us to speak our piece to God. They teach us to rethink the calamities that befall us and to ask the most important question: How is God part of all of this?

Instead of the easy way out offered by doubt and cynicism the psalmists cling to God. They refuse to think of their calamities in any other way than by taking full account of God. Therefore, as the Psalms demonstrate abundantly, they end up being prayers and not mere ruminations. This seriousness about God is a vital and necessary part of the prayer life of Christians and the church in times of duress. The Psalms give us the words and the form with which to cling to God resolutely.

3. New orientation: Praying the Psalms in times of surprising new life

We now turn to the evangelical heart of the Psalms. The faith in a God who hears the call of his people in distress has proved to be well founded. These psalms are the amazed responses of God's people to his surprising gifts of new life just when none seemed possible.

The psalms of new orientation represent a genuinely new situation, created by God.

This new orientation is not simply a return to the old orientation, even if the physical circumstances may represent a return to "business as usual." The relationship

between God and his people could not be the same after the candour of the psalms of disorientation. No return to a pre-candour situation is possible any more (Brueggemann 1984:123-4).

This new reality is newly created by God. It is not an extension of human attempts. It is neither derived nor extrapolated. It can only be described in a “new song”.

“That newness cannot be explained, predicted, or programmed. ... Since Israel cannot explain and refuses to speculate, it can do what it does best. It can tell, narrate, recite, testify, in amazement and gratitude, ‘lost in wonder, love, and praise’ ” (Brueggemann 1984:124).

3.1 Types of psalms of new orientation

We will now proceed to demonstrate the way each of the types of psalms of new orientation, as distinguished by Brueggemann (1984:123-67), are marked by a passion which takes full account of God.

3.1.1 Thanksgiving songs (Pss 30, 34, 40, 138 etc.)

These are psalms on the other side of disorientation. The situation has dramatically changed for the better. God is thanked for rescue from quite concrete situations of distress which are still fresh in the mind of the psalmists (Brueggemann 1984:125-6).

The focus on God in these psalms is quite obvious. The resolution of the situation is ascribed to Him and not to some fortunate convergence of affairs or as the outcome of personal efforts. The new state of affairs is seen as the result of God hearing their pleas for help. The outcome is that the psalmist gives thanks to God (לַיהוָה, which is a derivative from יָדָע - to know). Giving thanks is more than being grateful. It is a confessional statement that makes a full commitment to the Other (Brueggemann 1984:127). The move from disorientation to thanksgiving is thus a move to a fuller acknowledgement of God.

3.1.2 Thanksgiving songs of the community (Pss 65, 66, 124 etc.)

Most thanksgiving songs belong to the personal sphere. The counterpart in the public realm is the hymn. There are, however, a few songs of thanksgiving that are thanksgiving for specific answers to specific cries about public calamities. These psalms are the thanksgiving songs of the community (Brueggemann 1984:134-140).

As is the case in the thanksgiving songs of the individual, these psalms demonstrate a full acknowledgement of God's activity in the world - in this case the public domain. The often surprising twists and turns of their destiny is seen as the work of God and He is given due acclaim.

Taking God seriously in the public domain is a polemic act. When these psalms praise God for transforming public life, they acclaim Him as the true God, the victor in the battle for supremacy in the world. For this reason other nations are called to worship Israel's God. Their gods are mocked as impotent.

This means that these psalms not only take God seriously; they take Him more seriously than anything or anyone else. When no-one could save, when the situation was beyond redemption, God wrought liberation. No-one, nothing else deserves our acclaim more than God.

3.1.3 The once and future king (Pss 29, 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99, 114 etc.)

These psalms are commonly called the enthronement psalms. They celebrate *Yahweh's* victory over Israel's enemies and grant kingship to Him on the basis of this victory. These psalms contain strong narrative elements. They act as testimony to God's mighty deeds (Brueggemann 1984:140-152). Brueggemann (1984:140) calls them "the songs of new orientation par excellence".

Very little need to be said to demonstrate these psalms' full account of God. They retell his mighty deeds and call all of heaven and earth to participate in the act of enthroning him. They hold all peoples accountable to God's rule. The full focus in these psalms is on God and his acts.

3.1.4 Thanksgiving generalised to confidence (Pss 23, 27, 91 etc.)

These psalms are further removed in time from God's deliverance from specific crises than the songs of thanksgiving. Therefore they are more reflective and less concrete than the thanksgiving psalms. They have generalised God's deliverance from a specific situation of bondage to speak of a relationship with Him that is trustworthy in the face of *all* calamity. God's concrete acts of deliverance are taken as proof that He is profoundly reliable and powerful, and this fact is celebrated (Brueggemann 1984:152-7).

These psalms impose a God-shaped grid on all human life. This grid not only affirms God as part of human life, but as the truly consistent fact of life. The psalmists know

adversity; they know that well-being may often be disrupted cruelly. Yet they affirm God's reliable protection of his own as an all-encompassing reality:

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps 23:4).

3.1.5 Hymns of praise (Pss 100, 103, 113, 135, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150 etc.)

Brueggemann (1984:158) defines a hymn of praise as “a public (as distinct from personal or intimate) song that is sung with abandonment in praise to God for the character of God's person or the nature of God's creating and liberating actions”.

Brueggemann concedes that there is a question about the placement of the hymns of praise in the scheme of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. There is the question whether these psalms could not function equally well as instances where the old orientation has become so firmly entrenched that it results in these unremitting statements of firm, settled, and non-negotiable trust in a God-dominated world.

He chooses to place them at the end of the process on the strength of their freshness and buoyancy. They read well as surprising, glad statements of a new ordering of life, recently acquired. Yet, he does concede to Westermann's distinction between *descriptive* and *declarative* hymns. Descriptive hymns are hymns that seem to have lost their specificity and concreteness, their buoyancy and fresh surprise. They could reflect a well-ordered world and could be viewed as psalms of orientation. He finds resolution for this issue in Goldingay's observation that specific *use* of a hymn, rather than its *content* determines its location in the scheme (Brueggemann 1984:158).

His rule of thumb is that the more decisively declarative, the more focused on historic liberation a hymn is, the more likely that it will articulate new orientation. Conversely, the more descriptive a hymn is, the more it focuses on creation, the more likely it is that it will be concerned with old orientation, with a long-established, enduring order (Brueggemann 1984:158).

Both descriptive and declarative hymns demonstrate a life-orientation that takes full account of God, albeit in different ways. *Descriptive hymns* do this by insisting on God as the ground for the firmness and coherence detected in the world. The section, above, on the psalms of orientation (section 1) elaborates on this. *Declarative hymns* demonstrate their focus on God by a total and passionate yielding of the individual and community to God:

“Theologically the hymn is a liturgical and unrestrained yielding of self and community to God. It is a disinterested, uncalculating ceding of life over to its pioneer and perfecter (Heb 12:2). It is an act of self-abandonment that embodies the first answer of the Westminster Catechism: ‘The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’” (Brueggemann 1984:158).

We find the passion for God clearest and most self-evident in the declarative hymns. There can be no mistaking the all-consuming nature of the psalmist’s seriousness about God in these psalms. Praying them can kindle this same flame of passion.

3.2 Revelling in God as seriousness

The psalms of new orientation are the best instance of the Shorter Westminster Catechism’s view of man’s chief end in life: “... to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”. Both the elements of glorifying God and of enjoying Him are abundantly in evidence.

These acts of revelling in God constitute a seriousness about God. New turns of events could, from another perspective, simply be ascribed to a fortuitous twist of fate. They could also be ascribed to the configuration of the stars or various fanciful powers. The fact that they lead to these glad acts of faith, demonstrates a choice to interpret life in the light of God and his activity in the world. When disorientation is resolved, therefore, revelling in God is the natural and fitting human response.

But these psalms are not only *expressions* of God-passionate spirituality. They are also *shapers* of God-passionate spirituality, as Brueggemann points out in *Israel’s praise* (Brueggemann 1988). And this concerns the present study. Praying these psalms, praying in tandem with these God-fearers and mouthing their words has the power to change and enlarge perspectives towards the same seriousness about God. When good turns of events are framed by these psalms, they turn into occasions of joy in God and they encourage us in setting our hearts on God. Section 5 of this chapter will elaborate on the shaping power of the Psalms.

4. Accounting for God in the canonical shape of the Psalter

The past years have seen increasing interest and research into the canonical shape of the Psalter.³ Earlier researchers tended to view the Psalter as a random

3. See Howard (1993b) and Whybray (1996) for a survey of recent work done on the editorial structure of the Psalter and Mays (1993:14-20), for some suggestions for the kinds of data this study should take into account. See also Murphy (1993:21-8), Brueggemann (1993b:29-41) and Wilson (1993b:42-51), for remarks on the limits and possibilities of this approach.

collection of independent units. This followed the lead given by Hermann Gunkel's form criticism that divided psalms into various genres and studied the typical structure of each genre. The only relationship between individual psalms that received concentrated attention was that between psalms of the same type.

Lately, though, more and more attention has been given to the interrelationships between psalms of different kinds, to structural elements in the whole, to the placement of certain psalms in the whole and to thematic developments within the whole. Brevard Childs' work on the canonical shape of the Old Testament has opened up a line of questioning that takes account of the literary shape and theological intentionality of the Psalter as a whole (Brueggemann 1995:189).

We will now turn our attention to parts of this discussion. Our argument will be that these structural elements point us to the Psalter's passionate emphasis on God. The next chapter will demonstrate how some of these structural elements encourage us to engage life fully.

What follows is not an attempt towards an exhaustive treatment of the subject. We will only point out a few of the structural elements in the Psalter that support our main thesis.

4.1 Psalms 1 and 2 as introduction

There is evidence that Psalms 1 and 2 originated as a unit: Psalm 1 begins with a beatitude, while Psalm 2 ends with a beatitude. Together these beatitudes form a structural "envelope" for the whole (Mays 1994a:41). Craigie (1983:59) presents us with a quotation from the Babylonian Talmud that cites Psalms 1 and 2 as a unit. This notion is also supported by a quotation in Ac 13:33 that cites Psalm 2:7 as coming from "the first psalm". Psalm 2, like Psalm 1 has no superscription, while the rest of the psalms in the first book of the Psalms have superscriptions. The Septuagint carries superscriptions for all but the first two psalms, lending further support to view them as a pair with a unique function (Howard 1993b:58). Furthermore, Psalm 2 is part of an intentional placing of royal psalms at the "seams" of the three-book structure: Psalms 2, 41⁴, 72, and 89 (Wilson 1985:208). If Psalm 2 is not acknowledged as part of the introduction, it would be conspicuous as the only royal psalm placed *after* the seam.

4. Psalm 41 is not a recognised royal psalm. Wilson (1985:208), however, makes a good case for it functioning in this capacity. Its thematic concurrence with Psalm 72 is striking. In addition, it also starts off with a beatitude aimed at the man who has concern for the poor. This, seen in conjunction with its superscript that identifies it as a psalm of David, seems convincing enough to argue that it does not break the pattern of royal psalms placed before the seams of the first four books.

Even if we maintain Psalms 1 and 2 as separate psalms, they clearly function as a double introduction, a pair of “hermeneutical spectacles” (Wilson 1985:143) with which to read the whole of the Psalter.⁵ The agenda and themes taken up in these two psalms resound throughout the rest of the Psalter.

Psalm 1 focuses on *the individual*. It addresses the question of the individual faced with wickedness in society. It contrasts the two ways of living that are available to individual human beings and commends the way that finds its joy in the instruction of the Lord as the guide to life (Mays 1994a:41, 44).

Psalm 2 focuses on *public life*. It addresses the question of the community of faith faced with the problems of history shaped by nations contending for power. The psalm deals with the question of power: Who has the power to shape the destiny of the world? It announces the Messiah into whose power God will deliver these nations and kings. It insists on God as the dominating force in world history and recommends that the power-brokers of this world submit to him, and that his children find refuge in him (Mays 1994a:44-51).

Both these psalms insist on God as the dominating factor in human existence. Psalm 1 insists that God’s counsel (his *torah*) be taken seriously, since it offers the only workable lifestyle available. Therefore God cannot be minimised to a kind of “God of the gaps.” Human proficiency will not suffice for the complexities of life. One needs *torah*, guidance from God, in all areas of life. It also casts the Psalms as an answer to God’s prior speaking (Childs 1979:513). Prayer is not the initiative of man. Psalm 1 alerts us to God’s initiative.

Psalm 2 insists on God as the dominating force in the public sphere. The destinies of nations are ultimately in the hands of the Messiah, through whom God’s rule is made visible. It follows that God cannot be secularised into the private sphere.

This is maintained in the face of large-scale animosity and aggressive claims of supremacy by nations and kings. No other lifestyle than one that takes refuge in God will do in such a world. Human proficiency will not suffice for the complexities of public life. One needs shelter. The only shelter that will prove

5. The view of Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction to the Psalms is supported by, among others, Mays (1994:44) and Craigie (1983:59). Scholars such as Weiser (1962:102), Brueggemann (1984:38; 1995:190), Westermann (1989:293; 1980a:113), Childs (1979:513), and Wilson (1985:204) take Psalm 1 only as an introduction to the Psalter. Wilson’s “pair of hermeneutic spectacles”, therefore consists only of Psalm 1. We do, however, find it a particularly apt description of Psalms 1 and 2 as a double introduction.

adequate in such a hostile world is God, the One who laughs and scoffs at the puny threats of the nations (Ps 2:4).

Together these two psalms articulate a world-view that brands all attempts at life not based fully on the reality of God, as foolishness.⁶ They propagate a world-view and theology that, quite literally, acknowledge God as larger than life.

The fact that this world-view is proffered as an introduction to the whole Psalter has important ramifications. This casts all psalms that follow in the same light. The rest of the Psalter is built on this seriousness about God, and should be read in the light of what Psalms 1 and 2 say about him.

4.2 Five answers to five oracles

The Psalter is subdivided into five books, each ending with a doxology (Pss 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, and 107-150). The use of doxologies to conclude compositions and segments of compositions is well known in the ancient Near East, especially in hymnic collections (Wilson 1992:130). They offer us clear evidence of editorial work.

Wilson (1992:131) further confirms the editorial work in the fivefold division by a careful study of the way the different types of headings are used. The typical use of “genre”-headings to soften transitions between blocks of psalms grouped together by “author”-headings is conspicuously absent at the breaks indicated by the doxologies. This further confirms the reality of the breaks between the five books.

The subject-matter of the respective books gives us no clue to the reason for this subdivision. The only explanation that has warranted continued consideration is the ancient tradition that views the fivefold division as a purposeful mirror of the five books of the Pentateuch. This view is already proposed in the *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 1 (Wilson 1985:199; 1992:130). However, none of the attempts at finding substantive connections are convincing.⁷ Although there is no final answer to the meaning of this linkage, there is growing support for this tradition of reference to a correspondence with the fivefold division of the books of Moses.

6. See psalms such as Psalms 10, 12, 14 and 53 for a description of the foolish. The main reason for this designation is not their lack of intellectual prowess, but their lack of consideration of God.

7. See Miller (1985:199-203) for a full discussion of various attempts to pair blocks of material from the Pentateuch with parts of the Psalms. He finds these attempts “generally unsatisfactory and highly susceptible to subjective interpretation” (Wilson 1985:200).

Two answers to the meaning of the link between the Pentateuch and the Psalms seem attractive. Both support the main argument of this chapter - that the Psalms demonstrate a fundamental seriousness about God.

The first possibility is that offered by Eugene Peterson (1987:50-8; 1989a:53). He views the relation of the Psalter to the Pentateuch is that of an address to an answer. By attaching the Psalter to the five books of Moses one creates a context for the use of the Psalms. If we take the five books of the Pentateuch to be the five primary oracles of *Yahweh*, this device casts the Psalter as the other side of the coin - the five primary answers of God's people. This casts the psalms as liturgy and prayer, but liturgy and prayer of a specific type - words addressed at God *as a response* to his address that preceded our answer. The psalms bring us to prayer. They also prevent "presumptuous prayer" - prayer that speaks to God without first listening to him (Peterson 1989a:53). The division into five books ensures that our prayer is *answering* speech to the *addressing* speech of God" (Peterson 1987:51).

All other aspects of the Psalms are to be subjected to this functional leaning. Even the obvious didactic purpose of the wisdom psalms and *torah*-psalms (the most obviously sapiential of the psalms) are to be read in the light of the Psalms' placement in worship and their precedence by the five books of Moses.⁸

James Mays' remarks on the structural function of Psalm 3 fit into this stress on prayer as the primary mode of the Psalms. Mays (1994a:16) attaches importance to the fact that Psalm 3 is the first psalm after the introduction (Pss 1 and 2). The fact that it is *a prayer* seems important. Starting the Psalter proper in this manner casts the whole in the light of prayer:

"The Psalter had its origin with prayer books. Under their influence, all the psalms have been read and used as prayer. The psalms have been the prayer book of the faithful for individual devotion and corporate worship to this day" (Mays 1994a:16).

Brevard Childs' discussion of the function of Psalm 1 also supports this reading of the Psalms:

8. Psalm 34 could be mentioned as a case in point. The liturgical and instructional spheres and functions are brought together in a way that affects both. The first part of the Psalm (vv 2-11) commends calling to the Lord. The topic is prayer. The second part (vv 12-23) instructs students on "the fear of the Lord." The topic is *torah* and wisdom - ethical instruction. Yet the meaning of the psalm is to be found in the interaction of the two forms: "[T]he interaction keeps the truth of ethical instruction from being understood in simplistic, mechanical, and dogmatic fashion" (Mays 1994a:153). Wisdom is deliberately placed in the context of prayer.

“It is highly significant that the psalmist understands Israel’s prayer as a response to God’s prior speaking. Israel’s prayers are not simply spontaneous musings or uncontrolled aspirations, but rather an answer to God’s word which continues to address Israel in his Torah” (Childs 1979:513).

According to this view, then, the link between the Psalter and Pentateuch casts the Psalms as responses to God’s words. They follow *after* God’s words. They do not represent human initiative. There is an inherent “previousness” (Peterson 1987:48) to God’s words and activity that is affirmed by this view of the Psalms. The Psalms are meant to be used by people who have first listened to God speaking.

This view portrays the Psalms as taking God seriously by taking full cognisance of his initiative and by commending the practice of answering his address. Human initiative is not ignored, but it is cast as secondary to the movements and words of God in history. God is viewed as the prime mover of human life.

The second view we wish to mention, is that expressed by Gerald Wilson and corroborated by James Mays. They take the emphasis on the *torah* in Psalm 1 as a clue to the meaning of the Psalter. When seen in conjunction with the linkage with the five books of Moses, Psalm 1 introduces the Psalms as *torah* - as Scripture to be studied, heeded, and absorbed (Mays 1994a:15). The five books’ correspondence to the Pentateuch, in this view, is meant to present the Psalter as a parallel block of Scripture with the same authority, deserving the same attention and the same kind of intense reading as the *torah*.

Wilson extends this view when he states that the function of Psalm 1 is to set the “tone” for an approach to the Psalter. It suggests that the Psalms have now become the Word of God to Israel, in the same way as the five books of Moses. It is no longer merely Israel’s words of response. Psalm 1 suggests *a way of reading* the Psalter, rather than giving a key to its *content*. The Psalter should be read as the word of God, as *torah* (Wilson 1985:206-7).

This second way of viewing the function of the fivefold division of the Psalms would also support our main thesis. When we think of the Psalter as *torah*, to be meditated and taken with delight, we credit it with a fundamental God-ward focus. *Torah* is instruction in the whole body of tradition through which instruction in the way and the will of the Lord is given to Israel. This is the reason why it is the cause of delight: Not because it is a means of self-righteousness or a programme for self-justification, but “because the Lord teaches, touches, and shapes the human soul

through it" (Mays 1994a:42). *Torah* is a means of grace, an instrument of the living Lord, and not a mere moral code. It brings us into the care of God.

Neither of the two explanations for the division of the Psalms into five books can be finally proven. Both would strengthen our case for the inherent bias towards a God-centred life in the Psalms. They are not fundamentally at odds with each other, so that it is possible to take up both as different dimensions of meaning to the fivefold division of the Psalter. Together they offer this as another structural aspect that supports the argument of this chapter.

4.3 From lament to praise

Subsequently we turn to three progressions found in the material of the Psalter. All three are attached to elements of the editorial structure.

- The move *from lament to praise* is attached to the grouping of five hymns of praise that are placed at the end of the Psalter and the concentration of laments in the first part of the Psalms.
- The move *from delighting in the torah to praising God* (section 4.4) is attached to the introduction and ending of the Psalter and to the insertion of the fourth book of the Psalms.
- The move *from human kings to Yahweh as king* is attached to the royal psalms inserted before the "seams" at the beginnings of the first four books, and to the placing of the fourth book immediately after Psalm 89.

The Psalter exhibits a progression from lament to praise. The first half of the Psalter is dominated by lament. The second half is dominated by praise.⁹ The last five psalms form a unit consisting of psalms of praise. Each of these psalms begins and ends with a *hallelujah*. Each might be taken to represent one of the five "books" of the Psalms (Peterson 1989a:127). Psalm 150 does duty as the doxological ending of the fifth book (Mays 1994a:15).

Psalm 145 provides the trigger for this unit of praise. In Westermann's categories, as discussed earlier, it would be classified as a descriptive hymn. It is a meticulous acrostic prayer which, for all its internal discipline, is the only psalm that is given the title *תהלה* (song of praise). Each of the carefully crafted sentences is a statement of praise. It acts as a kind of anthology of praise (Peterson 1989a:124). It ends with

9. See Wilson (1992:138), Westermann (1977:200-1), Whybray (1996:34-5), Howard (1993b:56).

David calling himself and “all flesh” to praise God forever (Ps 145:21). The following five psalms (Pss 146-50) are hymns of praise, songs of new orientation (Brueggemann 1984:162-7) that seem to take up David’s call.

This development in the Psalms seems to be intentional. The Hebrew title of the Psalter is “תהלה” - songs of praise. Statistically this is not a true reflection of the contents of the Psalter. “Laments” would be a more apt title. The most common type of psalm is the personal lament - more than fifty of the psalms may be classified as such (Westermann 1989:65). But, seen in the context of the canonical whole, it becomes clear that the title for the Psalter accurately reflects the theology of Israel (Childs 1979:514). This is what the Psalms are about - praise of God. This is what they bring us to - praise of God. The predominance of lament reflects the exilic conditions of Israel and not the focus of the Psalms (Westermann 1989:65).

There is evidence of this progression on a smaller scale. Each of the five books in the psalms end with doxologies. There is something to be said for the idea that Psalm 145 represents an extended doxology for the end of book five, while Psalms 146-50 are five doxologies to represent the five books of psalms. If this is maintained, it gives us an insight into the theology behind the redactional activity. Even where some of the earlier books contain very little praise, the only apt ending for a book is a doxology. This is what prayer and liturgy work towards. This is the shape of the life the Psalms create (Peterson 1989a:127; Mays 1994a:451).

The typical form of lament of the individual presents us with this progression on an even smaller scale. These psalms (that comprise more than a third of the Psalter) often end with praise or a vow of praise.

“The vow to praise is a regular feature of the IL [individual lament] genre - whenever it is missing, a reason for its omission can usually be found” (Westermann 1980:60).

Some of the communal laments display the same feature, though it is not as typical as in the individual laments. The element of trust, based on God’s saving acts in the past, plays a larger role in the communal laments (Westermann 1980:43, 60).

Again we find the Psalms leaning towards praise. Praise is clearly seen as the resolution of lament. One might conclude that the Psalms propagate the rule that lament, inevitably, leads to praise:

“[T]he lament characteristically ends in praise that is full and unfettered. Indeed, the proper setting of praise is as lament resolved” (Brueggemann 1995:99).

This structural progression fits in with the basic historical self-understanding of Israel. In *From hurt to joy, from death to life*, Brueggemann (1995:67-83) demonstrates how the cry-rescue formula functioned through all of Israel's history with God. God's saving acts came about as a response to the cries of his people. Brueggemann traces the workings of this basic formula from the Exodus narrative to the Babylonian exile and comes to the following conclusion:

“Israel's history is shaped and interpreted as an experience of cry and rescue. Thus the form became for Israel a way of self-understanding in the world ...” (Brueggemann 1995:82).

The vow of praise in the face of lament, quite clearly, is a statement of utter trust, but trust based on a history of God's answers to his people's cries. The Psalms display total candour about the complexities and difficulties of life and also the full impact of their situation of disequilibrium.¹⁰ Yet they foresee a turn of events that would result in praise. This is much more than mere positive thinking or trust in their own resources. Even a preliminary reading of the laments and a basic understanding of their situation in the exile would preclude such an understanding. It was, rather, the seriousness with which they understood God to be active in their lives and physical context that led to this gravitational pull towards praise.

This characteristic of the lament psalms is found in the rest of the Psalter. It is visible in the insertion of the doxologies at the end of the five books, especially in the extended doxology at the end of the fifth book. It is visible in the progression from a predominance of lament to a predominance of praise. It is visible in the choice of a title for the Psalter. This demonstration of seriousness about God was much more than wishful thinking. It was done without minimising the stark realities of life in any way, as the next chapter will demonstrate. Praying the Psalms systematically and with awareness of this developmental structure will stimulate hope. Not utopian hope, that is a mere extension of human possibilities, but hope based on God's promises, his saving acts in the past, and his overwhelming presence.

4.4 From delighting in the *torah* to praising God

In *Bounded by obedience and praise: The Psalms as canon*, Walter Brueggemann (1995:189-213) takes up a cue from Brevard Childs' approach to the canonical shape

10. See the next chapter's discussion of the psalms of disorientation, and section 2.3 of the present chapter on "Candor as faith".

of the Old Testament.¹¹ Childs proposed that attention to the beginning and end of a biblical book, to see how they relate to one another, provides clues to the meaning of the whole. On the strength of Psalms 1 and 150 and the way the themes of these two psalms function in the rest of the Psalms, Brueggemann finds the Psalms to be a movement from obedience to praise, from duty to delight.

As we have stated, Psalm 1 is part of the introduction to the Psalms and its theme concerns the *torah*. It paints a picture of *torah*-piety that shows the righteous as those who are totally engrossed in the *torah* and find delight in meditating on it. Well-being depends on the *torah*. There is a moral coherence to life, with the *torah* as the unfailing map to all of it. The fruitlessness of the *torahless* ways of the wicked is sharply contrasted with the well-being of those obedient to the *torah*.

As an entry point into the Psalms, Psalm 1 intends to evoke a community of trusting, joyous obedience (Brueggemann 1995:191).

Psalm 150 is placed at the end of the Psalter as a conclusion. Psalm 150 is a hymn of praise, but it lacks the usual movement and development typical of Old Testament praise. The usual form of Old Testament praise follows a *summons* to praise with *reasons* or *motivations* for praise. Psalm 150 lacks the motivation for praise. It consists *en toto* of an extended summons to praise. It is “the most extreme and unqualified statement of unfettered praise in the Old Testament” (Brueggemann 1995:192). Psalm 150 has moved beyond giving reasons for praise - these reasons have been provided fully in the rest of the Psalter. It expresses “a lyrical self-abandonment, an utter yielding of self, without vested interest, calculation, desire, or hidden agenda” (Brueggemann 1995:193).

Brueggemann argues that these two psalms (Pss 1 and 150) are odd - conspicuous for their peculiar character. Psalm 1 seems at odds with most of the other psalms. Its claims do not allow for the possibility that the wicked might flourish and that the righteous might suffer. Psalm 150 sees no need to offer reasons for praise. Their oddness seems to be the very reason for their placement at the two extremes of the Psalter. Their canonical purpose is to make the particular theological claims as a frame which creates a field of meaning for the entire Psalter. Together they make the assertion about the shape of life lived in Israel’s covenant. This life is derived from and ceded back to *Yahweh*. It begins with obedience and ends in praise (Brueggemann 1995:193).

11. See also Brueggemann (1993b:36-41).

The sequence is important. Praise cannot be entered into apart from obedience, but it supersedes obedience. The total abandonment of praise is only to be had through the discipline of obedience. This understanding should not be interpreted to set up obedience as a means of qualifying by “being good.” Obedience is the means “to come to terms emotionally, psychologically, dramatically and theologically with the demanding, sovereign reality of God” (Brueggemann 1995:194). In this way one is prepared for the total abandonment of life to God in praise.

Brueggemann then discusses the dynamics of faith between these two poles. His basic thesis is that the move from *torah* obedience to praise is by way of *candour about suffering* and *gratitude about hope*.

The middle part of the Psalms leaves the safe and coherent world of Psalm 1 to engage suffering and pain. Here, the psalmists face the reality that obedience does not always connect with prosperity. They enter into this painful engagement with total candour. This is the only way to move from the safe and predictable world of obedience to the world of Psalm 150.

Urgent questions about God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) are asked in the lament psalms, but hope is constantly expressed. God’s commitment to steadfast love is trusted and the resolution of suffering is accepted as a reality on the basis of God’s fidelity. While this is a confirmation of the statement made in Psalm 1, it is also a move beyond its simplicity. God’s faithfulness is seen as the crucial element in their situation (Brueggemann 1995:201).

It is evident that the move from obedience to doxology is one that is accompanied by much struggle. It is a hard-fought move.

“The move from obedience to doxology, from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, is made by the painful candour of many lament psalms that call God’s fidelity into question and at the same time petition that fidelity. The move is made through the grateful hope of many hymns that count deeply on God’s faithfulness even in the face of troubled human reality” (Brueggemann 1995:203).

By pointing to the dynamics displayed in Psalm 73 (which he regards as a pivotal psalm), Brueggemann demonstrates that this struggle could be successful through the realities of solidarity, presence, and communion. Fresh perception only comes about in the sanctuary, where the psalmist is again confronted with Israel’s memory and hope. Only in such a way can the move from candid protest to grateful hope be made - the move that may bring a person to doxology.

Brueggemann (1995:213) ends his discussion with the statement that Israel's life is lived mostly in the terrain mapped by its centre and not by the edges. Most of Israel's life does not consist of the simple obedience of Psalm 1 and the pure praise of Psalm 150. Most of it is lived in the drama of suffering and hope - questioning and clinging to God's *hesed*. This life, though, is lived between the boundaries of obedience and praise. Through all of their struggles with God's *hesed* the twin invitation to simple obedience and pure praise remains in place.

Gerald Wilson (1992:129-142) gives us a slightly different but complementary view of the dynamic relationship between Psalms 1 and 150. He cautions that Brueggemann's summary of Psalm 1 as "obedience" might not accurately reflect its true function as an introduction. The reader is never counselled to keep, follow, or obey the *torah* but to find delight in constantly meditating on it. He concedes that such obedience might be assumed here, but does not see it emphasised. He also argues that the late occurrence of Psalm 119 with its persistent call to *torah* obedience creates a problem for Brueggemann's view of the development in the Psalms as a development beyond obedience. Wilson would rather view Psalm 1 as a call for a reading of the rest of the Psalms with the same delight and diligence. It casts the Psalms as Scripture, to be given the same authority as the rest of the *torah*.

This view concurs with Brevard Childs' view of the motives behind the formation of the Jewish canon. Childs states that the one concern behind the process of canonisation that is expressly mentioned, is the concern that the tradition from the past be transmitted in such a way that its authoritative claims be laid upon all successive generations of Israel (Childs 1979:78). The tradition is made accessible to future generations by means of a 'canonical intentionality', which is coextensive with the meaning of the biblical text (Childs 1979:79). An editor with this concern in mind would, quite conceivably, insert Psalm 1 at the beginning of the Psalter to establish its authority as Scripture. This would be especially necessary with a book such as the Psalms, that consists of human responses and not of oracles, as is the case with most of the other biblical books.

Delight in the *torah* is held up as the base from which the Psalter may be read with delight. This delight enables us to read the Psalter, which is also (part of) Scripture, with the same delight and diligence. In this way they become an entry point to a way of life that ultimately issues forth in praise (Wilson 1992:137).

Wilson also disagrees with Brueggemann's view that Psalm 73 provides the key to the dynamic that unlocks the possibility of doxology, even though the strong

evidence of editorial insertions in the preceding psalm (Ps 72) strengthens Brueggemann's case. He finds the central message of the fourth book of the Psalms (Pss 90-106) pivotal for the move towards praise (Wilson 1992:139-42). Psalm 89 ends the third book by admitting to the total failure of the Davidic dynasty. This crisis represents a huge collapse of paradigm and calls forth the response of the fourth and fifth books of the Psalter. Psalm 90, and the remainder of the fourth book steps into this crisis by pointing Israel away from reliance on the inadequacies of human kings and kingdoms to the adequacy of *Yahweh* Himself.¹²

The kingship of *Yahweh* is celebrated in the central psalms of the fourth book (Pss 93, 95-99). The failure of the monarchy does not signal the failure of *Yahweh*.

“In a fashion similar to the theophany of Job 38-42, God appears in these psalms in such majesty that all doubts as to his power and control are summarily removed. Israel is not so much called to obedience in these psalms as to surrender - complete and absolute surrender to the eternal king whom they experience anew as creator and sustainer worthy of praise even in the midst of exile” (Wilson 1992:140).

After these psalms the Psalter takes a full turn towards praise. The rest of the Psalms (especially the fifth book) is dominated by praise. Psalm 145 (according to Wilson the end of the Psalter proper) again has David extolling God as the true king who is alone worthy of praise. Psalm 145 ends in v 21 with David's call to himself and “all flesh” to praise God forever. There are formal similarities between this verse and the doxologies at the end of the other four books. Psalms 146-150 take up David's call to close the Psalter with a unit of extended praise.

We would like to concur with Wilson's reading of Psalm 1. We do not think that Brueggemann's final analysis is in total disagreement with Wilson's proposal, but we do prefer the way in which Wilson states the entrance to Psalmic spirituality.¹³ In stating the entrance point in this form, Wilson keeps together both the discipline and the freedom implied by the move from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150. Psalmic spirituality is

12. For an extended analysis of the development of the theme of kingship and the Davidic covenant, see Wilson (1985:209-19). Wilson finds that the psalms at the seams of the books (Pss 2, 41, 72, 89) reflect this progression of the institution of the Davidic dynasty to its utter failure. This is then followed by the fourth book's glorious rendition of God Himself as the new king.

13. It must be mentioned that Wilson's critique is based on an earlier seminal proposal of Brueggemann in 1990. Our summary of Brueggemann's proposal is taken from a fuller and reworked rendition of the same proposal in 1995 (see Brueggemann 1995:283). It is evident that what Brueggemann means by “obedience” is not that far removed from Wilson's proposal of “delight in the *torah*”. He certainly did not have a legalistic view of obedience in mind. Therefore the late occurrence of Psalm 119 would not really cause problems for his proposal.

held forth as a spirituality of delight - at entrance, delight in the law; at its zenith, pure delight in God. On the other hand, Psalmic spirituality is also a matter of discipline. It proceeds from full attention to all the tenets of the *torah*, through a struggle with the paradoxes of life, still clinging to the tenability of the *torah* as the only basis for life, into the joy of doxology. Doxology does not abolish the discipline of the *torah*, but moves beyond it and supersedes it (Brueggemann 1995:196). However it is still “the premise and condition” of praise (Brueggemann 1995:195).

Both proposals view the Psalms’ inner dynamic as a move towards praise. We would propose that both Brueggemann and Wilson’s suggestions about the pivotal point on which the turn towards doxology is made should be affirmed. Both are based on convincing structural arguments. Both Psalm 73 and Psalm 90 follow clear structural and thematic breaks in the Psalter. It takes little imagination to take both candor and memory in God’s presence (Ps 73) and the new perspective on God’s kingship (Ps 90) in tandem as the crucial turning point towards doxology. A turn towards doxology without candor and memory could be conceived as superficial. A turn towards doxology without the new perspective of God’s kingship could be conceived as groundless. Both are clearly needed.

Our proposal is, therefore, to read the Psalms as a progression from delight in the *torah* to praise. This progression is wrought through candid lament and memory, and through a new recognition of the kingship of God.

This reading of the overall structure of the Psalms presents us with a totally God-centred paradigm for life. From the outset, life is dominated by God’s *torah* as the entrance point for a life in harmony with his designs. When this life-orientation is pursued through the doldrums of suffering, it leads to the abandonment of human resources which compete with God’s kingship. Life is discovered only to be available as a gift from God. Ultimately this results in a full ceding of life to God in praise. Praying along these lines cannot but lead one into a life of obedience, of candor about suffering, of hope, and towards the utter delight in God of praise.

4.5 From human kings to *Yahweh* as king

The previous section made mention of Gerald Wilson’s view of the third book of the Psalter (Pss 90-106) as pivotal for the move towards doxology. In his analysis of the thematic content of the five books (Wilson 1985:209-28), he uncovers a development in the Psalms from an emphasis on the Davidic dynasty to an emphasis on God as king.

The editorial activity in the Psalter presents this move as an answer to the failure of the Davidic kings. The first three books of the Psalter are preoccupied with the Davidic dynasty. This is evident from the intentional placing of royal psalms at the “seams” of the three-book structure: Psalms 2¹⁴, 41, 72, and 89 (Wilson 1985:208). All of these psalms (apart from Psalm 89) view the Davidic dynasty in a positive light. The first two books, in particular, could be viewed as a celebration of God’s faithfulness to his covenant with David (Wilson 1985:208).

Then comes Psalm 89, right at the end of the older unit of three books. Psalm 89 speaks of God’s faithfulness to his covenant with David. Then it turns to a bewildered lament at the failure of the Davidic dynasty. It leaves one with the painful question: Has God failed? Has he reneged on his covenant with David?

The fourth book of the Psalter provides the pivotal answer to the question with which the third book closes: God has not failed. The failure of the Davidic dynasty is a human failure. The first two psalms of the fourth book presents God as a refuge, a home¹⁵ for his homeless people. This is followed by the peaceful Sabbath-psalm, Psalm 92. The rest of the book is filled with psalms presenting God as the king - Psalms 93, 95-99. The overwhelming theme of the fourth book is to be found in these God-as-king psalms.

Wilson presents a strong case for the deliberate editorial compilation and placing of the fourth book. Thirteen of the seventeen psalms are “orphan” psalms - psalms without superscriptions (Wilson 1985:214). Wilson demonstrates that these untitled psalms are frequently subject to editorial manipulation (Wilson 1985:173-81). Such a high proportion of these psalms in the fourth book is a strong indication of an editorial hand at work. There is also a close interweaving of theme and even verbal correspondence between these 17 psalms (Wilson 1985:215). This leads Wilson (1985:215) to conclude that what we have here is the “editorial centre” of the Psalter. The grouping stands as a kind of answer to the problem posed in Psalm 89. Wilson’s brief summary of the answer is:

“(1) YHWH is king; (2) He has been our “refuge” in the past, long before the monarchy existed (i.e., in the Mosaic period); (3) He will continue to be our

14. Wilson views Psalm 2 as the beginning of the first book, as he takes only Psalm 1 as an introduction. We regard it as the psalm preceding the beginning of the first book, for we consider Psalms 1 and 2 as a double introduction to the Psalter. This fits the pattern even better, since all four of these “seam”-psalms are then placed just before the “seams”.

15. Both these psalms, when speaking of God as a “home/dwelling place” (Pss 90:1; 91:9), use the word בֵּית, with its connotations of warmth and companionship, instead of the word for a mere living structure, בֵּית.

refuge now that the monarchy is gone; (4) Blessed are they that trust in him!” (Wilson 1985:215).

Wilson points out that the fifth book, again, takes up David psalms. This time, however, we find them cast in a way that reflects the post-exilic situation. Psalms 138-145 is a final spurt of David psalms, ending in David’s call on himself and “all flesh” to praise God. The five hallelujah psalms immediately after Psalm 145:21 are cast as David’s response to his self-injunction in the first part of the verse (Wilson 1985:226). When Psalm 146:3 (“Do not put your trust in princes ...”) is laid in David’s mouth in this way, David, the king, is depicted as bowing before the kingship of God (Wilson 1985:227).

The theme of the fourth book is thus affirmed and taken through to the climax of the Psalter. The rest of the final hallelujah (Pss 147-150) seems to be addressed to the “all flesh” David called to praise in Psalm 145:21. The prominent themes of these psalms are the power of God which renders him trustworthy (Pss 147:4-5, 15-18; 148:5-6); God’s faithfulness to his exiled people (147:2-3; 148:14; 149:4); the kingship of God and his ultimate, victorious power over the nations who oppress and will continue to oppress Israel (Ps 149). Psalm 150 brings down the curtain while “everything that has breath” proclaims the praise of God (Wilson 1985:227).

The fifth book, then, stands as an answer to the plea of the exiles gathered from the *diaspora* (Wilson 1985:227). The answer is given in terms of God’s reign. He is the enthroned king, deserving of their praises and He looms far larger over life than the calamities that had befallen them.

This development from dependence on human kings to reliance on God as king represents a full turn towards God. Trust in human agencies of power is rejected in favour of trust in God. The locus of hope is shifted from earth to heaven - not in a spatial sense, but in the sense of sufficiency. Eschatology is injected. In a word, God is taken seriously.

Although we will not elaborate further on this theme, mention should be made at this point of the development of messianic tones in the royal psalms. These psalms were retained in spite of the fact that the institution of kingship had been destroyed in Israel by the time of the final redaction of the Psalter. The reason for this seems to have been that these psalms were retained as allusions to the coming Messiah (Childs 1979:516). They were treasured as a witness to the messianic hope which looked for the consummation of God’s kingship through the Messiah (Childs 1979:517).

We will not take up this theme in the next chapter, so a cautionary word should be added to the discussion. This move from human kings to God as king is not a move into otherworldliness. Zion, as a physical locus of God's reign, remains a focus in the Psalter. The pilgrim psalms (Pss 120-134) are inserted as a unit. David does not disappear from the horizon. In fact, he introduces the last salvo of five hallelujahs with his words in Psalm 145:21. What happens is that a new perspective for viewing earthly reality is introduced that makes it recognisable as *God's* kingdom. God's kingdom is affirmed as a kingdom to be proclaimed and given shape in the material here and now.

5. The Psalms as prayers for world-making

Walter Brueggemann's *Israel's Praise* (1988) makes it clear that the Psalms are not only to be viewed as responses to the reality of God; they are also expressions that help shape our relationship to and view of God. They *articulate* spirituality. This is evident from the perspective of the threefold scheme of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. But they also *shape* spirituality. Brueggemann's analysis helps us to understand the way the Psalms shape spirituality which takes God seriously.

Brueggemann's analysis is concerned with the world-making power of worship. Worship is not only potentially a force in shaping; it simply does this - it is not a matter of what worship *ought* to do, but of what it actually does (Brueggemann 1988:10). Whenever believers engage in acts of worship, worlds are being formed. Also, a sense of what is real and of the way God interacts with physical existence, takes shape.

Brueggemann is especially concerned with two elements of such worlds. Worlds have a certain *view of society* and an underpinning *view of God*. The second element is constitutive of the first. God's character determines the kind of world we project. The rest of our discussion in this chapter will concentrate on this element of world-making in worship. The first element (the view of society) will receive attention in the next chapter (Chapter 5, section 5).

The fact that acts of worship have this power to shape worlds, takes Brueggemann to a discussion of the way worship can be misappropriated. Worship may be used to support idolatry or ideology. It may shape a world in which God is said not to be able to act (idolatry) or where a certain social system is unchangeable and beyond criticism (idolatry). Worship may produce a mute god and a static world (Brueggemann 1988:104-119). The idolatry of a mute, inactive god and the ideology of a static world is necessary to legitimise the social arrangements favoured by those

whose interests are served by the status quo. Vested interests in the way things are currently arranged prefers that there should be no room for the free and surprising interventions of God. Therefore this kind of worship leaves us with a god who is at the mercy of the manipulations of those in control of the liturgy.

It takes very little imagination to realise that this kind of worship is an aberration. We need forms of worship that introduce us to a different world - one where the free God of the Bible is seen to be active in liberating his people and where social structures are seen to be subject to his reign. Brueggemann demonstrates how this is achieved in the Psalms - specifically in the doxology of the Psalms. The rest of our discussion in this section will concentrate on how the Psalms function as worship that presents us with a biblical view of God in opposition to idolatry. The next chapter (Chapter 5, section 5) will take up the way the Psalms function as a antidote to ideology.

The Psalms nullify ideology and its underlying idolatry by depicting a totally different God and by inviting the participants of worship into his world. Brueggemann elaborates on a number of ways God is depicted in the Psalms which effectively stand against the mute god of status quo idolatry:

The first is found in the so-called “enthronement psalms” of Sigmund Mowinckel. They depict God as the One who has achieved victory over all other gods and established Himself as the ruler of all known reality (Brueggemann 1988:30-8). God’s rule is characterised by equity and justice. Therefore an unjust status quo is fundamentally challenged by this particular dramatic declaration of God’s rule. As a liturgical act the declaration “the Lord reigns”, is more than a reminder of the fact of God’s rule. It is a dramatic enactment of this reality that pulls participants of worship into a counterworld with fresh possibilities (Brueggemann 1988:34-8).

Spoken in a world filled with obeisance to other gods, these psalms have an inherent polemic ring. The theme of *Yahweh’s* domination of other gods is a common one in the Psalms. Alternatives to God is not viewed with tolerance. The Psalms, instead of softening their attitude towards acceptance of religious pluralism, extend an invitation to other nations to worship their God, *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* is depicted as the only true God, while the gods of other nations are caricatured for their inabilities. Acceptance of this counter-world meant rejection of idolatry. The world created by the enthronement psalms has room for only one god - *Yahweh*, the mighty god of equity and justice.

The second depiction of God that is set up against status quo idolatry is found in the Psalms’ reference to God’s commitment to acts of liberation (Brueggemann 1988:39-

45). The roots of this aspect of the liturgical inheritance of Israel lies in their history as a people. The Song of Miriam (Ex 15) provides us with the prototypical liturgical move of Israel. It reacts to God's liberating intervention that brought his people out of Egypt. It interprets the event as an unmaking of the world of the Pharaoh and the opening up of totally new possibilities (Brueggemann 1988:42).

This theme is taken up again and again in the Psalms, even to the point of taunting all that stands in the way of liberation (Ps 114:3-6). It is clear that this element of the Psalter will always live in tension with attempts to solidify social arrangements (Brueggemann 1988:40). God the liberator stands against any claim to immutability by agencies of subjugation.

This function of nullifying idolatry and presenting us with a world where God is actively involved at the centre, is very important. There is no shortage of idolatries and ideologies on offer. The pervasive pluralism in modern-day society makes the act of world-making in worship immensely important. The Psalter's seriousness about God and the way they depict God as ruler and liberator (among other things) makes it particularly powerful as an ideology-breaker. This chapter has established the fact that the Psalms take God seriously. It follows that the counter-world of Psalmic worship has God at its very centre. This world effectively replaces any modern-day idolatry and, by doing that, undermines any ideology that makes claims contrary to God's character.

6. Summary

The chapter started off by focusing on the *subject-matter* of the Psalter. Each of the first three sections of the chapter concentrated on one of Walter Brueggemann's three major categories of psalms (psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation). All Brueggemann's subdivisions of these three categories were taken one by one, and examined to indicate how they demonstrate a focus on God. We found all of them supporting our main contention of the chapter, namely that the Psalms demonstrate a seriousness about God.

The second part of our chapter demonstrated the way seriousness about God is constitutive for the editorial shape of the Psalter. We focused on the use of Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction to the Psalter, on the fivefold division of the Psalter, and on the developments from lament to praise, from delighting in the *torah* to praising God, and from focusing on human kings to *Yahweh* as king. Again we found enough evidence to support our contention that the Psalms are passionately focused on God.

We concluded the chapter with a section on the world-making power of the Psalms. We found the particular way the Psalms speak about God to be the key to their world-making power. The Psalms confront us with the reality of the reign of God and with his character as liberator. Finally, we came to the conclusion that the way the Psalms take God seriously is the most important aspect of their world-making power. They introduce us to a view of reality with God at its centre.

CHAPTER 5: TAKING LIFE SERIOUSLY

“Ik ben gewoon dit boek te noemen een ontleding van al de delen van die Ziel, omdat er geen aandoening in de mens is, die hier niet als in een spiegel voorgesteld word. Ja zelfs, om het beter te zeggen, de Heilige Geest heeft hier naar het leven geteken al de smarten, droefenissen, vrezen, twijfelingen, verwachtingen, zorgen, ontsteltenissen, ja zelfs tot aan de verwarde aandoeningen waarmede de geesten van de mensen gewoonlijk in beroering gebracht worden”¹ (Calvijn 1972:II).

“...all dematerialized spiritualities are vacant lots” (Eugene Peterson 1988:171).

Chapter 5 is the necessary addition to the previous chapter. Whereas Chapter 4 was concerned with the way the Psalms take God seriously, Chapter 5 argues that *the same Psalms* are completely concerned with human life in all its aspects. Therefore, most of the chapter will provide a mirror-image of Chapter 4. It will follow the same route through the Psalms, but will demonstrate how Israel obstinately refuses to take God-talk and prayer out of the concrete world of experience of Israel. The Psalms take life seriously.

If this chapter can accomplish to prove that the Psalter is also committed to material life (as it is to God), we will have good reason to propose praying the Psalms as an antidote for dualistic spirituality. If we can establish that the language and images used in the Psalms demonstrate a full occupation with God and life simultaneously, they can help us to do the same in our day and age.

We start our inquiry by looking at Brueggemann’s three categories of psalms, as we did in the previous chapter.

1. Orientation: Praying the Psalms in times of equilibrium

It is immediately obvious that the three categories Brueggemann distinguishes correspond with human experience. His approach is an attempt to connect the subject-matter of the Psalms to the realities of human life:

1. This is the well-known description of the Psalms by Calvin: “I habitually call this book an anatomy of all parts of the soul, since there is no human affliction that is not depicted here as in a mirror. Yes, to say it with even more clarity, the Holy Spirit has here given us a true to life rendition of all the distresses, sorrows, doubts, hopes, cares, confusions, yes even to the point of the confused spiritual ailments that usually trouble the human spirit.”

“...I have sought to consider the interface between the flow of the Psalms and the dynamics of our common life” (Brueggemann 1984:10).

Our discussion of the psalms of orientation in the previous chapter demonstrated their insistence on God as ever present, but also ultimately involved in the affairs of his people. The discussion of the five types of psalms of orientation has made it clear that God is not perceived as a distant deity, uninvolved in the affairs of his children. Whatever these psalms say about God and however much they insist on attention to God, they never provide an image of God without implications for life. One can say this about *the function* of these psalms:

“The function of this kind of psalm [psalms of orientation] is theological, i.e., to praise and thank God. But such a psalm also has a social function of importance. It is to articulate and maintain a ‘sacred canopy’ under which the community of faith can live out its life with freedom from anxiety. ...Whenever we use these psalms, they continue to assure us of such a canopy of certitude - despite all the incongruities of life” (Brueggemann 1984:26).

The *subject-matter* of the psalms presents us with a view of God and God’s activities that is thoroughly entangled with the affairs of daily life. This credits human existence with an importance that cannot be ignored.

A consideration of the various types of psalms of orientation will demonstrate the various ways in which God is seen to be present and involved in life on earth. The previous chapter gave a short summary of the five different types. We will not repeat these summaries, but simply make observations about the way each of these types of psalms express their concern with normal human life.

1.1 Types of psalms of orientation

1.1.1 Songs of creation (Pss 8, 33, 104, 145 etc.)

The songs of creation look at the regularities of creation with the eyes of faith and turn them into affirmations of God’s constancy and dependability (Brueggemann 1984:28). Creation faith has a covenantal dimension (Brueggemann 1984:30). God proves his covenantal faithfulness in the constancy and stability of creation. Everything that contributes to physical well-being is viewed as God’s covenantal gifts.

The seriousness about life in these psalms comes to the fore in their insistence on a life of gratitude towards God for his gifts. The gifts are valued for their enhancement of life. They are valued to the extent of leading to a life of thankful covenant keeping. God's enhancement of life becomes an opportunity for celebration.

1.1.2 Songs of *torah* (Pss 1, 19, 119, 15, 24 etc.)

These psalms understand God's gift of *torah* as his gracious revelation of his will and purpose for the world (Brueggemann 1984:38). This has immediate implications for life. Obedience to the *torah* is Israel's way to respond to God's well-ordered world. When the songs of *torah* express delight in the *torah*, their seriousness about life is demonstrated. It is exactly because right living, living in accordance with the will and purpose of the One who determines the destiny of creation, is so important for the psalmists that they take such delight in God's gift of the *torah*. *Torah*-keeping is not an other-worldly enterprise. These psalms' affirmation of life explains their joy in their access to the *torah*.

1.1.3 Wisdom psalms (Pss 37,14 etc.)

It is not much of an academic feat to relate a passion for wisdom to a passion for life. What one should not miss in the Psalms is the way they relate social order to the order of God (Brueggemann 1984:42-45). The order wisdom detects, is an order instilled by God's hand. The ways that lead to life are God's ways.

The wisdom psalms' didactic tone provides us with a further clue to their high concern for wise living. They deem the insights that have been gleaned over time important enough to place an emphasis on instructing the young in its truth. These psalms are prayers that hope to be overheard and then followed as guidelines to meaningful living and a stable society. The pray-ers' concern for wise living lead them to pray in this way within earshot of the young.

1.1.4 Songs of retribution (Pss 111 and 112)

The songs of retribution bespeak a passion for justice. Their conviction that God will see to justice in the world (Brueggemann 1984:45) leads them to views of moral symmetry: Evil will be punished; good will be rewarded. Life is important in these psalms, so important that it is unthinkable that injustice should flourish. Life is too important for God to pass it off that lightly. He will not allow evil to encroach on life and spoil it.

1.1.5 Psalms for occasions of well-being (Pss 131, 133 etc.)

The most obvious thing about these psalms is their connection to life. Ordinary life is elevated as instances of God's sustenance and care. The twin psalms 127 and 128 give us a particularly clear instance of the importance given to ordinary life. These two psalms concern work and family life. Work and family were the two constitutive dimensions of ordinary life in Israel (Mays 1994a:401). Both psalms give thanks for fruitful work and family life as a blessing from God. This acknowledges these ordinary daily occurrences as important enough to warrant both God's full attention and our careful consideration.

1.2 Careful analysis as seriousness about life

This brief consideration of the basic types of psalms of orientation should make it evident that their concern for God in no way diminishes their passion for life. These two passions is seen as inherently interrelated. For the psalms of orientation, to be concerned with God means having a deep concern for life. The way these psalms speak about the one brings the other to the fore. God is a god who is deeply committed to the life of his creatures. To speak of Him leads to speaking about life. Life makes no sense without God. To speak about life means speaking about his character. It means finding his character's stamp on the way creation is structured, in the way the *torah* views the purpose and substance of life, in the way justice is promulgated in life, and in the way wise conduct is rewarded. The psalms of orientation have forged these twin passions into one.

This leads the psalms of orientation to a form of seriousness about life that presents itself in a careful analysis of life. They are not content with the surface structure of things. They seek out deeper meanings and patterns. They read these deeper meanings and patterns as indications of God's character and clues to his purposes. They do not only do this with the majestic and the conspicuous, but also give full attention to the mundane and the inconspicuous. They try to be as comprehensive as possible, not letting a single detail slip by. This is especially clear in the many acrostic poems that are used to propagate wisdom. Nothing is too unimportant for careful analysis. All of life needs to be subjected to careful scrutiny.

The great danger (as far as our perspective on life is concerned) in times when both necessities and luxuries are freely available, is that we might start living trivially, only on the surface. These psalms prevent this by asking about the ultimate structure and, going even deeper, connecting this structure to its Source of life. They fund our

perspective of reality with a sense of the rich texture and interconnectedness of life, and of the way all of this relates to God.

Praying these psalms creates a sense of wonderment at the intricacies of life. They keep us firmly rooted in the totality of life and prevent our passion for God to lure us into otherworldliness. The fact that these prayers have their roots in settled social, economic and political situations make them all the more remarkable. They provide us with valuable perspectives in such times. When prayed in other seasons of life, their relentless concern for detail is more than helpful in preventing us from losing our focus on the width and depth of meaning that permeates the whole range of human experience.

When all these perspectives are taken into consideration, we are led to the conviction that the psalms of orientation are utterly serious about life.

1.3 Whose prayers?

Before moving on to the psalms of disorientation, we need to ask one critical question: Whose prayers are these?

The psalms of orientation are clearly the prayers of the well-off, the economically secure and the politically significant. This, of itself, does not make these psalms suspect, but this recognition does allow us to read them knowingly (Brueggemann 1984:26-27). We are alerted to the fact that these psalms could be wrongly appropriated. The sure sense of God's orderliness could be put to bad use as a way to celebrate only the status quo and to keep present arrangements intact.

The reasons for doing this could be far from noble. In a situation where the advantage of some is at the expense of others, these psalms might be very attractive to those on the take. Such an appropriation may forge them into the means for keeping unjust social structures in place. In cases like these, these psalms (and other prayers along the same lines) actually serve as a form of social control. We should take careful note when Brueggemann says:

“There are times when such psalms may be used freely. But there are times when such psalms must be used carefully or with a knowing qualification. For we know persons and communities whose experience of injustice and disorder deeply contradicts this faith. Then we must always ask whose interest is reflected and served by such psalms and by their use” (Brueggemann 1984:27).

The fact that these psalms can be usurped in such a way warns us to be watchful for partisan applications. God's created orderliness cannot be easily and unambiguously identified with our social experience of well-being and moral coherence (Brueggemann 1984:27).

A word in advance seems appropriate at this point. Our last chapter will make a case for *the whole* of the Psalter to be appropriated as foundational for prayer. The psalms of disorientation and of new orientation balance the *creation themes* of the psalms of orientation with the *salvation traditions* of Israel's theological corpus. These traditions are claimed by the lowly (עני). They provide a context for prayers such as the psalms of orientation. The salvation traditions leave no doubt that self-serving individuals have no claim to God's blessings. They also sensitise pray-ers to the plight of the poor and helpless. The surest way to keep the psalms of orientation from becoming legitimations of unjust social arrangements is to keep them firmly fixed in their context - the canonical corpus.

Having said that these are the prayers of the well-off and politically relevant, one should add that these psalms have considerable religious power for all sorts of conditions. Their statements about God extend beyond the partisan considerations of a particular socio-economic group. They have an eschatological ring for those who do not share in the present arrangements of power and economical well-being (Brueggemann 1984:28). They offer hope that the order of God, as presented in these psalms, will overcome present injustice. They carry the conviction that the creation work of God has not yet been completed, but will be in future. If a well-oriented world is not yet experienced, it can be anticipated by praying these psalms. They create a feeling for the inexorable push of God's activity towards this kind of world:

“There moves in these psalms a deep conviction that God's purpose for the world is resilient” (Brueggemann 1984:28).

When the psalms of orientation are appropriated in this way, they are actually an instance of social criticism. They typify present arrangements as being at odds with the shape of the future God is inaugurating.² They keep the hope for a new dispensation alive and concrete.

2. A clear instance of this is the frequent, seemingly out of place, outbursts against the wicked (for instance in Psalm 104:35). The wicked are viewed as those who disrupt the pattern of God's well-ordered and safe world. Therefore the musings on the peaceable and equitable arrangement of the world is sometimes, quite unexpectedly, ruptured by interjections of venom directed against the wicked. If God's שְׁלוֹם is to win through, they have to be removed from the scene (Allen 1983:34). These interjections save many of the psalms of orientation from appropriation for vested interests. It is significant that these verses are often the specific ones left out in lectionaries and prayer books' appropriation of the Psalms.

When the psalms of orientation are misappropriated to legitimise ideologies, they lose their seriousness about life. They no longer cover either the breadth or the depth of life. They are narrow in their focus, since they only cover the experience of a certain partisan group in the community. They are shallow, since they ignore the underlying pain and suffering below the surface of the seemingly amicable arrangements.

We will contend ourselves with these few remarks at this stage. The theme of partisan misuse of the psalms will be elaborated in our discussion of the world-making power of the Psalms (section 6) and their political relevance (section 7). We inserted these comments at this stage, since the psalms of orientation are peculiarly vulnerable to the danger of ideological misappropriation.

2. Disorientation: Praying the Psalms in times of disarray

“In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for one another, and for our life together here” (Annie Dillard 1982:94-5).

The psalms of disorientation have a different perspective on life from that found in the psalms of orientation. Whereas the latter recognises God’s hand in stability and equity, the psalms of disorientation view life as a pilgrimage where times of disarray have their place. Times of disequilibrium are not automatically viewed as signs of God’s displeasure or absence, but there is an openness to the positive aspects of these times. Many of the psalms of disorientation start off with ragged complaints, that actually ask the unsettling questions about God’s absence and reliability. When the questions are finally spent, though, they confirm God’s presence and trustworthiness, in spite of their situation being the same. Times of disorientation are finally seen as the places where new life is given by God (Brueggemann 1984:52). Here, more than anywhere else in the Psalter, new life is understood as a gift from God, something not attainable by human effort.

We begin our discussion of the way the psalms of disorientation are serious about life with an overview of the types of psalms of disorientation in Brueggemann’s scheme

(Brueggemann 1984). We will argue that each of these types of psalms places concerns for human life at the centre of interest.

2.1 Types of psalms of disorientation

2.1.1 Personal lament (Pss 13, 35, 86 etc.)

The personal laments display a remarkable candor about the distressing elements of life. There is an insistence that things are not as they should be. The problems, as they stand, should be addressed. As we have stated in the previous chapter, these psalms take a theological perspective on their crises. Their analysis includes God and they insist that the essence of their problems lie in the relationship with God.

However, this fact should not lead us to think that the personal laments pass over the issues of life. Far from it. They present us with a way of thinking about God that denies any split between the conditions in our lives on earth and our relationship with God. There is an intrinsic connection between these aspects of our lives that are affirmed by this turn to God. Their seriousness about life is such, that they are prepared to pray these abrasive prayers if this is what is necessary for resolution. The politeness barriers are down. "Out with it!" Everything is expressed: Pain, disillusionment, hate, dejection, affront.

Such is the psalmists' seriousness with life that there is no attempt to be docile or polite in these psalms. Such is their seriousness about life that they do not flinch from a full confrontation with even the most painful experience, if this is necessary for resolution. Life is too precious not to do these things, if doing them would mean that life could again be enjoyed to the fullest. These psalms refuse to fall into passive numbness. For this very reason they open the way to resolution, as we shall see in our discussion of the psalms of new orientation.

2.1.2 Communal laments (Pss 74, 79, 137 etc.)

The communal laments are concerned with public calamities like war, drought and famine. When these calamities struck, or when public meanings and values were placed in jeopardy, these psalms brought this to the attention of God.

In these psalms, the seriousness about life is quite evident. There is no resignation or fatalism. Life, in this case public life, is too precious not to try to retrieve it. The unique feature and biggest gain for the church's life of prayer lies in the fact that their concern is for *public* loss. Secularism has caused us to vacate a tangible Christian

presence from the public square. We have, somehow, been taken in to believe that public matters are beyond our control and beyond God's concern. The communal laments' seriousness about life extends far beyond individual human existence. Christian spirituality that prays these psalms is taught to view public life as a proper concern for God and as something to be taken seriously.

2.1.3 Two problem psalms (Pss 88, 109)

Life is difficult. But situations as extreme as those reflected in these two psalms are rare. Yet they exist and have to be taken into account. The two "problem psalms" carry no articulated resolve of the issues the psalmists face. They leave us in a state of unresolve:

"... dangling in the depth of the pit without any explicit sign of rescue. That is an important statement to have in the repertoire, precisely because life is like that. Faith does not always resolve life" (Brueggemann 1984:78).

There are no pat answers, no easy ways out. Neither the silence of God (Ps 88) nor the extreme vindictiveness of other human beings (Ps 109) can be solved by some ten-step programme. Some situations in life leave us at a loss. But, with the help of these psalms, at least not at a loss for words. They give us words with which to address God from the depths of the pit.

These psalms have an important pastoral function. Too much pastoral work is too concerned with quick resolutions and answers (Brueggemann 1984:78). This will not do for the two extremes of life represented in these two psalms. They teach us that faith sometimes means staying in the midst of disorientation instead of nostalgically retreating again and again into orientation, or settling too easily for some imagined resolution. Reality often has a slow tortuous pace. These psalms take account of that fact.

Such is the scope of the Psalter's concern for life, that we find these theologically risky psalms in the collection. Their abrasiveness have not been tampered with. Their rough edges have not been brought into line with conventional, polite religion. They are a sign of faithful adherence to the Psalms' serious consideration of the realities of life. Anything less than a total commitment to the value of human life would have eradicated them.

If these psalms represent the deepest point of seriousness about God, they also do so in regard to seriousness about life. They keep these two sides of reality in a marvellous unity:

“This speech is precious because it shows that Israel understood that what is *healthily human* intersects with what is *healthily faithful*” (Brueggemann 1984:86).

2.1.4 “A second opinion” on the disorientation (Pss 50, 81 etc.)

These psalms are ostensibly more concerned with God and the issues of sin and the breakdown of covenantal relationships than with human experience. Yet one would be guilty of misreading them if the point is missed that the problem with the relationship is read from quite concrete occurrences in the life of Israel. The judgement of God that results from covenantal infraction by Israel is worked out in actual historical events. Israel is left to its own devices (Ps 81:13). God does not save anymore (Ps 50:22). He does not protect them from enemies (Ps 81:15), famine (Ps 81:16-17), and disorder. He does not guide them anymore (Ps 95:11). These psalms’ focal point is the fractured relationship with God, but they offer an explanation for life gone wrong: Breach of the covenant resulted in these concrete crises.

It is evident that seriousness about life would lead one to listen to God’s accusation. The fact that God’s judgement was incurred led to their situation of disequilibrium. A turn back to God was, simultaneously, a turn back to life. In this sense these psalms are another example of Israel’s attention to matters of human existence.

2.1.5 “The seven psalms” (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143)

The connection between these psalms and concrete human existence is less obvious than in most of the other psalms. These psalms are thoroughly concerned with God, since they are prayers that attempt to heal the relationship with God that has broken down. It would not seem amiss to interpret them as wholly concerned with “spiritual” matters. Viewed against the overwhelming focus on physical life in the rest of the Psalter it would also not harm the contention of this chapter - that the psalms demonstrate an intense concern with life on earth. We would, however, argue against such a notion. We find even these psalms to be intimately connected to everyday life.

The context of the rest of the psalms provide us with a clue to how these psalms relate to the Psalters' concern for life. The Psalms demonstrate a decidedly holistic approach to life. Throughout the Psalms God is viewed as the giver of life. Many of the psalms of disorientation use the language of death and deadly sickness (as a form of near-death) to typify life under God's wrath.³ Not only do the Psalms describe the kind of deathly life with this language; they also imply that sickness is the direct result of God's wrath at sin (Mays 1994a:163). In this regard we may mention Psalms 6:2; 32:3-4; 39:11-12; 41:5; 88:8, 17; 107:17-22. A number of psalms (for instance, Psalms 6, 38, 39 and 88) are built around this connection between sickness and sin. Five of the "seven psalms" refer to the problems of sickness (Pss 6, 32, 38, 102, 143), in some cases quite extensively.

These psalms do not make generalisations about sickness, as if all sickness should be viewed as the result of sin (Mays 1994a:164). The book of Job is an eloquent protest against such a view. These passages do, however, tell us something about the intimate connection the Psalms observe between physical well-being and the relationship with God. There is no separating our physical lives from our relationship with God.

"There is here a profound and uncomplicated understanding of psychosomatic realities. The body pays for covenantal disturbances" (Brueggemann 1984:96).

The manner in which the language of sickness and death is applied, is just one of various ways the Psalms demonstrate their holistic approach to life. These brief remarks on how this language is applied should suffice to dispel any thought that the "seven psalms" concentrate on the relationship with God to the exclusion of concern for physical life.

Seen in this light, resolution of the problem sin poses in the relationship with God, is a crucial issue for physical life. God is the well-spring of life. Alienation from Him has decided consequences for physical life. A concern for life leads one to tend the relationship with God. This finds expression in the "seven psalms."

2.1.6 After the deluge - Thou! (Pss 49, 73, 90 etc.)

These psalms demonstrate the evangelical "nevertheless." They cling to God's provision in the face of unrelieving adversity. They sing God's praises even though they are still in the pit. At first glance some of the statements made in these psalms

3. See Mays (1994a:163-39) for a discussion of the connection between sickness and sin in the psalms.

may seem to be in an escapist vein and to take insufficient cognisance of concrete conditions. This would not be a correct interpretation of the way they relate to life.

Though these psalms provide us with a sense of reality in which God's sovereignty overrides hurtful conditions, they never do so at the expense of realism. They are starkly realistic about life. But they provide an alternative reading of life's circumstances. They contend that the dominant reading in society of success, of justice and of worth needs revision. They do this revision in the light of the alternative reality offered by God. God's sovereignty and the reality of his presence should be taken into account even if it is intangible at a specific point in time. The psalmists refuse to be captured by the evidence, to be overly impressed by the raw data at hand, if seen in isolation from God's Lordship (Brueggemann 1984:112-13).

Israel's interest in life leads them to a point where they find the distressing data of disorientation too narrow to live with. They find relief, not in some hidden exit, but in broadening reality by taking God into account. This provides them with new impetus for life. They do not allow fatigue and numbness (Brueggemann 1984:20), or denial to get the better of them. In the end they find fidelity to God more practical than the pragmatism of the ungodly!

2.2 Candor as seriousness about life

The seriousness about life in the psalms of disorientation is expressed in their candor. They care too much about life not to attend to their hurt. The religious experience of Israel included their painful experiences. At their best they never succumbed to the temptation to use their religious experiences as a flight from reality. They included the unpleasant parts of life in their worship.

“The lament manifests Israel at it best, giving authentic expression to the real experiences of life. Israel never wavered concerning the data or substance of its religion, knowing that it had to be about the real experiences of life. A study of the lament may be a corrective for some religion in the church that wishes to withdraw from life as it really is, to pretence and romance in the unreal world of heavenly or holy things” (Brueggemann 1995:67).

We touched upon the issue of the “False Self” in the previous chapter (section 2). We stated that its refusal to lament represents, among other things, a lack of seriousness about life. If seriousness about life surfaces in prayer as candor toward God, it should be clear that the issue of the “False Self” needs to be discussed in this chapter.

Brueggemann takes the concept of the “False Self” from the theory of personality called “the object-relations theory”. This theory claims that matters of personality development are not simply internal, but are relational and external. Personality is developed in relationships. If a person is to develop ego-strength, he or she must have initiative in the relationship. A False Self is developed when a person leaves all the initiative to the other person in a relationship. He or she fails to develop an independent personality *vis a vis* the other (Brueggemann 1995:102-3).

In religious discourse this means that God is surrounded by “yes-men” and “yes-women”. In times of disorientation this situation results in a celebrative, consenting silence, that does not square up with reality. Praise becomes mere flattery, a veneer hiding a multitude of hurts and scars. It amounts to denial, cover-up and pretence (Brueggemann 1995:102). The abrasiveness of life is never allowed to be admitted and brought to speech. Only doxology is allowed. The relationship with God is one-sided. The believer is nothing and can either praise God uncritically or take all the blame when the relationship does not function properly. The result is a life of fear and guilt, filled with resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness. In the absence of lament the only possibility is a religion of coercive obedience (Brueggemann 1995:103-4).

It is quite clear that this kind of spirituality lacks seriousness about life. It is an obvious evasion of the abrasiveness of life. This kind of religious escapism might seem rather innocuous and, sometimes, even pious and noble in its determined reference to God. In reality it is in the same league as other escapisms, such as drug taking and indulgence in alcohol. It also prevents the person in its grip from facing the realities of life in a constructive way. It can, in fact, be even more constrictive and self-perpetuating than other forms of escapism, since it can interpret away most of what life throws at it. Other forms of escapisms have limits to how far one can get away with them. The False Self’s limits appear to be a good deal further along the road. When a person runs into these limits, the damage is often greater than the damage done by other forms of escapism. The disillusionment of believers suffering from this spiritual malady, often leaves them in a spiritual void. They can see no alternative to the kind of faith they had, and this faith has proved inadequate in the face of life’s crises. It is often extremely difficult for persons who have gone through this destructive cycle to regain full trust in God.

On the other hand, we also maintain that this kind of spirituality is based on a misconception of God. God is very much a covenant God. He sets up the covenant

in such a way that his covenant partners are given autonomy and initiative.⁴ If this is not practised, we have a breakdown in the relationship. God structures the covenantal relationships with his people in such a way that the free participation of the human partners are vitally necessary.

Seen in this light, the candor of the psalms of disorientation is both a seriousness about God and a seriousness about life. They take the covenantal relationship with too much seriousness to leave chunks of human experience out of their conversation - especially if this experience threatens to overwhelm them. On the other hand, they are too serious about life not to take their woes to God. Life gone wrong is not a peripheral issue. It is taken up with passion and candour. It is not ignored, but faced squarely and made the essence of conversations with God. Eugene Peterson interprets David's willingness to face death and pain in his laments as a mark of the seriousness with which he took life:

“David, who lived exuberantly, also lamented fiercely. His exuberance and lamentations were aspects of the same life-orientation and commitment: life matters. David honoured human life - the sheer fact of human life - extravagantly. The depth of the lamentation witnesses the extent of the veneration” (Peterson 1997:115).

When all this has been said, we should state that there are instances where positive statements in times of duress may be a genuine “evangelical nevertheless” (Brueggemann 1984:51). One should, however, note that this can be a genuinely faithful response only after the pertinent issues have been squarely faced. If the issues of life are skirted to take a shortcut to doxology, we should suspect the False Self operating.

3. New orientation: Praying the Psalms in times of surprising new life

“And like Billy Bray I go my way, and my left foot says ‘Glory,’ and my right foot says ‘Amen’: in and out of Shadow Creek, upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise” (Annie Dillard 1974:279).

It is clear that the psalms of new orientation should always be read against the backdrop of the troubles that had preceded them. The psalms of disorientation are, in

4. This does not cancel the “previousness” of God. God always has the initiative, but this never cancels the free initiative of his covenant partners. The initiative and autonomy of the human partner is a qualified initiative and autonomy. It is “*theonomic reciprocity*”, to use AA van Ruler’s term - a reciprocity that is real, but nonetheless, secondary to God’s initiative (Rebel *as*:141).

fact, “partial forms” (Brueggemann 1984:124). The psalms of disorientation are their “proper rhetorical forerunners” (Brueggemann 1984:124). Westermann (1977:129) maintains that the full form of the lament psalm is the most basic rhetorical pattern of Israel’s faith, since it contains the full movement from trouble, through resolution, culminating in praise and thanksgiving. The psalms of new orientation represent a full-blown development of the last stage of the full form of the lament psalm.

Without this implicit rhetorical context one could have been tempted to conclude that some of the psalms of new orientation are so heavenly-minded that they have lost their concern for concrete life. This accusation could most convincingly be levelled against some of the hymns of praise where the focus falls heavily on the summons to praise, and the reasons for praise are either given in generalised terms or reduced to the bare minimum.⁵ Once the implicit links with the psalms of disorientation are recognised, though, one realises that these psalms are, in fact, born out of the resolution of very concrete troubles. They did not originate in a vacuum. They are not the product of a hymn-writing committee attempting to bring some heartiness into worship. They are the glad responses to God’s liberating intervention when all seemed to have gone awry.

“Israelite praise characteristically comes out of the depths, out of the Pit from which we are surprised to come, because the situation seemed unresolvable” (Brueggemann 1984:124).

Therefore the total focus on and joy in God that characterise these psalms do not preclude a seriousness about life. It is in the crucible of life that this new joy in God is discovered. It is through the resolution of very concrete matters that the psalmists arrive at their new-found resolve to praise God.

Brueggemann admits to the fact that the classification of some psalms as psalms of new orientation instead of old orientation rests on subjective decisions. Many psalms are clearly psalms of new orientation. There is a freshness and buoyancy that attests to the fact that their experience of God’s liberation is still fresh in their memory. Other psalms show signs that this experience is further back in the past and that the memory of the events is not as fresh. These psalms may either be interpreted as psalms of old orientation or new orientation. *The way that a psalm is used* will determine whether it speaks of the enduring graciousness of God (old orientation) or articulates the surprise of new grace (Brueggemann 1984:125).

5. Psalm 150 is the most extreme example of this. It consists almost entirely of a summons to worship.

Once again we receive support for the notion that concrete contextual factors (in this instance the context of the users of the psalm) are decisive for the meaning we derive from them. In a context of equilibrium these psalms would most probably be appropriated as psalms of old orientation, attesting to the firmness and reliability of God's world. In times of recent resolution of troubles, or in times of instability, they would most probably serve as psalms of new orientation.

3.1 Types of psalms of new orientation

Brueggemann distinguishes five types of psalms of new orientation (Brueggemann 1984:123-67). We will now proceed to demonstrate the way each of them are marked by a concern for concrete life.

3.1.1 Thanksgiving songs (Pss 30, 34, 40, 138 etc.)

Thanksgiving songs preserve a clear link with the troubled past. God's resolution of the trouble is still fresh in the minds of these psalmists. The importance of the resolution of such concrete issues of life is affirmed by intense joy and total abandonment to God, the creator of new life. The change in situation is interpreted as a new state that God wrought out of nothing in answer to their persistent laments. The importance of life is affirmed by the joyous and grateful acceptance of the new lease on life.

Many of the thanksgiving songs are characterised by new-found joy in the *torah* (Ps 40:6-8 etc.). This is not hard to fathom, since the *torah* opens up further possibilities of experiencing God-wrought life. It is important to note that God's intervention leads the psalmists in this direction and not into some mystical withdrawal. Their concern for life continues unabated, but it is clearly a sharpened concern for God-centred life. Psalms of new orientation not only celebrate "freedom from" but also "freedom for" (Brueggemann 1984:133). Their concern for life finds expression in a concern for a kind of life resonant with the reality of God's rule.

3.1.2 Thanksgiving songs of the community (Pss 65, 66, 124 etc.)

These songs have great importance for secular society. They will have none of our hesitance at inserting religious concerns in the public domain. They have no hesitation in discussing public affairs as the proper concern of religion. When they turn to God to thank him for deliverance in the public domain, they deconstruct all secularist views of the world. Not only human life on the private plain, but also human life in the public domain, is taken seriously as the proper concern of believers.

3.1.3 The once and future king (Pss 29, 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99, 114 etc.)

On the face of it, these psalms seem so intensely focused on God that material reality hardly enters into consideration. This would, though, not be a fair reflection of the contents of the enthronement hymns. They ground their acclaim for God on thoroughly concrete acts of deliverance and transformation. The exodus and the Zion traditions form the basic subject-matter of these psalms (Brueggemann 1984:140). The deliverance from Egypt and God's choice of Zion are interpreted as world-shaking events that irrevocably change power-arrangements on earth.

“The exodus event and tradition announce in heaven and earth that there will be no more imperial business as usual” (Brueggemann 1984:141).

Not only is God seen as having won decisive battles. These psalms stake God's claim of governance *on earth*. These quite concrete turns of events are claimed as paradigmatic for a new state of affairs. God's reign is declared to encompass all of reality. All nations are called upon to acknowledge this fact and to pay tribute to Him (for instance, Psalm 96:1, 3-5). These psalms are, therefore, concerned with a total new ordering of material reality - one that gives cognisance to the claims of universal sovereignty on God's part. Concerns for *shalom* (life in all its God-given fullness), for justice, right, faithfulness and equity, fall within the scope of God's new rule.⁶ God's utilisation of his absolute power is always at the service of *torah* values (Brueggemann 1984:147), values that explicitly order human life in the material world. What Brueggemann says about Psalm 96 can be generalised to the other enthronement psalms as well:

“Psalm 96 thus focuses on (a) the moment of inversion through enthronement when something new begins, and (b) the long-term implementation of that rule for a new ordering of life. Put in conventional theological terms, the enthronement is the new justification of the world; the hoped-for new life is the practice of sanctification of the world” (Brueggemann 1984:145).

One last element of the enthronement psalms deserves mention in this discussion. They make special mention of God's gift of the land (for instance in Psalm 47:5).⁷ This is mentioned as closely tied in with God's covenantal election of Israel among the nations. The land binds Israel to the Giver (Brueggemann 1977:47). The very fact of being a landed people presented Israel with the concrete questions of

6. See Brueggemann's discussion of Psalm 93 (Brueggemann 1984:146).

7. For a full discussion, see Brueggemann (1977).

managing it (Brueggemann 1984:73-89). A number of the psalms' concern for justice seems to tie into questions about land ownership.⁸ The juxtaposition of the rule of God and the issues of land, once again, affirms material reality as the proper concern of people under God's rule.

3.1.4 Thanksgiving generalised to confidence (Pss 23, 27, 91 etc.)

In these psalms the troubles from which the psalmists have been delivered have receded into the past. They are toned down, compared with the psalms of thanksgiving and most of the hymns. They provide an orientation of confidence towards the adversities of material life, based on the reliability and power of God as demonstrated in the past. The confidence in these psalms is totally in touch with material life in two respects.

Firstly, these psalms take full account of the difficulties of material life. They do not minimise the threats to their present buoyancy. In this respect they prove themselves not to be fanciful flights from reality. God's reliability and power are viewed as the answer to the real issues of their life on earth. Therefore these psalms are filled with images that point us towards corporeal existence (for example, the images of "cup" and "table" in Psalm 23).

Secondly, they base their confidence on concrete acts of deliverance in the past. Their confidence is derived from the fact that God had changed the concrete situations in the past and in this way, proved Himself to be ready to do the same in new situations of the same kind. Though their grid of reality takes God's activity as its focal point, the arena for this activity is seen to be their concrete world. Therefore they demonstrate a lively concern for material life.

3.1.5 Hymns of praise (Pss 100, 103, 113, 135, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150 etc.)

The hymns of praise comprise two basic elements: The *summons* and the *basis* for these summons. Where the summons call for a complete focus on God, the basis for these summons takes full account of the material world. The basis, typically, refers to concrete historical acts of liberation by God as the reason for praise. So we are prevented from dissolving our links to material reality even when we are immersed in this, our most heavenly-minded of all liturgical acts. God is praised on the basis of his mighty deeds in our material world. Even when the hymns of praise extol his personal attributes, these attributes are inferred from these concrete deeds.

8. See Brueggemann's discussion on this issue as it presents itself in Psalm 37 (1995:235-57).

With this concrete base for praise established, we turn our attention to a development in the hymns of praise in which the element of summons is developed to the detriment of the basis. Psalm 150 provides an extreme example where the whole psalm consists of summons and no basis is mentioned.

This development may be interpreted in two ways. *One way of viewing it* would be to take a critical stance towards psalms that suppress the basis. According to this view they tend towards ideological use, where a *status quo* is uncritically acclaimed and reference to God's unsettling interventions in human affairs is underplayed. This rhetorical development takes the present order "out of history" (Brueggemann 1984:164) and removes it from the possibility of critical scrutiny. The present state of affairs is then absolutised and imagined always to have been so.

If this reading is correct, we have here an instance of psalms losing their concern for life. Their interest in life becomes sectional, attending only to the material benefits of those advantaged by the *status quo*. This kind of praise loses its breadth by attending only to sectional interests. It also loses its depth, since it ignores the pain and suffering in the lives of many who are coerced into singing and praying these words.

A second way of viewing this development is to assume a tacit ground for praise. The psalmists articulating these unspecified summons to praise, act from a conviction that no grounds need to be given, since they are so overwhelmingly self-evident. In the case of Psalm 150 (the last psalm in the Psalter), we find the explanation that the rest of the Psalter provides the reasons for its call to praise, a satisfactory one (Miller 1986:70). This explanation could also be extended to the other psalms in the five-fold doxology at the end of the Psalter, that exhibit the tendency of minimising the basis.⁹

Brueggemann's reference to the observation of Goldingay (Brueggemann 1984:158), once again, helps us. Goldingay observed that the specific *use* of a hymn determines its location as a psalm of orientation or of new orientation. This leads us to assume that ideological *use*, rather than the absence of a specifically expressed basis for praise, would cause the erosion of a psalm of praise's concern for concrete human existence. When the second, non-ideological view is taken of the underdevelopment of grounds for praise, we can infer a passionate concern with human life. The glowing fervour demonstrated in these psalms reflect the passionate struggle to find

9. See Brueggemann (1988:90-104) for a discussion of the erosion of the element of reason for praise in the final five doxological hymns.

resolution to disorientation lying behind them. Only a total commitment to wholeness of life can result in such an explosion of praise.

3.2 Abandonment to life as seriousness

The experience of disorientation often leads to a withdrawal from life. This does not happen in psalmic spirituality. When disoriented life is attended to with the stubborn persistence demonstrated in the psalms of disorientation, the table is laid for a joyous celebration of new life. When their trust in God is vindicated and events take a turn for the good, the psalmists take to this new life with abandonment and embrace it with passion. This abandonment should never be confused with frivolous pleasure-seeking. Psalmic praise is “a knowing act”. It arises out of a long and troubled story, and it is “a hard-won verdict” (Brueggemann 1995:115).

The psalms of new orientation are firmly grounded in the material reality of human life: They are not flights of fancy. They are not mystical experiences of detachment. They are reactions to real (if unexpected) positive outcomes. But they are fully aware of the brittle nature of times of tranquility. Emerging, as they do, from the crucible of the psalms of disorientation, they are rooted in the experience of human pain and ecstasy in everyday life. Their vision of God is a vision of a God firmly entrenched in the world we see before our eyes and the life we live on this earth.

It is evident, therefore, that the psalms of new orientation present us not only with a joyous celebration of God, but also with a joyous abandonment to life. Seriousness about life, in this instance, is seen in the glad embrace of the new life given by God.

This embrace of life is not limited to life in the private sphere. The emphatic earthiness of the psalms of new orientation accounts for their sometimes explicit political statements. This slant of the Psalms will receive attention in section 6 of this chapter. The point we need to make at this juncture is that the attention to life given in the psalms of new orientation is not limited to private concerns. God is experienced as acting in the larger context of nations and kings. The destinies of all the nations of the earth are shaped by God’s liberating actions. The psalms of new orientation’s roots in lament give them a sensitiveness to injustice, since it is often something they had experienced firsthand. God’s attention to injustice is often noted in the lament psalms, and this is carried through to the psalms of new orientation as a basis for praise. Statements about the transformation of public life is a natural extension of this understanding of God’s liberating intervention. Whole public life is also embraced and celebrated as a valued gift from God.

A final note should be added: An attitude of glad surprise at God's unexpected gift cannot be sustained forever. The seasons of life tend to run full cycle. In time, new orientation turns into old orientation. Psalms of new orientation have a fresh memory of previous times of disorientation. When that memory fades, prayer turns into the kind we encountered in the psalms of orientation. Though the times of disarray are not denied, these prayers, formally, tend to disregard the experience (Brueggemann 1984:26).

The inherent danger of the psalms of orientation becoming uncritical ideological foundations for an unjust status quo, is averted if they are used in conjunction with the psalms of disorientation and the psalms of new orientation. Creation themes, with their focus on stability and reliability predominate in the psalms of orientation. This could easily be misread as a proclamation of the immutability of a present order. The psalms of disorientation and new orientation balance this (totally valid) perspective with their use of the liberation-Exodus themes (Brueggemann 1988:101-4). Their perspective shows God's covenantal love and fidelity to be the bedrock of trustworthy reality. By adding this perspective, they subject all social arrangements to critical scrutiny. The affirmations of the trustworthiness of life on earth, found in the psalms of orientation, cannot be usurped for ideological use if their context within the whole of the Psalter is taken into account.

4. The canonical shape of the Psalter and the shape of life

4.1 The canonical shape of the Psalter

The psalms' passion for life is not only evident in the subject-matter of the individual psalms themselves, but is also evident in the arrangement and shape of the materials. As in the previous chapter, we will only consider a few of the aspects of the final redaction and shape of the Psalter that seem most pertinent to our concern for this chapter. Sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 are mirror images of sections 4.1 and 4.3 of the previous chapter.

4.1.1 Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction

The double introduction to the Psalter, Psalms 1 and 2, display absolute seriousness about God. In their function as introduction they provide an interpretative framework for the whole Psalter. All that follows finds its focal point in God. That much was established in the previous chapter.

But, simultaneously, these two psalms also affirm the Psalter's concern for human life. The two psalms cover all of life - the private and the public spheres. Psalm 1 asks the important question, "Where will I find guidance?" Psalm 2 asks, "Where will I find refuge in a hostile world?" These are existential questions. Therefore the fact that the answer to both questions is "God!" should not stand as evidence of a disregard for material life. Rather, it should point us to the way the Psalms view the inherent unity of questions about God and questions about life. Questions about life inevitably lead to answers that take God into account. Questions about God inevitably lead to answers that have vast implications for life.

Psalm 1 does not plunge life into otherworldliness when it finds the key to personal life in the fact that God has offered us his *torah*. It articulates a passionate concern for the way life is lived. The two extended metaphors added to the introductory beatitude paint a picture of the vastly different outcomes of two approaches to life. These outcomes are depicted in graphic terms which leave us in no doubt that they refer to everyday material reality and not to life on some elevated "spiritual" plane or a kind of afterlife. Life that finds its source in delight in God's counsel (*torah*) leads to fulfilment, stability, fruitfulness. Seeking out other sources of life leads to fruitlessness, impermanence and, ultimately, to ruin. This is graphically depicted by the two word pictures of a tree planted by streams of water and of chaff, blown by the wind.

Psalm 2 speaks about God nullifying the power of nations and kings to provide refuge for his beleaguered people. It does not postpone this to some post-historical end-time. It is concerned with finding refuge in the here and now, in historical reality. It speaks of the Messiah and his reign as a present reality, even if it is still only experienced partially in the Davidic king.¹⁰ The time of the Messiah is soon to break upon the world and already has a bearing on the way public life is conducted. The rulers and kings are invoked to subject themselves to God (Ps 2:10-12a); the downtrodden who take refuge in God are the subject of the closing beatitude (Ps 2:12b). Public life is held up as the arena of God's activity. It is taken to be an important concern for spirituality.

10. We share the view of James Mays with regard to the royal psalms (Mays 1994a:33; 45-8; 1994b). Psalms like Psalm 2 were composed for use by a Davidic king of Judah on the occasion of his installation. They shared the conception of kings as mediators of divine power with their neighbours, so that the titles and names ascribed to the "Anointed One" or Messiah (in this case, the anointed king) in Psalm 2 could be used with freedom. In time Israel realised that no Israelite king had ever approximated the sweeping claims of the royal psalms, nor had any of them fulfilled their office by ruling in a way that corresponded to the kingship of God. Finally, there came a time where there was no Davidic king in Israel. Yet these psalms were retained when the Psalter found its final form. The Davidic "Anointed One" Who would fulfil the hope in these psalms was still to come. A Christian reading of this psalm finds it to be a true description of the reality of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

Once again, we have to consider the fact that these introductory psalms provide a key to the rest of the Psalter. Their location at the beginning of the Psalter suggests that their main themes are of the utmost importance for the whole book. A study of the rest of the corpus of the Psalter bears this out.

The seriousness about the *torah* found in Psalm 1, pervades the whole book of Psalms. Psalm 1 introduces an agenda that recurs with consistent regularity. The concern about the way public power is wielded, as broached by Psalm 2, is found throughout the Psalter, especially in the form of a concern for justice. The issue of political power is introduced and continued in all its multiple facets in the psalms that follow.¹¹ Any reading of the Psalms would do well to start by acquiring a fundamental insight into the subject-matter of Psalms 1 and 2.

Once again we find a deep concern with the concrete facets of life on earth. The importance of these themes for the whole Psalter can be deduced from the fact that they are so firmly established in the introduction. The importance of this theme for psalmic spirituality is confirmed by this fact.

4.1.2 Through lament to praise

The previous chapter (section 4.3) elaborated on the Psalms' development towards praise. There is a total willingness to engage the rawness of life in lament, but this is never taken to be a final move. Praise is always anticipated. The previous chapter identified this as a move of faith, as a clear instance of seriousness about God.

The tenacity to move towards praise can also be interpreted as seriousness about life. It demonstrates an unyielding thirst for life at its fullest, for *shalom*. It displays a resolute resistance against the state of affairs that led to lament. It arrives on God's doorstep with the brokenness of life on its lips, pleading for God to intervene. The complaints and petitions in the laments concern real problems in the physical world and ask for deliverance from these concrete problems. The praise and vows of praise are connected with resolution of the situation that causes disorientation. They do not simply focus on abstract notions of God's character and being, but on his past concrete acts of deliverance.

11. Brueggemann's *Israel's praise* (1988), provides us with an extensive discussion of the socio-political impact of praise in the Psalms. Section 5 of this chapter takes up the theme.

The structure of the Psalter, as well as that of these individual psalms, display seriousness about life in the way they speak about the resolution of difficulties as a ground for praise. The fact that this development is totally integrated in the whole of the Psalter leads one to submit that this focus on the material world is woven into the very fabric of the Psalter as a whole. Praying the Psalter systematically and with cognisance of this internal development will stimulate a kind of spirituality that gives full attention to everyday life.

4.1.3 Headings

One of the most prominent structural features of the Psalms is the headings. Only 49 psalms are without headings (Mays 1994a:11). Some of the headings are extended descriptions of the time, place, type, instruments for accompaniment, and occasion for the psalm. Other headings merely consist of the name of the person or group to which it is ascribed. Our concern here is with the headings that connect the respective psalms to specific historical occurrences and those indicating the author.

We take these headings to be, mostly, of secondary origin. They do not form an integral part of the various psalms, but evidence various secondary concerns (Wilson 1985:139). Some of them may be quite accurate, but they need not be. Their function is not historical. They are intended to be heuristic tools. The continuity between the headings and the events they refer to, is solely literary (Childs in Wilson 1985:172). They intend to point towards general parallels between the situation described in the psalm and some incident in the life of David (Wilson 1985:172). In his discussion of the extended superscription to Psalm 3, James Mays states:

“The other narrative headings in the Psalms are like this one in kind and function. Mistaken as historical notices, they lead to puzzlement. Taken as permission and encouragement to heuristic reflection, they lead to discoveries that lend concreteness and use to the liturgical language of the Psalms” (Mays 1994a:54).

Wilson (1985:143) points out the personalising effects of the historical superscriptions. Presenting these prayers as reactions to concrete situations in the life of David has personal implications for the person reading or praying the psalm: If David responded to events like these with this psalm, then what better way to respond than with this classic utterance? The superscriptions provide a new context for the psalms they are attached to and in the process loosen these psalms from their original cultic contexts, where translation to the lives of individuals may not be as smooth (Wilson 1985:172).

This personalisation of certain psalms does not only impact the psalms explicitly provided with historical superscriptions. It tends to extend to the way others are used, even if they are without superscriptions of the same kind (Wilson 1985:143). They cast the whole of the Psalter in a different light.

This function of the headings is confirmed by Brevard Childs (1985:196-8; 1979:521-2), in his discussion of the manner in which the Old Testament's view of human life is communicated. The narrative is the basic medium for the Old Testament's witness in this regard. The basic structure of the Old Testament is made up of narratives that tell the stories of ordinary people living in the presence of God. These stories are judged to be theological paradigms and are retained as an integral part of Israel's sacred history. Many of these stories are expanded with clearly typological features. This accrual of typological features to the great figures in Hebrew tradition is not meant to serve their idealisation, but is intended to serve as vehicles of Israel's accumulated experience of life before God, both in terms of obedience and disobedience. David is not depicted as the ideal man, but "a representative man" (Childs 1979:522), who experiences all that human beings run into in the course of their lives. The narratives provide a concrete "feel" of what it is to live in the presence of God.

Childs refers to the theological significance of the canonical shaping of the Old Testament in terms of *persona* who each became the nucleus around whom a specific tradition received its focus: Moses for the Law, David for psalmody, Solomon for wisdom.

Previously, Childs had pointed out the concern for the transmittal of the faith tradition to the next generation in the editorial shaping of the canon (Childs 1979:78). The tradition needs to be "actualised" for the new generation (Childs 1979:79). Much of redactional criticism views these editorial efforts to update the text as secondary, and expends much of its energy in stripping them away to arrive at an authoritative nucleus. Childs takes the opposite position. He views the editorial labour as driven by a hermeneutical concern to prevent the text from being moored to the past. This concern was present during the various stages of the book's canonisation and the final shape of the biblical books took full account of the various attempts at actualisation. By weaving this enormous richness of theological interpretation into the text itself, the final editors rendered the text religiously accessible. The modern hermeneutical impasse is caused by the method of stripping away these very elements as secondary. By "decanonising" the text, it is securely anchored in the historical past and the interpreter is presented with enormous difficulties in applying it to the modern religious context (Childs 1979:79).

Applied to the psalm headings, this means that they have to be taken extremely seriously precisely because they are editorial additions. They intend to make the texts accessible and to prevent them from being “moored in the past.” They demonstrate a canonical intentionality to insert these psalms into the concrete life of living believers.

Childs provides an affirmation of Wilson and Mays’ view of the role of the personalisation of the Psalms by the superscriptions. He also confirms our contention that the superscriptions express the Psalter’s concern for human life. The addition of the superscriptions to the Psalms seem to have the express goal of depicting them as more instances of the same type as the narratives: Paradigmatic examples of human life before God.

The heuristic function of the headings points us toward the theological, pastoral, and homiletic intimations of the Psalms. It leads us to search out the connections between our own lives and the Psalms (Mays 1994a:54). Seen in this light, the headings not only ground the Psalms in the reality of David, Solomon, Moses, the Korahites, and others, but they also encourage us to ground them in our own experience. They remind us of the connections between prayer and life in the real world.

4.2 The Psalms and the shape of life

There is a concurrence between the structure and flow of the Psalms and that of life. This is true of the large structural developments, like the progression from lament to praise and the existential sequence of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. It is also true of the forms the Psalms provide us with for times of stability, grief, and joy. It would not be possible to offer a comprehensive discussion of this aspect of the Psalter, but some aspects of this concurrence need to be pointed out in brief.

Let us start off with Brueggemann’s threefold scheme. At first glance it seems very much like an existential grid imposed on the Psalter. One is almost surprised at the effortless way it seems to fit on the subject-matter of the Psalter. Brueggemann, though, denies that his scheme is an imposition from outside the Psalter. It came, rather, from a close reading of the text itself. It came from his conclusion that the shape and dynamic of the Psalms can be understood best according to the theological framework of crucifixion and resurrection (Brueggemann 1984:10). The scheme is a systematic application of the crucifixion-resurrection paradigm. The surprise (if we

should find it surprising!) is rather the effortless way in which this scheme fits our experience of life.

The three categories cover the whole of life, confirming John Calvin's description of the Psalms as "an anatomy of all parts of the soul" (Calvijn 1972:II). Human life is, indeed, made up of alternating phases of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.

The interrelationship between the three seasons of life also concur with Brueggemann's scheme. Disorientation does, indeed, occur as a failure of old certainties and of social structures. New orientation does follow disorientation as the glad acceptance of new life as a gift.¹² New orientation does need the candor of lament to enable us to be receptive to the newness that breaks in from elsewhere. The fervour and specificity of new orientation does tend to fade into the serene certainty and generalities of orientation. The Psalms do, indeed, follow us along the contours of life and provide us with wisdom and shelter (Pss 1 and 2) in these very conditions. Praying the Psalms, in fact, alert us to the basic structure of life before God.

5. The Psalms as prayers for world-making

We return again to Brueggemann's approach in *Israel's praise*. The Psalms *articulate* spirituality. But they also *shape* spirituality. Brueggemann's analysis of the way the Psalms shape spirituality, makes it clear that they influence spirituality to take the material dimensions of life seriously.

The previous chapter (Chapter 4, section 5) stated that the world offered by the Psalms is determined and underpinned by their particular depiction of the character of God. We especially stressed the fact of God's rule and his character as a liberator of the helpless.

This world-making endeavour of liturgy and prayer is conducted in a polemical context, in a world filled with counter-claims, especially from those favoured by the status quo. These ideologies, most often, legitimise their claims with a particular idolatry. The Psalms resist and nullify ideology. They do this by presenting an

12. Of course we have to deal with the modern propensity to view life as an *achievement*. This view can, however, only be upheld for as long as one can remain in control. Control of one's own destiny is notoriously difficult to obtain and retain. It is, at the best of times, the preserve of a small part of society and often only to be had at the expense of others. Therefore we find the Psalms singularly occupied with the fate of the עֲנִי (the humble poor). As a social class they were under no illusions of control, whereas the unjust refused to relinquish control, even at the cost of perpetrating injustice.

alternative world, one that is in accordance with the character of God (Brueggemann 1988:29). This move attacks ideology at its root by establishing an alternative for its ideology and, thus, leaving it without legitimisation.

The Psalms declare the good tidings (בשׂר) that God reigns. Brueggemann illustrates the basic affirmation of the Psalms by expounding on Isaiah's exposition of this counterclaim to Babylonian versions of reality (Brueggemann 1988:45-51). He refers to Isaiah's well known text in Isaiah 52:7, where a messenger arrives breathlessly with the good tidings, "Your God reigns". He views this as an imaginative re-telling of a version of social reality already present in their liturgy:

"According to this poetry, the messenger came all the way from Babylon, when all the time the news was already there in the liturgy of the Psalms" (Brueggemann 1988:48).

This re-telling erodes the world of the Babylonian empire. It invites people to begin to notice the cracks in the foundations of the establishment and to withdraw their support for the empire (Brueggemann 1988:49). It invites them, instead, to view the world from the vantage point where God's supremacy is affirmed and to ignore the Babylonian claims on their lives. Even if the old empire still operates, liturgical participation of this kind undermines it at its foundations. It is only a matter of time before it crumbles and falls. Israel now acts differently, since it no longer views the world through the ideology of the rulers. Life is now viewed in terms of equity, righteousness, and truth - the basic elements of God's character. This is the real world, and any other world is understood to be a false world ordered by false gods (Brueggemann 1988:53). Since God is the one in power, his way will ultimately win through.

At this juncture we may note that the centrality of this affirmation of God's reign in the Psalter is confirmed by James Mays and Gerald Wilson.

Wilson (1985) views the fourth book of the Psalter as the editorial centre. It responds to the failure of the monarchy by expounding on God's reign. The failure of Israel's human kings does not detract in any way from the grandeur of God's rule. The world of exile and Babylonian supremacy is not allowed to lead Israel to a conclusion of the failure of the world of the covenant with God. The fourth book of the Psalter provides a fresh perspective on the world of Israel's faith by its insertion of the claim of God's kingdom as a conclusive focal point.

Mays (1994b) proposes the proclamation of God's reign as the central perspective of the Psalter. When we accept this, we stand in no doubt as to the ideology-shattering power of the Psalms. Dramatic enactment and celebration of God's rule in liturgy and prayer makes nonsense of any counter-claim of power and control over our lives. When this claim is taken seriously, worlds are changed and the bluff of ideology is called. The people of God are, then, liberated to act in ways that lead to participation in the coming of the kingdom of God in concrete reality.

This view of reality puts the Psalter fundamentally at odds with all ideologies protecting self-centred interests. We have to be constantly on the alert to the possibility of getting trapped into securing our own interests. The Psalms provide us with the age-old remedy to this classic ailment in its depiction of a world where God actively works his way of liberation and justice. In such a world no arrangement of power or goods can ever be immutable. God can act freely to bring about new arrangements. The firm ground for certitude is not to be found anywhere else than in God's character and in God's rule.

Making an alternative world in modern-day society is, to say the least, a difficult task. We are faced with so many competing truth claims that all truth becomes relative (Berger 1979; 1992:68, 126). On the other hand, people are locked into patterns of numbness and despair by the seeming immutability of the ideologies of those in power. The "slave memory" (Brueggemann 1988:55) is often deeply entrenched, and so new possibilities find their way into the imagination of worshippers only with great difficulty. Brueggemann's discussion of the relationship between the *summons* to praise and the *reasons* given for praise, is especially pertinent for the subject of this chapter.

Brueggemann distinguishes between "singing up" and "singing down" (Brueggemann 1988:78). "*Singing up*" is praise that finds its source in the reasons given for praise. God has liberated; therefore we sing up. Our doxology wells up from our experience. "*Singing down*", on the other hand, finds its source in an imposed liturgy. People are called to doxology. Singing down wells up from the summons of liturgy and only then moves to the reasons for praise.

There is no doubt that "singing down" is the most tenuous of these two kinds of world-making. If one says, "Praise *Yahweh*", the addressees might well ask, "Why should we praise *Yahweh*?" The Psalms anticipate this question by providing reasons from the memory and direct experience of Israel: "Because ... (כִּי)". The credibility of the summons depends on the authenticity of the reason (Brueggemann 1988:78). The summons itself does not compel. It is the reason that compels (Brueggemann

1988:79). To do this, it needs to be specific, growing out of what is seen, heard, known, experienced. In the terminology of this chapter, it has to take life seriously. Reasons for doxology, for worship, that do not take life seriously, will not suffice.

Brueggemann points to the concrete specificity of the reasons for praise given by Miriam at the Red Sea: Miriam answered the question “Why?” with, “[because] the horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea” (Ex 15:1). This is a concrete reason - much more so than the stylised and formulaic claims of, for instance, Psalm 117 about God’s לִמְנוּחַ and לְיָמֵינוּ . In instances where the reasons have been reduced to these general summaries, Brueggemann contends, we need to move below the formulas to the experience that “wells up”.

“In order to create and sustain the world in which Israel is called to live, the reasons for praise must move below the grand claims to Israel’s transformative memory. In order to ground a summons convincingly, the reasons, whether as vivid as that of Miriam or as programmatic as in Psalm 117, must be quite specific and bear witness to God’s transformative power in the midst of human need, pain, deficiency, or vulnerability” (Brueggemann 1988:79).

Reasons can gain this specificity either by recital of God’s saving deeds (as in Psalm 136) or by reference to the concrete experience of individual persons (as in Psalms 30 and 40). The programmatic statements of psalms like Psalm 117 are based on the specificity of psalms like Psalm 136 and Psalms 30 and 40 (Brueggemann 1988:83). Though they do not seem specific, one may assume the concrete reasons given in the latter psalms.

The strength of the psalms of praise for world-making lies in their attachment to concrete reasons (Brueggemann 1988:84). They are grounded in life. Hence the summons to praise God has the power to invoke the new world where God’s activity is paramount and where his justice prevails. Attempts at world-making should always take this into consideration. Life has to be affirmed if doxology is to be practised with any conviction, and if it is to have any effect.

Brueggemann’s discussion of the way this dynamic between summons and reason is twisted by social interests (Brueggemann 1988:89-121), is especially important for the discussion of this chapter. His analysis underlines the vital importance of concrete reference to life for the world-making enterprise of worship.

Brueggemann points out three ways in which the liturgy of praise can be confiscated and rendered harmless to the vested interests of those with social power.

The first way that the world-making power of worship can be rendered harmless, is by focusing on the summons to the detriment of the reason for doxology (Brueggemann 1988:90-6). There is a shift in emphasis from the reason to the summons. The reason, with its troublesome concrete “transformative tales” (Brueggemann 1988:90), is toned down or dropped. This translates into a shift in emphasis from the *authenticating experience* to the *authenticated world* - a world that does not emerge out of concrete transformation, but is offered as an absolute (Brueggemann 1988:91). The worshipping community is cut off from its own experience and from its storied past. This opens the world for a recharacterisation of God (idolatry) and a redescription of the world as a social system (ideology).

Psalm 150 is the prime example of this move. We accept Patrick Miller’s assertion that this is due to the fact that Psalm 150 is the last psalm and that all the preceding psalms provide concrete reasons (Miller 1986:70). The lack of reasons for the summons in Psalm 150 does, however, open it up to this kind of misuse to a much larger extent than psalms with elaborate and concrete reasons.

The second way that the world-making power of worship can be weakened, is by generalising the concreteness of experience in the reason for praise (Brueggemann 1988:96-100). There is a move from what Claus Westermann calls declarative to descriptive language.

Declarative language is “a recital with a finite verb of what God does, of a specific time and place when God acted to change the world” (Brueggemann 1988:96). Declarative language is concrete and specific - it tells us in a straightforward way exactly what God did. It is immediately linked to concrete memory and experience. Songs of thanksgiving, such as Psalm 138, are good examples of declarative language.

Descriptive language is “a recital with a participle in which God’s characteristic actions are recited, but without meaning a particular time and place, or even suggesting there might have been a time and place” (Brueggemann 1988:96). Descriptive language is more abstract and given to generalisation, more remote. Psalm 145:13-19 may be cited as an example of descriptive language.

The specificity of declarative hymns puts them in tension with settled situations. The stories of God’s deeds of liberation from specific social situations of injustice, have explosive potential to unsettle the social balance that favours a certain group *vis a vis* another group. They are also in tension with intellectual and economic self-

sufficiency in any context. Instead of self-reliance, they turn life over to God and find reliance on God to be the key to a future.

“We find concrete declarative language too costly for our epistemology, our economics, and our sense of having shaped and defined the world in our terms, which are terms of control” (Brueggemann 1988:99).

Descriptive language is less disruptive to the status quo. Generalised praise, that refer to God’s liberation in more abstract ways is much safer to utter than declarative hymns. They lose the specific verbs for God’s acts in history, so that human verbs may quite easily be inserted. Human activity may supersede the activity of God (Brueggemann 1988:100). This is not an inevitability, but their generalised nature opens them up to this kind of misuse.

We contend that the Psalter as a whole provides the context for these generalised hymns. As with Psalm 150, we take the specific and concrete salvation stories of the declarative hymns to be present in the deeper layers of meaning of the descriptive hymns. Misusing them in the way described above is only possible if they are isolated from their context in the rest of the Psalter.

Once again we see that the seriousness about life provides a key to the efficiency of the Psalms for world-making. The more obvious the ties to concrete life and concrete stories of deliverance by God, the more explosive the world-making and world-nullifying potential of the psalm.

The third way the world-making potential of worship can be undermined, is by stressing creation themes to the detriment of liberation themes (Brueggemann 1988:101-4).

Brueggemann acknowledges that creation theology may be a bold statement about the sovereignty of *Yahweh* against idols and false orderings of the world. He also maintains that the major claim of creation theology is characteristically to establish, legitimate, and advocate order at the cost of transformation (Brueggemann 1988:101). Thus it may effectively be used to resist evangelical world-making and world-nullifying if such an enterprise seems to threaten vested interests in the status quo.

Creation theology, obviously, deals with the concrete world. Our discussion of the Psalms of orientation in section 1 of the present chapter concluded that creation theology can take life seriously. When creation theology is put to use for ideological

purposes, however, it ignores certain aspects of reality. It overlooks pain and inequality that might unmask the insufficiency of the system. It only focuses on the experience of a segment of society.

If prayers of orientation are forced on people in a situation of disorientation to the exclusion of prayers of liberation, we cannot maintain any longer that these prayers demonstrate seriousness about life. In this instance they ignore large tracts of life and lose their credibility and ability to perform world-making.

If these three approaches to worship are allowed to exert their influence on the worship of the faith community, they result in “a mute god, a static world” (Brueggemann 1988:104) - idolatry and ideology. A view of a God who does nothing concrete or specific is perpetrated. The existing social order is legitimated, even if it is unjust. This leads to “a satiated, conformist community without energy, a people without vocation, an assembly without hope, who can only treasure and defend the status quo as the best available arrangement beyond which nothing better is imaginable” (Brueggemann 1988:120). We need the reasoned, declarative, liberation-speech of the Psalms if our world-making enterprise is to have any effect. The Psalms can, of course, be misappropriated. They are not a foolproof guarantee for evangelical world-making. However, we contend that, if allowed a decent run of use on their own terms, they will transcend such misuse and nullify all the idolatry and ideology the world can throw at them.

Brueggemann’s concluding chapter in *Israel’s praise*, makes much of the world-making importance of a focus on pain. Pain is “the locus of possibility” (Brueggemann 1988:129-36). Access to life is mostly through the resistant door of pain (Brueggemann 1988:133). This door is kept shut by idolatry (that turns pain into guilt) and ideology (that turns pain into denial). When worship opens us to the reality of pain we turn to God for liberation, and hope arises.

Pain is also “the matrix of praise” (Brueggemann 1988:136-48). Praise finds its source in the memory of concrete pain resolved by God’s liberating intervention. God answered the pain-filled cries of his people. This is the ultimate reason for praise.

Psalm 77 may be mentioned as a clear example of this. The first eleven verses present us with a poignant articulation of hurt and doubt. Some serious questions are asked about God’s fidelity. Then there is a startling turn in v 12 where the psalmist invokes the powerful memory of Israel. God’s saving deeds are remembered. The rest of the psalm is taken up by this, without ever returning to the anguished

questions asked in the first part. The painful present, though unresolved, is effectively subsumed in the glory of the memory, and turned into praise. The psalm ends in trusting celebration. Praise has the power to transform pain (Brueggemann 1988:139).

The mere fact of turning to God in situations of pain, as the lament psalms do, has the effect of undermining idolatry and ideology. They present us with a God who can act, and a situation that may change. If our pain is taken up in the lament forms of the Psalms, worship becomes subversive. The same is true of the songs of thanksgiving, that can be viewed as the other side of lament (Brueggemann 1988:146). They present us with an active God who intervenes in tangible ways in concrete situations of disorientation.

Again we see the importance of taking concrete life seriously. If life is only viewed in terms of orientation and new orientation in our worship, we will miss most of what we face in everyday life. Seriousness about life will take *all of life* into account; it will include our disorientation. All this fits in well with Don Saliers' description of Christian worship:

“Christian liturgy transforms and empowers when the vulnerability of human pathos is met by the ethos of God’s vulnerability in word and sacrament” (Saliers 1994:22).

When worship brings the ethos of God and the pathos of human beings together, a new world is created - a world filled with possibilities and hope.

Our final remark concerns spirituality. It should be clear that world-making could very well serve as another world for “spirituality formation” - at least if one operates from our working definition of spirituality. Brueggemann attests to the fact that the world-making of liturgy is not creation *ex nihilo*. It is “the organising act of imposing order, shape, sequence, pattern, and meaning on already existing elements which are disordered and chaotic until acted upon” (Brueggemann 1988:52). The convergence between this statement and our own working definition of spirituality (Chapter 1, section 4)¹³ is obvious. World-making could be construed as “growth in understanding and ordering of the elements of our lives to a correspondence with the reality presented to us in worship”. Worship shapes spirituality by providing new categories and new perspectives on reality. This leads to new ways of interacting

13. “Spirituality is a life-orientation that presents itself as worship (communion with God) and as a continuous growth in understanding and ordering of the elements of our lives to a correspondence with the reality presented to us in worship.”

with God, others, and creation. The elements of our lives are reordered in decisive ways.

6. Praying the Psalms as a political act

“There is no holiness but social holiness” (John Wesley).¹⁴

We close the chapter with some remarks about the relevance of the Psalms for the public sphere. As mentioned before, the Psalms do not only pay attention to private concerns. We do not find the modern division between public and the private in the Psalms. Public matters are always taken into account in the Psalms. They have huge political impact:

“[C]ommunion with God cannot be celebrated without attention to the nature of the community, both among human persons and with God. Religious hungers in Israel never preclude justice questions” (Brueggemann 1984:169).

The concern for justice, for a fair deal, is one of the characteristic features of the Psalter. Psalmic spirituality is spirituality with a concern for social equity. The social systems one supports are supposed to be in harmony with the nature of God. Any disjunction is treated as a grave problem, not to be ignored. One is often surprised by the way the Psalms treat personal injury as a *theological* matter. The fact that God’s rule is one of the basic assumptions of the Psalms makes any form of injustice untenable. The Psalms’ view of God as a just (צַדִּיק) God whose mercy (חַסֵּד) and truth (אֱמֻנָה) can be trusted, kindles a passion for public matters.

“The passion of these psalms [the psalms of divine wrath] arises from the fundamental conviction that justice must be done - at least, it must be done by a God who has created the world as a ‘house to live in’ for all creatures, a God who will arise over that world as ‘the sun of justice’ that drives out evil and brings salvation to those in peril of death” (Zenger 1994:67).

If God’s way with the world is defined as above, no deviation can be tolerated. If injustice prevails, God’s wrath is kindled. Avoidance of speaking about God’s wrath reduces God to a mere spectator Who is uninterested in this world, or to a *deus otiosus* (a functionless God) who lacks any kind of social-critical potential (Zenger 1994:73).

14. Quoted in Wainwright (1986:604).

Each of the three types of psalms distinguished by Brueggemann (1984) speak to the matter of public justice differently:

The psalms of orientation are the most vulnerable to be misused by status quo ideologies. In times of orientation there is a supposition of harmony between the character of God and the stable state of human affairs. Revolution is treated as a “disease” (Brueggemann 1984:174). Present arrangements are often legitimised and protected by the psalms of orientation.

If the psalms of orientation are used uncritically to legitimise a certain status quo, it is, of course, a misuse of these psalms. Such a reading does not fit in with the rest of the Psalter, where we find clear warnings about the ever-lurking danger of unjust social structures. The danger of being co-opted by ideology and ending up in idolatry is far from imaginary in times of stability. Social responsibility, in such times, would consist of being vigilant against any attempt to full identification of God with a particular set of social structures. The kind of seriousness about life which we encounter in the Psalms, will guard against the tendency of social arrangements to favour certain groups in society at the cost of the “helpless poor” (עֲנִי).

The great strength of the psalms of orientation for evangelical social consciousness lies in their breadth of scope. They take the whole creation and interprets it in terms of God’s activity. When this view is connected with the perspectives on liberation found in the psalms of disorientation and new orientation we are provided with a holistic view of life that refuses to concede any part of life to the claims of ideology and idolatry.

The psalms of disorientation present us with a form that enables us to be candid about pain and injustice in times of disequilibrium, without losing our faith in God.¹⁵ These psalms not only reject unjust social arrangements. They also refuse to accept the presentation of the character of God behind these arrangements. They deal with both the *ideology* and the *idolatry* that legitimises it. They unmask this presentation of God as idolatry and open up new social possibilities by articulating an alternative view of God. God is called upon as the One who liberates. Unjust arrangements are viewed as fundamentally opposed to his ordering of life and is, therefore, doomed to fail. The numbness of the downtrodden is alleviated and new energies are released for hopeful and subversive living.

15. For a discussion of the importance of the availability of a form in times of rawness, see Brueggemann’s *The formlessness of grief* (Brueggemann 1995:84-97).

As we have pointed out in the previous chapter, in section 2.2, the protest about disorientation may take different forms. It could either find the source of disorientation in God's own actions, in the enemy, or in oneself. In all these instances the case for the character of God as One who is fully committed to public justice, is defended. Unjust arrangements are viewed as intolerable. God's liberating actions are looked forward to as the key to substantive social change. This is even true when the case is made against God. There is continuous referral to his acts in the past. He is called to act in a way that is in accordance with his character, as it has become known in his "great deeds" throughout history. His character is prayed back at Him - even He can be "no other God" (Brueggemann 1988:47). Even when doubts are expressed about God's role in the present situation though, the overwhelming impression is one of firm conviction about God's enduring faithfulness to his own character and to his covenant (Brueggemann 1095:57).

The psalms of disorientation themselves do not represent disruptive acts, but their aim is to bring about a new system of meaning for society as a whole (Brueggemann 1984:175). They are never prepared to let sleeping dogs lie if injustice is detected. They protest against it in the highest court, in the court of prayer.

The psalms of new orientation are celebrations of fresh settlements for situations of disorientation. It is important to note that these psalms do not represent a return to an old order. They celebrate the new rule established by God. This new rule and new order of things is explicitly viewed as a departure from the idolatry and resultant ideology of the previous unjust state of affairs. Psalms of old orientation can still be prayed and sung in such times, but as hopeful vistas on a totally new order and not as legitimisation of the unjust order.

The psalms of disorientation and new orientation present us with a treatment of God's character that focuses on his tendency towards status quo-unsettling acts of liberation. They tend towards suspicion of static social arrangements that might favour certain groups. They reflect the theological and social knowledge of people who know from experience that power tends to corrupt those who become too casual with it. Therefore they act as a necessary balance to the psalms of orientation. They cultivate a fine balance between loyalty to societal structures and a readiness to critique.

The public spirituality which the Psalms cultivate, finds its roots in all three of Brueggemann's orientations. The Psalms push us both towards seeking just structures (a *constructive* view) and towards protest against unjust structures (a *critical* view). At times they present God as "the guarantor of the old equilibrium",

while at other times He is presented as “a harbinger of a new justice to be established” (Brueggemann 1984:176). They also equip us with the ability to recognise and celebrate public liberation that is worthy of the label. Praying the Psalms prepares Christians to take their place in public life and to be a force to the good.¹⁶

7. Summary

The chapter started by using Walter Brueggemann’s threefold grid for the psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation to indicate the way the subject-matter of the Psalms display seriousness about life. Each of Brueggemann’s subdivisions for the three basic types of psalms was taken in turn and the specific way they displayed seriousness about life was discussed.

The section on the psalms of orientation was closed by concluding that the way in which these psalms offer us a careful analysis of life, demonstrates their commitment to take life seriously. We also added a critical reminder of the danger of appropriating the psalms of orientation uncritically to legitimise a specific *status quo*. The section on the psalms of disorientation concluded with a discussion of how these psalms’ candor demonstrates their seriousness about life. The section on the psalms of new orientation concluded with a subsection that discussed the way these psalms’ abandonment to life is a demonstration of their commitment to seriousness about life.

Next, we moved on to discussion of how the canonical shape of the Psalter is determined by the Psalms’ passion for life:

The introductory psalms (Pss 1 and 2) were found to take life seriously in two different spheres. Psalm 1 demonstrates the Psalms’ seriousness about the life of the individual. Psalm 2 takes up the questions about power in public life with equal seriousness. As an introduction, these psalms cast the whole Psalter as a document that commends taking life seriously.

For the next stage, we turned to the structural development of the Psalter from lament to praise. The interconnections between the laments and doxology suggested by this development, led us to conclude that the Psalms, once again, refuse to make light of the issues of life. Pain is faced in all its rawness. Praise is arrived at within the matrix of praise. Therefore psalmic praise cannot be confused with either

16. On the importance and difficulty of developing a public spirituality in our time, see Parker Palmer’s *The company of strangers* (1981), Robert Bellah et al’s *The good society* (1991), Thomas Merton’s *Conjectures of a guilty bystander* (1965), and Richard John Neuhaus’s *The naked public square* (1984), among others.

cheerleaderistic flattery, or with escapism. Their seriousness about life is demonstrated in their full account of the rawness often faced in reality. This fact accounts for the exuberance often displayed in Israel's praise.

The last structural aspect of the psalms under discussion was the headings. We found that the headings that connect psalms to specific concrete occurrences and to historical figures, are editorial additions with the express purpose of facilitating the practical application of the psalms to everyday life. The headings are a heuristic tool provided by the editors of the Psalter. Their aim is to prevent the Psalms from being moored in the past by providing clues to the kinds of concrete situations in which they may serve as proper responses to God.

We ended the section on the structure of the Psalter with a section discussing the striking similarities between the structure of the Psalter and the flow of human life. The existential structure of the Psalter was viewed with the assistance of Brueggemann's threefold structure, as well as the editorial structure discussed in this section.

Our next section was concerned with the Psalms' function in the world-making activity of worship. We discussed the way the hymns' world-making potential might be annulled by shifting the focus away from the concrete reasons for praise, by sticking to generalisations when citing reasons for praise, or by suppressing liberation themes. We pointed to the importance of the connection between psalms of disorientation and psalms of new orientation to prevent this annulment of the world-making power of the Psalms. The concrete connections to the experienced life of worshippers, is presented as vitally important for the authenticity of worship, and therefore for its world-making efficiency.

We ended the chapter by discussing the political impact of the Psalms. They have immense implications for public life, due to their emphasis on matters of justice. We discussed the way Brueggemann's three types of psalms may be related to matters of public justice and concluded that psalmic spirituality is inherently, among other things, a public spirituality.

CHAPTER 6: PRAYING THE PSALMS AS A CONGREGATIONAL STRATEGY

“Renewing any institution requires revitalising its core, its reason for being. Unless this core is refocused and funded afresh, renewal becomes a matter of strategy for survival. Accordingly, the churches’ renewal becomes possible only when their religious vitality is energized again by a basic reform of their worship of God. Worship enacts and proclaims a construal of Reality and of our relation to it” (Leander Keck 1993:25).

“Speaking about God always stems from speaking to God; theology comes from the language of prayer” (Erich Zenger 1994:95).

We now need to summarise the line of our argument up to this point. We have established the fact that spirituality has its roots in liminal experience. Experience of God is the source of spirituality. Therefore spirituality finds expression in acts of worship. It can only be understood in relation to its source. However, spirituality also finds expression in the material world. It reorders the elements of its world in accordance with the reality it encounters in worship.

We have also established that a variety of factors in the material world are in a dialogical relationship with spirituality. They have an important formative influence on the shape of spirituality. They provide the matrix in which it develops. Conversely, spirituality also shapes the material world. The shape of spirituality can only be understood by reference to its dialogical relationship to its matrix in the material world.

On the strength of our findings about the source and the shaping influences of spirituality we suggested a model of spirituality that views spirituality as something that takes shape in a web of interactions between the individual, God, the other, and creation. This web of interactions occurs within the concrete matrix of factors from the material world.

This view of spirituality leads us to a particular understanding of a congregation’s task in spiritual formation. To perform this task a congregation has to take a number of facts into account: The fact that experience of God is the source of spirituality; the immersion of spirituality in concrete reality; the interactive character of spirituality, as we have depicted it in our model of spirituality; the shaping power of the matrix

on spirituality; the dialogical character of the interaction between spirituality and its matrix, which opens the possibility of a reordering of the elements of this matrix.

The most important characteristic of a congregation's strategies and tools for spiritual formation will have to be a dual focus on God as the source of spiritual growth and the dialogical interaction with the everyday world in which believers live. These two aspects will have to form part of an integrated whole. If this is the case, spirituality can take shape in ways resonant with its matrix but still true to God. It can also order its world in accordance with the reality of God instead of either withdrawing from it or being determined by it.

Our investigation into the Psalms identified them as tools for such a congregational strategy. We regard the evidence for the Psalms' seriousness about both God and life to be conclusive. We also regard the fact that this evidence could be gleaned from *the same* psalms and psalm-types, as well as from *the same* editorial structure to be conclusive in proving that these two aspects are part of one integrated view of reality. The decisiveness of God's presence and the importance of spatial existence are presented by the Psalms in such a way that they cannot be separated. God, in the Psalms, is totally involved with everything that occurs in our day to day existence. Life, in the Psalms, is vibrant with transcendent meaning.

Furthermore, we propose *praying* the Psalms as a congregational strategy for integrated spirituality. We have already made our point about the profound importance of prayer for spiritual growth in Chapter 3. We also take David Kelsey's point that worship is the most important activity of the church, into consideration (Kelsey 1992:136). Church renewal can only occur if there is a revitalisation of worship and prayer.¹ If our view of the integration of the sacred and the material in the Psalms is correct, praying them will decisively influence the spirituality of the pray-er in a similar direction.

This chapter will utilise the insights and concepts developed in the previous chapters to propose ways in which praying the Psalms may be utilised as part of a holistic strategy for spiritual growth in congregations.

1. Why the Psalms?

Though we may cite many reasons for our focus on the Psalms as prayers, *our first, and most important reason* lies in the fact that they are prayers "of men who *knew*

1. See Ben Johnson's elaboration of this in *New day, new church* (1995a:95-110), where he makes a series of proposals for renewal of the prayer life in congregations as seminal for the renewal of the church. See also Johnson (1995b:27).

who God was" (Merton 1956:7). We pray the Psalms with the hope of this intimate knowledge of God rubbing off on us:

"The function of the Psalms is to reveal to us God as the 'treasure' whom we love because He has first loved us, and to hide us, heart and soul, in the depths of His infinite Light" (Merton 1956:14).

This reason for praying the Psalms is closely connected with the importance we attach to taking God seriously. If our prayer life results in God being revealed to us as our "treasure," we will not fall into the trap of a thisworldly spirituality.

The second reason is the corollary of the first. The Psalms provide us with a spirituality that focuses on the specific occurrences of human life:

"[T]he spirituality of the Psalms is shaped, defined, and characterized in specific historical, experiential categories and shuns universals" (Brueggemann 1984:175).

In other words, it takes life, exactly as and when it occurs, seriously. It does not wander off into generalities or spiritual romanticisms.

The penitential psalms act as a case in point. These psalms have tended to be spiritualised to such an extent in the modern church that talk of sin regressed to the abstract plane. These psalms should not be spiritualised. That would be contrary to their intention. They are relentlessly concrete, even if the details of the specific sins at their origins have been worn away with liturgical use. They still carry the stamp of sinners who had committed specific violations of God's will, experienced at first hand the concrete consequences of such recalcitrance, and are now standing before God in repentance. These prayers view penitence as a situation where a new beginning is sought from God. Life is brought to a standstill. Only some specific new initiative from God can lead to a resumption of meaningful existence.

The impact of Psalm-praying on life in general may often be deduced from their relentless focus on specifics. They are not content to merely evoke vague religious sentiments. They bring concrete elements of life into our prayers.

The third reason is the fact that the Psalms provide us with prayers which integrate their focus on God and their focus on the specifics of life. It was sometimes hard to keep matters of human life out of our discussion on the Psalms' focus on God in Chapter 4. The same was true in our discussion on the Psalms' passion for life - it

was difficult to keep matters pertaining to God out of the discussion. God is, in the Psalms, a god who is fully committed to human life and wholly concerned with his covenant with Israel. In the Psalms, life receives its only real meaning in its relation to God. The Psalms give us a *theological* reading of reality.

This is the feeling for the texture of life and the vision of God we propose that a congregation should endeavour to inculcate in its members. We believe that praying the Psalms can produce a spirituality that will not either drift off into secular horizontalism or into otherworldly escapism.

Basically, these three reasons sum up our concern in the study. In view of the suggestions for practical implementation that we aim to make in the rest of this chapter, we will provide some further reasons for our focus on the Psalms. These reasons were gleaned from the previous two chapters. We intend to base some of our considerations for practical proposals on them.

The fourth reason, then. The Psalms provide us with a comprehensive prayer book, with prayers for all seasons. The Psalter is, indeed, “an anatomy of all parts of the soul”, as Calvin stated. It will serve us in times of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Therefore it provides us with an agenda for prayer. With the help of the Psalms, all of life comes under prayer and is brought into God’s presence. Even the things we expressly do not want to discuss are dragged into the fray. They cover territory hitherto untouched in the lives of many Christians.

The fifth reason is the direct result of the second and fourth. Because of their seriousness about life and their comprehensiveness, the Psalms provide us with a means with which to articulate experience. They are experientially accurate. Where we lack the words, the Psalms provide them. They help us to articulate awe, pain, desolation, joy - all the experiences at the limits of life, which we are ill equipped to put into words. They help us to break the silence before God when we find ourselves at a loss of words.

The sixth reason: The Psalms provide insight into life. If life cannot be understood apart from God’s working in the world, they have a vital role to play. By facilitating our conversation with God about life and, simultaneously, our enquiry into the ways of God with us, they lead us to plumb the depths of *real life*. By calling it “real life” we mean to distinguish it from the insipid versions of life propagated by God-unaware society. The Psalms provide us with the words and images to make sense of the complexities of life and the mysteries of God, even if it has to be by way of paradox.

The seventh reason: They keep our memory of God's great deeds alive. They remind us of God's liberating presence in the lives of our predecessors in the faith. In so doing they draw our attention to God's activity in our own past. They prevent us from forgetting what He has done for us by taking us back to archetypical saving interventions that changed the fate of our forebears.

Prayer can easily get stuck in the urgencies of the moment and our fears for the future. When this happens, it loses sight of God's willingness and ability to do new things. The Psalms remind us of the past, and they identify the past as shaped by God's great deeds. When we pray these prayers, our present urgencies lose their sting in the light of God's care and our anxieties about the future pale into insignificance in the light of God's power.

The eighth reason: The Psalms promote candor. They are shockingly honest towards God, expressing both their positive and negative feelings towards Him, even to the extreme of making a case against Him. They are also totally frank about the painful realities in life and about their own feelings toward these disorienting situations and the enemies that encroach on their existence. They also have no reticence in disclosing their own guilt and powerlessness.

For conventional religion this would be improper, impolite, an offence to God, a sign of lack of faith. In truth, this candor offers the only way that will lead us to fully address both God and our physical reality.

These prayers can break the cycle of False Selves in the community of faith. They can open our eyes to the brokenness of our world and in our own lives and, by doing this, lead us to commit all of existence to God in trust on his power and trustworthy grace. They lead to a relationship with God where there is no beating about the bush, no hedging and "political correctness", but where the real issues in our world and in our personal lives receive full attention. Only in this way do we gain a true perspective of our warped world and are we energised to commit ourselves to join God in a positive engagement with this skewed situation.

The ninth reason lies in the Psalms' holistic view of God's rule. They provide us with a theological reading of public life. By doing this they break the privatism often associated with modern Christianity. Matters of public justice and the issues of power and economic resources are brought into the perspective of God's just rule.

Praying the Psalms knowingly, leads to alertness for the public role of believers and broadens our conception of vocation considerably. The kind of spirituality that may result from such prayers may, once again, fill “the naked public square” (Neuhaus 1984) with believers who are strongly committed to public expressions of God’s just rule. Even when we find little resonance for our own situation in the imprecatory psalms and the laments of those suffering injustice, our sense of the injustices perpetrated against others is sharpened. These prayers can lead us into solidarity with others in intercession and social action (Brueggemann 1984:87).

One could find many more reasons for promoting the Psalms as the prayers of a faith community that is concerned for integrated spirituality. The reasons mentioned are the ones most obvious from the lines we have drawn thus far and they will suffice to point us towards some specifics for congregational practice.

In all these things the Psalms prime the pump for a lifetime of God-fearing, life-confirming prayer. They rescue prayer from a Docetistic passion for spirituality without physical substance. They also prevent prayer from dwindling away into an activity which restrains itself to an ever shrinking area of life deemed to be the field of God’s activity.

2. Praying by the book - some practical considerations

“This is not the latest thing on prayer, but the oldest: the Psalms, obvious and accessible as tools for prayer in the work of faith” (Eugene Peterson 1989a:7).

What follows is no more than suggestions. We will motivate these suggestions, and some will carry more weight than others. They are suggestions for the use of the Psalms in private devotions, but we will add some remarks on liturgical use at relevant points. These pointers are a selection from the list developed for laity as part of the course on praying the Psalms in *Addendum 1*.

A cautionary note must be added to such a “how to” list. Praying the Psalms is not a matter of technique or knowledge. It is a matter of a gift freely given in conversation with Someone with Whom I am in an intimate relationship. The gift is the gift of God’s presence, of unmediated communion with Him.

“We cannot by mere human ingenuity or talent exhaust all that is contained in the Psalms. Indeed, if we seek only to ‘get something out of them’ we will perhaps get less than we expect, and generous efforts may be frustrated because they are

turned in the wrong direction: toward ourselves rather than toward God” (Merton 1956:44-5).

With this in mind, let us proceed with some practical suggestions.

2.1 Praying by the *whole* book

Our first suggestion for the application of the Psalms for our prayer life is that the whole Psalter should be prayed and not only certain selections. This holds for both personal and liturgical use.

There has been a tendency to censor the texts of the Psalms and to work only with the homogenised version (Holladay 1993:304-15). We find this in the Catholic Divine Office (Holladay 1993:304-311), and also in the widely used Common Lectionary (Holladay 1993:314). The parts that are left out, are invariably parts with a negative import, such as the calls for retribution and curses (Pss 137:7-9; 139:19-22, 23-24 etc.). Laments are also found to be underrepresented. We cannot support this practice.

The first reason for our suggestion to pray the whole Psalter, is closely related to the insights gained by viewing the Psalms in canonical perspective. Individual psalms should be read within the context of the whole. This means that the whole Psalter should be brought into play. Omitting certain psalms, for whatever reason, provides us with an incomplete context for the psalms that are used and may lead to their misconstrual.

A second reason may be mentioned. Experience has taught us that the very Psalms that are hard to stomach are often the ones fraught with new insights for a specific time. It may be vice and not virtue that tempts us to omit them. We would do well to pay extra attention to psalms that present us with this temptation.

A final reason is derived from John Calvin’s description of the Psalms as “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul” (Calvijn 1972:II). The Psalms present us with a discipline that covers the extent of life as we know it. Omissions could withhold parts of life from God’s scrutiny by retracting them from devotional and liturgical life. Praying *the whole* Psalter lessens that danger considerably.

Our reference to the completeness of the Psalter should not be viewed as recourse to a kind of fundamentalism. It should rather be seen as a precautionary view, in the light of our well-known tendency towards denial and cover-up. Taking the whole

Psalter as the curriculum for prayer, prevents us from filtering out prayers for the wrong reasons. We need to take account of all of God and all of life that is on offer. Censoring the text of the Psalms could curtail our perspective on both.

2.2 Praying whole psalms

We recommend praying psalms in their entirety, instead of leaving out less palatable pieces. This is recommended on two grounds.

Firstly, this takes account of the fact that a psalm has a particular dynamic, which is only comprehended when all its (sometimes disparate) elements are taken as a whole, with their interrelationships. Leaving out parts of the psalm will certainly lead to loss of meaning and might even lead to a situation where the psalm is totally misinterpreted. Some of the more “difficult” parts may be essential for comprehension of the real meaning and impact of the psalm.

This is an important point that warrants some elaboration. In a discussion of the distressing finale to Psalm 137 Erich Zenger concludes as follows:

“Of course, the elimination of verses 8-9 would not only destroy the literary structure of the psalm, but would deprive it of an essential key to a correct and theologically acceptable (!) understanding of its perspectives and violence” (Zenger 1994:48).

He continues:

“Those, including the ‘liturgical reformers,’ who will only permit verses 1-6 to be prayed or sung as a defensibly ‘Christian’ psalm rob it of its theocentric dynamic, which is essentially connected to the appeal to God in verses 7-9. Only through verse 7, in fact, does the psalm become, in its language and literary form, a *prayer to God!*” (Zenger 1994:49).

Psalm 137 is one of the psalms where length clearly was not a consideration for curtailment.

In his discussion of lexical omission of Psalm 139:19-22 he uses even stronger language:

“In this case, the action of the ‘liturgical reformers’ was a deed of artistic and theological barbarity!” (Zenger 1994:32).

“Artistic barbarity”, since the censure of the liturgical reformers totally disrupts the structure of the psalm. Vv 19-22 lie at the heart of the unit in vv 17-22, which stands as the antithesis of vv 13-16. In vv 13-16 the psalmist extols God’s action of shaping the psalmist for his vocation. In vv 17-22 we find the psalmists anguished acceptance of his vocation. To eliminate this section would disrupt the flow of the psalm and obscure the meaning of the whole. The contrast between the way of destruction and the everlasting way (v 24) and the anguished struggle with God’s presence and ownership of his life in vv 7-16 becomes puzzling if the reference to enemies in vv 17-22 is left out (Zenger 1994:28-34). Psalm 139 offers another clear demonstration of the problems presented by omissions for the sake of “Christian” sensibilities.

These two examples should prove to be ample warning about the destruction of meaning that may occur when psalms are censored.

Secondly, we need the whole of the Psalter. We need to note the second and third reasons given above for praying the Psalter as a whole. The very elements we are tempted to eliminate might be the ones most relevant to our situation. We also need the whole Psalter to relate to the entire topography of the soul.

There are two exceptions to this. Liturgical use of the Psalms often utilises a portion of a psalm - sometimes as little as a few words or a single expression. The reason for this drastic abridgement is to focus on a particular liturgical moment.

This is, obviously, something quite different from praying through the Psalms in personal devotions. The liturgy, as a whole, provides context and meaning for these psalm-portions. The church year and the lines of teaching followed through the year forms an even larger context for the specific liturgy. The portion of the Psalm is, therefore, not cast into the air to acquire some kind of free-ranging meaning from its denotations and connotations. It is firmly anchored in a solid field of meaning. One hardly needs to say that support for this practice presupposes that the portion of the psalm is used in accordance with its intrinsic meaning.

One would also make concessions for some of the acrostic psalms that have no particular line of development, but rather take different perspectives on one reality. Psalm 119’s length certainly makes it a candidate for abbreviation. The fact that it is an acrostic poem makes it quite expedient to do so.

One should, however, not be dogmatic about this. The motivation for this recommendation is to facilitate *informed* praying of the Psalms. It goes without

saying that pray-ers who have a thorough knowledge of the Psalms will often spontaneously use sentences and phrases from the Psalms when praying or when in need of expressing something poignantly. One only has to read the prayers and devotional writings of Augustine, Luther and Calvin to realise the extent to which the Psalms can penetrate one's prayer vocabulary. This amounts to an informed use of the Psalms and cannot be construed as a break with the meaning of the whole. It comes about after long use of the whole Psalter and whole psalms.

2.3 Praying in canonical sequence

We would recommend praying the Psalms in their canonical sequence in personal devotions (Holladay 1993:356). This constitutes a break with most of the traditional ways of praying the Psalms - especially the Catholic tradition of the Divine Office.

The reason for this is, once again, to allow the canonical context of individual psalms in the Psalter to exert as much of its meaning-conferring function as possible. Praying through the Psalter from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150 allows one to follow the Psalter's own flow from delighting in the *torah* to praising God, from David-kings to God as king, from lament to praise. It allows the many companion-Psalms to be prayed together.² It also allows editorial units with special functions for the whole, to be prayed together, such as Psalms 1 and 2, Psalms 90-106, and Psalms 145-150. Furthermore, there is something to be said for not separating many of the traditional units, such as the *Hallel* (Pss 113-118) and the Songs of Ascension (Pss 120-134).

The only proviso is that these Psalms should be prayed knowingly. Some of the elements described above might penetrate the understanding of the pray-er, but some instruction on these riches of meaning appears necessary.

Liturgical use could hardly follow this recommendation if the church year is followed. Liturgies would rather take their lead from lectionaries or other methods of pairing Psalms with the specific liturgical aims of a particular Sunday. Care should at all times be taken that the meaning of the Psalms is honoured in the liturgical context where they are inserted.

2.4 Praying with a realistic schedule

We refer here to the number of Psalms prayed daily. There are no hard and fast rules for the number of psalms prayed daily. This would obviously depend on the time available for the individual. The old monastic breviaries with their eight times of

2. These psalms are deliberately paired to be read in conjunction, for instance Psalms 9 and 10, 42 and 43, 103 and 104, 105 and 106, 111 and 112, 127 and 128, 135 and 136.

prayer a day managed to go through the Psalms in one week (Holladay 1993:274). This is simply not within the province of the great majority Christians, save the few in monastic communities. One or two psalms a day should suffice - especially if they are only *part* of a devotional time.

The important thing is not how many psalms one can manage on a given day. One should allow time to savour them, meditate and ruminate, for their meaning to unfold and connect with all of the pray-er's life (Merton 1956:22).

It should be obvious that those who are beginners at praying the Psalms would not be able to manage too much of this in one session. But even old hands at Psalm-praying should not rush through them and risk losing their meaning.

2.5 Praying meditatively and not merely analytically

We concur with Holladay (1993:356), when he encourages a practice of praying the Psalms “naively, uncritically”. This does not exempt one from praying the Psalms knowingly. Disciplined study of the Psalms is a necessary corollary to praying them.

The placement of Psalm 1 as part of the introduction to the Psalms argues forcibly for a passionate commitment in this regard. The righteous person commended is the one who spends time with the תורה. Yet this is not described as a purely intellectual or analytical pursuit (though this is, obviously not eliminated from the process). The verb used to describe how the person involves himself with the *torah* is התנה, which denotes the soft murmuring reading of Scripture to oneself. The Vulgate translates it as *meditari* (Kraus 1988:117). The placement of Psalm 1 as an introduction to the Psalter commends this practice for our use of the Psalter itself. The Psalter should be the object of continuous musing.

Our style of praying the Psalms should be affected by this recommendation. Thomas Merton makes an important remark in this regard (Merton 1953:17-19). He emphasises that the Psalms do not, of themselves, intend to produce contemplation. They lead us to contemplation because their impact is *theological*, rather than *psychological*. That means that they place us in direct contact with God, through the assent of faith to His Revelation. They should not be approached as tools which guarantee a psychological state, but as prayers whose theological effect depends ultimately on the free gift of God.

“This, too, is the secret of the Psalter. God will give Himself to us through the Psalter if we give ourselves to Him without reserve, in our recitation of the Psalms” (Merton 1953:64).

Our recommendation of a meditative praying of the Psalms aims in this direction. An overly analytical frame of mind tends to put us in an objective frame of mind that often does not enter the Psalter and, as a result, does not enter into this self-giving conversation with God. Neither does it lead to full appropriation of the existential meaning of the Psalms. The recommendation of meditative praying aims to open up the possibility of communion with God and to open up our lives to the expressions of human life before the face of God contained in the Psalter.

2.6 Parts not directed at God

Not all of the Psalter is directed at God. Using those parts as prayers could be carried out in more than one way. One may choose to make them into prayers by praying the parts speaking *about* God *to* God. This, for example, entails changing parts that say “the Lord...” to something like “You, O Lord...” as you go along.

Another way of dealing with these psalms or portions of psalms might simply be to direct a prayer to God at the end of each such section or psalm. A number of psalms are structured in this way, for instance Psalm 82.

The most common way is simply to pray the Psalms as they stand, in the knowledge that this is done in the presence of God.

One does not need to choose between these strategies. With time one can become totally comfortable with any of them or with a combination.

2.7 Psalms as a *part* of our prayer life

Our suggestion of the Psalms as prayer does not mean that they should make up the whole of our prayer life. Apart from praying the Psalms, we should also make time for the many other forms of prayer.³ One should attend to prayer disciplines such as that propounded by Ben Johnson (1987a:50-1), or Johnson and Ramey (1992:54-5), that invite us to pray our own prayers through a progression consisting of various types of prayer.

3. See Richard Foster's *Prayer* (1992), for an exhaustive summary of types of prayer experiences. Foster combed the devotional literature in the Christian tradition to arrive at this treatment of prayer.

We would suggest though, that praying the Psalms take pride of place and that they could function especially well as the introductory part of one's normal times of prayer. In this way they may enrich and focus our other prayers by their sharp awareness of God and the issues of life. The specific focus of this study, integrated spirituality, will be well served by such a use of the Psalms.

3. Praying the Psalms in congregational settings

3.1 Liturgical settings

"I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed" (Annie Dillard 1977:59).

"The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to be wearing ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return" (Annie Dillard 1985:40).

As Annie Dillard knew so well, worship is a serious business. To be able to take life seriously, we need to start by taking God seriously. This makes the Psalms an important liturgical resource. Their seriousness about God is the source of their seriousness about life.

The Psalms serve two functions in Christian liturgy (Holladay 1993:291-2). Their first function is to *express* or *reflect* our spirituality. They provide us with words and conceptual tools for conversation with God. In addition, they do so in terms of our concrete circumstances and our particular spirituality.⁴

They also *shape* spirituality. They reshape our relationship with God by offering us an alternative interpretation of reality.⁵

The Psalms may be applied in three different ways. They can be used as *liturgical prayers* (this includes litanies), they can be *sung* (in which case they may also function as prayers), and they may serve as *texts for preaching*.

4. Walter Brueggemann's scheme of "orientation - disorientation - new orientation" demonstrates this function of the Psalms in a particularly clear way.

5. This is extensively argued by Walter Brueggemann in *Israel's praise* (1988).

The laments and the so-called “psalms of divine wrath” seem to be the most conspicuous in their absence from today’s liturgies. The absence of laments is particularly strange in the light of the fact that well over a third of the Psalms are laments. If the Psalms could be instrumental in reinstating the element of lament in worship, they would infinitely enrich our worship. We have already mentioned Brueggemann’s analysis of the tendency of lament-less worship’s to lead to a breakdown of covenantal interaction and to stifle questions of theodicee.⁶ Holladay (1993:293) adds to this by stating that the reinstatement of lament in our worship would stretch and toughen our experience of worship.

The fact that this absence of lament is experienced in situations of disorientation for the church, leads one to view it in a serious light.

“It is a curious fact that the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented It is my judgement that this action of the church is less an evangelical defiance guided by faith, and much more a frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life” (Brueggemann 1984:51).

Reinstatement of lament could offer the opportunity to break this numbness and denial and to open up fresh possibilities. These Psalms could pave the way to recovery and thanksgiving (Holladay 1993:299-300). They could also sensitise the congregation to the plight of the marginalised (Holladay 1993:294) and lead to action on behalf of the destitute.

The psalms of divine wrath could also introduce important elements to our worship. Zenger (1996), demonstrates how these psalms elicit a fiery concern for justice in our prayers and worship. They prevent us from settling for a world dominated by violence and injustice. They revitalise the church for its own stand against the powers of this world. Yet they are the psalms most severely censored and are often totally banished from our worship services. We will come back to this matter in our discussion of lexical aids for preaching in section 3.1.3.

One more remark should be made before we discuss three important aspects of worship services. Our argument for the introduction of the Psalms as prayers relates to James Fowler’s view of faith as a matter of triangulation. A certain view of our shared centre of value and power is expounded by the worship service as a whole. As Fowler has stated, faith is relational, with a covenantal pattern of relationship

6. See Chapter 4, section 2.3.

(Fowler 1991:16). And, as the sociology of knowledge has demonstrated in its exposition of the way social worlds are formed and maintained, faith is a matter of continual negotiation. We are in a process of mutual negotiation and alignment when we enter into worship. We are confronted with discrepancies between our centre of value and power and that articulated by the liturgy.

There is always a possibility for us to reject or misconstrue the world of the liturgy. Therefore we are in need of convincing and clear articulations of the God-dominated and life-confirming world of biblical faith. Our discussion of the three important elements of liturgy will operate from this assumption.

3.1.1 Psalms as liturgical prayers

“Lex orandi, lex credandi.”⁷

Using psalms as liturgical prayers, is a time-honoured tradition in the church. We strongly recommend a resumption of this practice where it has fallen by the wayside, and a fuller implementation of it where it is only done partially. By a “fuller implementation” we mean to suggest bringing the whole of the Psalter into the liturgical life of the church, instead of culling some liturgically useful parts from the whole.

This, however, is not something we can do without facing some practical problems. Many of the psalms present us with difficulties as liturgical prayers if taken as they were written. This is especially true of the laments and the so-called “enemy-psalms”. They grate against our Christian sensibilities, which have been formed by Christ’s call to love our enemies and to trust in God. The enemy-psalms seem vindictive and filled with hate, while the laments give us the impression of a lack of faith.

The solution that the church has followed, has mostly been that of censoring the text of the Psalms and simply leaving out the offensive parts or, in many cases, leaving out entire psalms. Section 3.1.3 will discuss these omissions. For the present, we can only state our belief that this strategy makes us run the dire risk of losing the full sense of the Psalter by imposing a kind of “canon within the canon,” chosen by our

7. “The law of prayer is the law of belief”, or, translated with more freedom: “How we pray determines how we believe.” This traditional aphorism is shorthand for a phrase of Prosper of Aquitaine, dating back to his arguments against the Semi-Pelagians. The original phrase was “*legum credendi lex statuat supplicandi*” which is to say, “the law of prayer determines the law of belief” (Hohenstein 1997:140).

own subjective standards. In the light of our concern for seriousness about God, this cannot be condoned. It also leaves important tracts of human existence unprayed, which is equally unacceptable in the light of our concern for life.

We are still left with the problem of the harshness and seeming negativity of many of the psalms. One way of getting around these problems would be to provide explanations of the theology and the existential dimensions behind them. The problem we have with these psalms is not situated in the psalms themselves, but in our lack of understanding of the theological horizon in which they originated and in the way this lack of understanding leads to misunderstandings when we simply hear them in terms of *our own* feelings about life and our assimilation of the pseudo-Christian clichés of the Christian tradition (Zenger 1994:63).

This is not a feasible suggestion for liturgical prayers. Protracted explanations would ruin a psalm as a prayer. Erich Zenger provides us with an elegant solution to the problem. He suggests that we should simply translate them into language less resonant with our common misunderstandings and more able to clarify their actual meaning to modern-day believers (Zenger 1994:91). He provides us with a number of useful instances where an alternative translation of a psalm that is offensive to our understanding of life may preserve its meaning while avoiding the possibility of misconstrual. Psalm 137:8-9 and Psalm 139:21-22 are clear demonstrations of the possibilities offered by this approach:

Psalm 137:8-9 may be retranslated in the following way:

“O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us - he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (NRSV).

“O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy the one who brings you to judgement because of what you have done to us! Happy the one who seizes you and puts an end to your rule⁸ forever!” (Zenger 1994:91).

Psalm 139:21-22 may be retranslated in the following way:

“Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies” (NRSV).

8. Zenger bases this translation on his interpretation of the “infants” in v 9 as those of the royal house, that is, of the dynasty (cf. Is 7:14-16; 9:1-6). “The horrible image means to say that this dynasty of terror ought to be exterminated completely (‘root and branch’)” (Zenger 1994:50). Even if we do not accept this interpretation the translation would still make good sense.

“O Lord, should I not combat⁹ those who fight against you? Should I not loathe those who rise up against you? Indeed, with my whole passion I fight against them: they have become my enemies” (Zenger 1994:33).

We should notice that Zenger stays close to the original text. He does, however, succeed in removing the offensive connotations and the possibilities of misunderstanding without damaging the literal sense of these psalms.

This, then, is *our first suggestion* for a reintroduction of the Psalms as liturgical prayers. We need good retranslations of this kind, based on a thorough understanding of both the biblical text and of the modern context of the communities in which they are to function. This eliminates the need for distracting feats of interpretation to be done while praying these hermeneutically complex psalms and reinstates an immediacy of understanding.

A proper understanding of the world in which the psalms originated and of the meaning of a particular psalm, would enable one to pray the psalm in a manner true to its nature. Even then, it is a cumbersome practice with many distractions. Translating the prayers in the way Zenger proposes, shortens the hermeneutical loop and removes many of the obstacles that would prevent their full function as prayers. The two horizons of understanding fuse into one, precipitating a transparency of meaning that vastly enhances their usefulness in a modern liturgical setting.

We would also recommend that these retranslations should keep the modern liturgical setting in mind as far as their length is concerned. Many of the psalms are too lengthy for the whole to be used in a modern liturgy. This leads to abridgements that may savage the intent of the original psalms if this is not carried out with great care to preserve the original dynamic and flow of the whole. A retranslation of a psalm needs to be done in a way that both preserves the full flow and “feel” of the original and that keeps its length within bounds.

We do not propose this to mean that we have to eradicate the use of portions of psalms that have found their way into the set liturgies of the church. These quotes from the Psalms serve a purpose in their own right, but can never replace prayers which utilise the full form of the Psalter. We also do not propose this practice to

9. Zenger bases this translation of *קָרַב* as “combat” on the fact that the word refers to concrete deeds in the Old Testament. “In Psalm 139:21-22 the issue is not an impulse to hatred and loathing of other human beings, but an attitude and actions that oppose and combat destructive violence” (Zenger 1994:32-3).

replace free prayer in our worship services, but we do propose that these prayers be prayed *in addition* to the free prayers. We propose praying the Psalms as an introduction to a free prayer, so that the Psalm may act as a platform, as a prayer to prime the pump for further prayer. The free prayer may then elaborate on the themes of the psalm, concretising them in ways that relate them to the specific context of the congregation.

The second suggestion we wish to propose is to pray the whole of the Psalter over a period of time. The reasons for this suggestion are the same as our reasons for suggesting that whole psalms be prayed. The comprehensiveness of the Psalms as “an anatomy of all parts of the soul” and as prayers for all seasons is one of its greatest assets as an agenda for prayer. Using *all the psalms* as liturgical prayer over a period of time, would ensure a much broader reach for our prayers than any free prayer or a selection of psalms can offer.

We should also be aware of the treacherous habit of our own hearts to filter out anything that might lead to inconvenience or dissonance. Our criterion for the elimination of certain psalms might not be as artless as we purport. If we make no allowance for new and unsettling elements in our liturgy, unhealthy trends can flourish with impunity. Also, by eliminating certain psalms from liturgical use, we may, in fact, be eliminating what we need most at a certain stage.

The way we schedule a programmatic liturgical use of the whole Psalter may prove to be quite complex if one attempts to stay with the church year. Yet, the difficulties should not prove to be insurmountable. One could use any of the known lectionaries as a basis and be able to find places to insert psalms they have left out in the place of duplications. Another option could be to simply start with Psalm 1 and carry on at a rate of one psalm per Sunday, independent of the rest of the liturgy. This latter strategy would fit in quite well where the worship service is built around preaching in the *lectua continua*-style. We would prefer to take the first option, even though it would be far more difficult to implement. It has the important advantage of the psalmic prayer being an integrated part of the liturgy as a whole.

In conclusion, prayer in church will gain considerably in breadth and depth if the Psalms take up their rightful place again. They would provide a rich agenda and a growth in substance that will greatly enhance our worship. We also believe that they will play their part to shape a spirituality that is deeply committed to both God and life by leading believers to pray in ways that integrate both these aspects and that demonstrate a passion for both.

3.1.2 Psalms for liturgical singing

“The hymns of Luther killed more souls than his sermons” (A Jesuit opponent of Luther, quoted by William Holladay 1993:195).

Not all of congregational singing is prayer, but a large part of it is. A discussion of the Psalms for liturgical singing is, therefore, in order.

The Psalms have long played an important role in worship by being sung. This can already be ascertained with certainty from the fourth century onward (Holladay 1993:165).

Our remarks on the use of the Psalms as liturgical prayers are also applicable to the use of the Psalms for liturgical singing. We would also commend singing *whole psalms* and singing *all of the Psalter*. The problems we face in doing this are much more difficult to solve than the case is in praying the Psalms.

Our first problem is that of length. Most attempts to put psalms to music result in renditions that take much longer to sing through than it would take to read them. This leads to the practice of singing only certain preferred verses. Apart from the problems with abridgement mentioned above, such abbreviations may lead to “singing down”¹⁰ - to singing the call to worship without singing the reasons for praise. We end up singing only the “nice verses”, the ones articulating a call to praise, positive outcomes, subservience to God. These are very important elements in the Psalms, but, divorced from their context in lament and rage they often become little less than a kind of “cover-up”; a denial that produces “yes-men” and “yes-women” steeped in the False Self.

This should alert us to use the Psalms as liturgical songs in a responsible way. If we are forced into a choice of verses, we should take account of the full meaning of the particular psalm and make our choices accordingly. We should be particularly attuned to the flow and logic of the psalm and to the interconnections between the various subdivisions.

The problem will persist, though, if we do not have psalms to sing that are of a practical length, without losing the internal dynamics of the original. This is a worthy challenge for hymn writers and composers and one which would do the

10. As discussed in the previous chapter. See Brueggemann (1988:78-85).

church great service. In the meantime we will have to make do with what we have in the most responsible way possible.

Our suggestion that the whole of the Psalter should come into use, also affects our choice of psalms to sing over a period of time. The psalms chosen for singing should deliberately cover the full spectrum of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. We should also be aware of the structural developments in the Psalter, and of the place of a specific psalm in the canonical dynamic, better to be able to use individual psalms in accordance with their canonical meaning.

We contend that this development would, especially, bring about a return of lament psalms as an integral part of worship. Don Saliers' dictum about worship occurring where the human pathos and divine ethos concur (Saliers 1994:22), would be well served by such a development. The psalms of disorientation could serve in bringing the brokenness and pain in believers' lives into the worship service and into the healing presence of God. Our suggestion is to broaden the element of confession of sin that is part of most set liturgies to encompass both sin and suffering. This would enable the Psalms to fully function in funding integrated spirituality. In this case, spirituality that not only seeks restitution of the relationship with God, but also healing for brokenness in life.

Lourens Strydom (1994:286-90) distinguishes five functions for liturgical singing. If the whole of the Psalter comes into play in the church's hymnology, all five functions will be served:

Liturgical singing is proclamation (Strydom 1994:286). The kerygmatic function of the psalms is served by our emphasis on bringing all the psalms into play and singing the total meaning of each psalm instead of only focusing on expurgated portions. This canonical approach may serve to safeguard us against making our own culture and subjective choices the norm for acceptability. If singing is to be viewed as proclamation, we would need to ascertain that the version of the psalms we are singing is a true articulation of their full meaning and that we are covering the full field of meaning of the Psalter. We would recommend that Zenger's suggestion to retranslate difficult parts of the psalms so that they are immediately accessible to the modern mind, should also be followed in the texts of hymns.

Liturgical singing is a response of faith, "sung prayers" (Strydom 1994:288). Singing the whole Psalter would add immensely to the comprehensiveness of a congregation's sung response to God. Calvin's reference to the Psalms as "an

anatomy of all parts of the soul” (Calvijn 1972:II) depicts the Psalms as an important tool to facilitate a full response to the comprehensiveness of God’s grace.

Liturgical singing has a pastoral function (Strydom 1994:289). If congregational singing is to play this role we need hymns that cover all pastoral situations. The Psalms are the obvious solution to this need, providing, once again, that the full range of psalms addressing the human condition before God are used.

Liturgical singing has a missionary function (Strydom 1994:290). The Psalms ring with invitations to the nations to join in the singing of praise to God. Before engaging in doxology, though, they offer us a totally candid struggle with the complexities of life. This is important, if they are to exert their missionary power. The doxology of the Psalter is “a hard-won verdict” (Brueggemann 1995:115) and not some quick-fix panacea. The gospel offered in the Psalms is a gospel that speaks to the heart of the problem of human existence. This can only be displayed in our congregational singing if the full spectrum of the Psalter is allowed to be articulated. If they are allowed to regress to the level of triumphalism they will sound forced and ring false to the ears of unbelievers.

Liturgical singing takes account of the uniqueness of the individual member of the congregation (Strydom 1994:290). The Psalter serves this function with distinction. It addresses the experience of both the individual and the community as a whole. Most of the psalms originated in situations in the lives of individuals. Persistent use has seen many of the specific details of pain and exuberance worn away, so that they become applicable to the unique shape of the life of any individual. The same psalm may be appropriated in a whole range of different existential situations. They speak to every believer in his or her unique journey through life.

Again we commend a comprehensive approach. Avoiding certain psalms or parts of psalms will detract from the ability the congregation’s singing has, to connect to all the individuals who make up its number.

Psalm-singing can certainly facilitate growth towards integrated spirituality. The twin passions of the Psalter coupled to music that enhances its expression could hardly leave a congregation unmoved. The discussion above, though, should make us aware that many of our present hymnals are not attuned to this task. While this is still the case, we will have to make do with what we do have - and should be able to, if we apply ourselves to the task.

Our discussion has not touched upon the difficulty of melodies for the Psalter. Wonderfully useful poetical renditions of psalms may be rendered useless by melodies that find no resonance with the members of a congregation. If this is the case, the larger church should shoulder the responsibility of rectifying this situation as a task of great urgency. Composers and hymn writers may very well hold the key to a powerful resurgence of psalmic spirituality. They will need all the assistance and encouragement they can get.

3.1.3 Psalms as texts for preaching

Though our concern is for praying the Psalms, we propose using the Psalms as texts for preaching as an auxiliary practice aimed at enriching the congregation's praying of the Psalms. It stands to reason that better understanding of the Psalms would enrich our praying them.

There are many who refuse to take the Psalms as texts for preaching. They feel that the Psalms should rather be on the lips of the congregation than on those of the preacher (Long 1988:43); spoken to God rather than to men. As prayers and religious hymns they have a totally different intention than the texts we normally expound on the pulpit.

We do not see this as prohibitive to preaching the Psalms, but rather as a cautionary note to take into account in our exegesis and in the way we preach from the Psalter. We have to take account of their unique literary characteristics (Long 1988:44-50).

We must add another remark on the strength of our main statement about the Psalms. The Psalms should be preached in such a way that their passion for God and their attention to life becomes evident. No exposition of the Psalms that degenerates into romantic triumphalism or into cheap psychologising can claim to be a true reflection of the text.

This is, of course, true of all preaching. Preaching is an act of directing a congregation's attention to *God*; to his great deeds in the past, the present and the future (Cilliers 1996:114). If preaching is not about God, it is not Christian preaching anymore. Preaching is first and foremost a theological act; proclamation of the Word of God (Van Seters 1988:19). But preaching is simultaneously a social act (Van Seters 1988:17). It is influenced by our social context and, in turn, influences our social context (Van Seters 1988:13-14).

These two aspects of preaching must not be separated into a kind of polarity where the world becomes merely a backdrop for God's personal encounter with individuals (Van Seters 1988:19). The true nature of the Psalms is such that preaching need only give attention to its subject-matter for these two dimensions to receive their rightful attention and, importantly, for them to be kept together.

We now turn our attention to the problem that we have alluded to in the previous two sections. There are various lexical aids for preaching in use in the world church. The most common - in South Africa, at any rate - seems to be the Revised Common Lectionary. In spite of the fact that the three year cycle of the lectionary allows ample time to cover all of the Psalter, we find a large number of psalms omitted. A list of the texts reveals that forty-five psalms have been omitted,¹¹ while some others are included five or six times. Psalm 119 appears nine times.

Some of the omissions may be ascribed to the fact that choices of psalms must concur with the seasons of the church year and with the other texts for a particular Sunday. Another principle of selection, especially where parts of psalms are left out, is to keep the length of psalm readings within bounds. Yet an analysis of the kinds of texts omitted shows us that the specific psalms and portions of psalms omitted, tend to be mostly laments and enemy-prayers - psalms with a negative import.

This practice cannot be condoned, for all the reasons stated in the previous sections. We need to bring the whole of the Psalter into our worship services and not only certain texts that suit our sensibilities. Depriving the Psalter its full say leads to deprivation in the church's worship - the one place where we can ill afford it. In the end we will have to decide: Are we going to concede to the principle of 2 Tim 3:16 that *all* Scripture is useful, while gritting our teeth about such savageries as bashing babies against rocks? Or are we going to use some sanitised version of the Psalter as it comes to us in a lectionary's abridgement? We need to find a way out of this dilemma if we do not want important parts of the Psalter to be effectively silenced.

We maintain that the solution to this problem is simpler than it might seem at first glance. Firstly, abridgements of psalms should be taken into consideration. If the abridgements do not harm the inner dynamic of the psalm and if they do not obscure its meaning, they should be allowed to stand. This is especially the case where the abridgements are made for the sake of length. In all instances, though, preaching

11. The following psalms are left out in their entirety: Psalms 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 18, 21, 28, 35, 38, 39, 44, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 64, 73, 74, 75, 76, 83, 87, 88, 94, 101, 102, 108, 109, 110, 115, 117, 120, 129, 134, 135, 140, 141, 142, 144. See the publication of the lectionary texts of The Consultation on Common Texts (1992:115-19).

should take account of the inner structure of the whole psalm and allude to the parts that had not been read, if necessary.

Secondly, the omission of psalms must be rectified. It is certainly untenable for certain psalms to be banished effectively from our worship services by not appearing in our tri-annual cycle of readings. We need to ensure that all the psalms are accounted for. Instead of being omitted, the “difficult” psalms must be expounded in our preaching. If the members of our congregations are to pray these psalms with freedom, they will have to learn to understand them. We contend that we need not avoid any of the psalms as texts for preaching.¹² If any psalms should be omitted, it should rather be the “easy” ones.

For congregations that make use of lectionaries, the problem still remains. What do we do about the forty-five psalms not taken up in the lectionary readings? Do we simply allow them to disappear from our worship? We would suggest that a place should be found for them as replacements for duplicated psalms during “ordinary time”¹³, when the specific season of the church year offers less of a problem. We would suggest that this task be carried out by a suitable committee or task group of the denominational structures where lectionaries are in use. In this way, co-ordination can be retained between congregations for the use of specific texts on specific Sundays. It will, most likely, not be possible to fit them all in over a three-year cycle, but a much longer cycle would also serve the purpose.

We need to make one last remark. When a specific psalm is taken as the text for preaching on a particular Sunday, we are often in a unique liturgical position. Most of the psalms, because of the fact that they are (at least partly) addressed to God, have an inner dynamic that makes them particularly attuned to liturgical use. This should be utilised as thoroughly as possible. Preaching on a psalm offers us the opportunity of shaping the liturgy of the day into an extended prayer along the lines of the psalm’s dynamic. The individual psalms offer us liturgical clues that can vastly enrich our experience of worship by the ways in which the members of the congregation are drawn into the active dynamic of the act of worship.

12. This assessment is based on a close reading of the laments and imprecatory Psalms with the help of Zenger’s *A God of vengeance?* (1994), Brueggemann’s *The message of the Psalms* (1984) and the commentaries of Mays (1994a), Craigie (1983), Tate (1990), Allen (1983), and Kraus (1986; 1989).

13. “Ordinary time” is the twenty-four or twenty-five week period before the start of Advent. This period is suggested, since it does not focus on a specific part of Christ’s life and, therefore, has a rather open agenda as far as themes for preaching is concerned.

“Wat moet gebeur is dat ons op ’n kreatiewe wyse deur die wisselwerking tussen prediking, verduideliking en aktiewe respons die gemeente moet betrek in ’n proses waardeur die betrokke psalm voor die aangesig van die Here uitgespreek en beleef word”¹⁴ (Burger 1988:15-16).

3.2 Prayer meetings and small groups

The Psalms can also play an important role in a wide variety of prayer meetings. We suggest devoting a part of any such meeting to praying a specific psalm. This may be done in the following way: The psalm is used to create the agenda for the first part of the prayer meeting. This is achieved by a reading of the psalm, sometimes followed by a short meditation on the psalm and some remarks on how one might pray the psalm, and then a time of free prayer using the psalm as a point of departure. Parishioners use this time of prayer to personalise the psalm and to elaborate on the themes and issues it brought up. The psalm itself or a portion of the psalm might be read as the first prayer of the session. If possible the psalm should be sung at the end of the prayer session. *Addendum 3* provides a few examples of such use of the psalms.

If these prayer meetings are conducted on a regular basis we recommend that the psalms be used in canonical order. Over a period of time one could cover the whole Psalter.

Small groups can use the psalms in exactly the same way. All Christian small group books and manuals stress the importance of prayer and worship times as a major component of small group meetings.¹⁵ The psalms can be extremely helpful for small groups in this regard. Small groups have the express purpose of grounding the gospel in the actual lives of those concerned. The Psalms’ proven attention to matters of God and of life will not only slot into this vision, but their rich complexity will inject the groups praying them with new perspectives on the full interconnection between God and even the most mundane details of their lives.

Prayer in these prayer groups and small groups may easily become overly “spiritual”, praying for concrete interventions of God in the affairs of their members only in an intermitted and unconnected fashion - almost as if God was absent and only answered our bidding by conducting raids on our world from time to time. The Psalms’ vision

14. “What should happen is that we should, creatively by way of an interaction between preaching, explaining and active response, draw the congregation into a process whereby the specific psalm is articulated and experienced before the face of the Lord.”

15. To mention a few: Burger and Simpson (1996:110-22), Barker et al (1985:92-6;22-37), Engelbrecht and De Wet (108-21; 134-5), Wuthnow (1994:239-42).

of God's full commitment to human affairs will go far towards shaping integrated spirituality in our small groups.

3.3 Personal devotions

“Coming to terms with silence is a necessary element in self-knowledge and in prayer. Pascal claimed that ‘most of man’s troubles come from his not being able to sit quietly in his chamber’ ” (Kenneth Leech 1992a:179).

“Prayer is a way to open our lives to the sacred dimension of our life journey” (Ben Johnson 1987a:48).

Personal devotions have an important place in all but a few strains of the Christian tradition. The importance of personal communion with God for the personal appropriation of the activity and presence of God can hardly be overestimated. Prayer has always been viewed as an important element of personal devotions, if not *the* important element.

The kind of prayer that could result in integrated spirituality would be that in which both the adoration of God and perspective-taking on life have a place. On the one hand, prayer in our times of personal devotions has to provide a time and place “where wonder and adoration have space to develop” (Peterson 1987:65). On the other hand we need to bring the elements of our lives into our prayers - all of it, from the painful to the ecstatic. Nothing is too humdrum or too shameful or too earthy for prayer. By bringing life into this context of wonder and adoration of God, we create the opportunity to discover the linkage between this world and that, between the material and the sacred.

“In the early Christian understanding, prayer was not opposed to life or the occupations of life. Prayer penetrated life and consisted above all in a new understanding of life and its occupations, in relating them to the central object of faith - to the Kingdom of God and the Church ... Work was controlled, enlightened and judged by prayer, it was not opposed to prayer ... Prayer in the spirit meant above all a constant recollection of this relatedness and subordination of everything in life to the reality of the Kingdom manifested in this world” (A. Schmemmann).¹⁶

16. Quoted by Wainwright (1986:605).

The Psalms offer us this juxtaposition of the holy and the earthy. They provide access to God's holiness and accessibility, his faithfulness and his silence, his wrath and his everlasting love. They do so in concrete ways, by reference to past occurrences in their history with God and in their reading of present states of affairs. They also provide us with a veritable inventory of life. We are accosted with the humdrum and the dramatic, the painful and the ecstatic, guilt and innocence, justice and violence - all of it.

Although the concrete situations referred to in the Psalms differ from those in our own lives, they provide the springboard for reflection on our own reality when they call specific analogical occurrences and situations in our own lives to our attention. We are invited to appropriate these psalms as our personal prayers in similar circumstances by the device of affixing historical headings to them.¹⁷ Their analysis of the human condition is such that we very soon find ourselves resonating with the words.

When this happens, the Psalms also invite us to take their God-dominated perspective on these occurrences. They pry us loose from our secular views of pain and good fortune and release us from the idolatries shaped by the limits of our corporeal existence. The resulting integrated view of the world can hardly be contained by the boundaries of our personal devotions. It soon appears in the form of words and acts that take this world-view as the ultimate reality. Our prayer language becomes our language towards "the other" and towards creation (as depicted in our model of spirituality in Chapter 2). It shapes our responses to and our reading of our contexts and our confessional tradition. It redirects our personal narratives towards the narrative of the Bible. It moulds the way our psychological structure comes to expression in our spirituality.

For all these reasons we strongly recommend the use of the Psalms for prayer in personal devotions. Not as the whole of our prayer life, as previously stated, but as an important part. Apart from other prayer disciplines, there is also much to say for a personal elaboration on the particular psalm one has prayed.¹⁸ The Psalms provide a springboard to further prayer. They prime the pump; they get us started.

We would recommend that the canonical order of the Psalms should be adhered to in personal devotions, taking one or two psalms a day. By so doing one will, eventually, develop a feel for the ebb and flow of the inner arrangements of the

17. See our discussion of the superscriptions in Chapter 5 (section 4.1.3).

18. For a practical demonstration of the way the Psalms may stimulate one to further prayer, see Carlos Valles' *Praying together* (1989).

Psalms and of the subtle interplay between many of the psalm pairs and collections. By praying the whole corpus of the Psalms over and over they become part of one's system and, eventually, provide more and more of the vocabulary and images with which one deals with God's relation to our world. Used as prayers, as our own words toward God, and appropriated by personal elaborations, their impact will be far greater than it would have been if they had simply been read as devotional literature.

Yet, there are some problems for your average parishioner, not conversant with the cultural and theological world in which the Psalms originated. Many elements in the Psalms make them hard to stomach, especially for otherworldly strains of spirituality. Modern Christians tend to avoid the abrasive elements in the Psalms, such as the frequent attention to enemies, the curse-formulas, the laments (especially when directed against God as accusations) and the professions of innocence.

Other psalms need more than perfunctory hermeneutic attention to function as prayers in a modern context. If one thinks of the enthronement psalms and the narrative psalms one realises that there are vast difference in cultural and historical circumstances. This strangeness sets up a barrier for the average believer who might start out quite determined to use the Psalms in devotions.

Another state of affairs further aggravates the situation. Apart from saying the Lord's prayer, the use of read or recited prayers is viewed with suspicion in many circles of the Christian church. For them it smacks of formalism and a lack of sincerity to read other people's prayers as one's own.

All of this makes it obligatory to find ways to facilitate a better understanding of the world of the Psalms, of our reasons for using them and of the ways they might be employed. We have two suggestions in this regard:

Our first suggestion is to offer a regular course in praying the Psalms in a congregation. *Addendum 1* offers the outline of a yearly course presented in the Dutch Reformed Church Helderberg in Somerset West. The course attends to the basic structure of the Psalter, to the difficult types of psalms and the way they might be prayed, and to practical issues in praying the Psalms.

As we have mentioned previously, use of the Psalms in liturgy and preaching could also be utilised to sharpen the congregation's skills in understanding and using the Psalms in prayer.

Our second suggestion is to provide prayer helps for praying the Psalms. *Addendum 2* is an example of such prayer helps. One needs to provide notes on the meaning of the psalm and on specific difficulties for the modern mind, if such exist. One also needs to provide some pointers on how the psalm may be appropriated in prayer. The example in *Addendum 2* is taken from a larger collection of such prayer helps, designed for the Dutch Reformed Church Helderberg as a kind of “starter kit” for persons who wish to start praying the psalms. This “starter kit” is also made available to persons attending the annual course on Psalm-praying.

If Christians’ personal devotions are still stamped by a dualism between the sacred and the material, they constitute a retreat from the world and might even aggravate the problem of otherworldliness. We propose praying the Psalms as a remedy. It is our strong conviction that this practice will, more often than not, stimulate an integration of the spiritual and material dimensions of life before God.

3.4 Pastoral work

Pastoral work is also an important field of application for the strategy of praying the Psalms. Praying the Psalms may be used in two ways, either by the pastor praying them in a pastoral situation or by encouraging the counsellee to pray them. We will concentrate on the second strategy in our discussion, since we deem it to be the more effective of the two. Our depiction of the way praying the Psalms effects change, though, is the same for both strategies.

It helps us to view pastoral work in the kind of triadic structure James Fowler proposed. We assume a large area of correspondence between the shared centre of value and power of the pastor and the counsellee. The counsellee, though, is experiencing a breakdown in the ability of his or her centre of value and power to make sense of a disoriented situation and in its capacity to provide meaningful ways of dealing with misfortune.

Seen from a Christian pastoral perspective, and in conjunction with Fowler’s view of faith-triangulation, all crises inherently revolve around questions of theodicee. They will not be solved in a meaningfully Christian way until the God-questions relating to the problem are cleared up. A pastor may enter the situation and soon realise that the counsellee’s perception of their shared centre of value and power is either awry or incomplete. His or her role, then, is to act within the triadic relationship in such a way that the person commits himself or herself to a process of negotiation about this insufficient centre of value and power.

This process must be carried out in a manner that fully includes the counsellee. His or her insufficient centre of value and power can only be modified by himself or herself. The counsellor can only facilitate the processes and provide insights that can steer this process in a constructive direction. He or she cannot bully the counsellee into a new centre of value and power. Centres of value and power are too deeply entrenched and the stakes are too high for such a simplistic approach to be effective in anything but extreme situations. There needs to be a process of negotiation, of bargaining, of testing the existing centre of value and power against the facts of the problem and against the alternative centre of value and power.

This is where praying the Psalms can play an important role. The Psalms have a tested and tried centre of value and power behind them. Their view of God is paramount in their approach to life. Their view of life is serious and comprehensive and, above all, integrates God's activity fully. A person praying the Psalms will soon find himself or herself expressing aspects of his or her specific problem. The Psalms will facilitate a negotiation process with the person, proposing an alternative to the person's insufficient centre of value and power in the convincing form of Israel's anguished prayers and its buoyant responses to God's answers. The person may find release by phrasing his or her emotions in candid ways he or she did not think permissible. He or she may find the problem analysed in the light of an alternative centre of value and power that takes account of God and that proposes aspects to the problem that provide fresh perspective - perspective that enables the person to start dealing with the problem in a new light and to discover aspects of the problem that had been hidden to him or her previously.

As stated in the previous two chapters, the Psalms have the ability to break down insufficient worlds - worlds shaped by idolatry and ideology - and to shape new worlds - worlds oriented towards God's justice and covenant love. It is this aspect of the Psalms that make them eminently suitable for pastoral work that take questions of theodicee seriously.

The Psalms may have this effect if simply read in a situation of disarray. However, we contend that their use as prayers intensifies their worldbreaking and worldmaking potential. When used as prayers, they move from the field of words spoken *about* God to words spoken *to* God. They become, in other words, negotiations with God. The fact that the Psalter is lavishly endowed with Psalms of disorientation means that these negotiations soon incorporate the present troubles of the praying individual. The fact that the Psalms also incorporate Psalms of orientation and new orientation, means that the negotiations are hopeful - they also take account of enduring structures and surprising outcomes. This process of negotiation may open new

possibilities in situations where all the doors and windows seem to have been locked - they may transform dark pits into dark tunnels, leading to the light.

Another helpful way of describing the way praying the Psalms might function in a pastoral situation, is offered by the way Donald Capps utilises the technique of reframing.¹⁹ The technique simply consists of changing the frame of understanding in which a person perceives events in order to change the meaning. When the meaning changes, the person's responses and behaviours also change (Capps 1990:10). The person is urged to "think about things differently" or "see a new point of view" or "take other factors into consideration" (Capps 1990:11).

Capps proposes reframing as a pastoral strategy where second-order change is called for. Second-order change means change where the system in which a person is seeking a solution needs to be changed as part of the problem-solving strategy (Capps 1990:12). This type of problem closely approximates Brueggemann's category of disorientation. While the system of belief (or, in Fowler's terminology, the belief in a certain centre of value and power) was still coherent (orientation), a certain set of solutions sufficed. When things change, a person will persist with old solutions and will soon run into trouble. What is needed now is second-order change. The system itself needs to change. Reframing has the ability of offering a person fresh perspectives on a situation that can lead to this kind of change.

By praying the Psalms, the person enters a different framework - one where disorientation still occurs (which "fits the facts" of his or her present situation), but where the disorientation is contained by God's presence. Previously the person might not have brought God into the system as a realistic factor (this may either be a deistic, atheistic or privatistic framework) or he or she might have done so in a framework of orientation. None of these frameworks offer solutions for a situation of disorientation.

If the person accepts this new framework, the problem does not disappear, but it loses much of its threatening dimension. This lifts the feeling of helplessness and the numbness and denial that previously dominated the person's outlook on the situation and frees him or her to constructive action. It may also bring a totally fresh perspective on what the solution to a specific problem might be and, thus, free the

19. The technique did not originate with Capps. It is an age-old narrative technique employed by many of the major therapists of his time, including Milton Erickson, Virginia Satir, Carl Whitaker, and Jay Haley (Capps 1990:2). Capps transposes it to the field of pastoral care.

person from preoccupation with an ineffective strategy. New, previously unimaginable solutions suddenly appear and have the power to effect change.²⁰

All of this may seem related only tangentially to our main theme - integrated spirituality. Viewing pastoral problems as inextricably related to problems of theodicee makes it clear why pastoral work, in our view, is intimately related to concerns for pastoral spirituality. Our references to the work of Fowler and Capps have shown that insufficient centres of value and power or, in Capps' terminology, insufficient understanding of the frameworks within which these problems occur, lie at the heart of existential crises. If we have grounds for our contention that dualistic views of reality offer insufficient centres of value and power and are insufficient frameworks for solving major existential crises, we need some tool to rectify this dualism. We need a strategy that could inculcate an integrated sense of God and the material world.

Our overview of the Psalms in the previous two chapters demonstrated the thoroughly integrated view they present in this regard. We tender this view of reality as a sufficient view - one that directs us toward a centre of value and power that may hold in situations of crisis and one that presents a framework that offers solutions to the most complex problems. In the light of these perspectives we offer the view of integrated spirituality as an important pastoral goal.

The problems for praying the Psalms in pastoral situations are the same as that alluded to in the previous section. We offer the same strategies to overcome them, namely inviting persons to a course in psalm-praying (see *Addendum 1*) and offering the counsellee the prayer-helps, such as those in *Addendum 2*. In addition, many of the pastoral conversations will, of course, take up themes coming from the counsellee's praying of the Psalms.

4. Recovering our tradition

As Eugene Peterson stated, praying the psalms is not the latest craze about prayer. In fact, it is one of the oldest prayer traditions in the church (Peterson 1989a:7). This study, therefore, does not suggest a radically new practice for the church. There are certainly many new insights to be gained from modern scholarship and research into the psalms, but, basically, this study calls for a recovery of a very old tradition.

20. Capps accounts how, in a situation where he was experiencing despair, he memorised a particular psalm (Ps 131) and returned to it again (Capps 1990:48). This application of Psalm 131 brought about a reframing of his situation and gave him the assurance that he would somehow get through that difficult time.

Liturgical and devotional use of the Psalms in Jewish history, from biblical times to the present, is a well-recorded fact.²¹ Since its inception, the Psalms have played a major role in the life of the Christian church.²² What follows is a very sketchy overview of the tradition of devotional and liturgical use of the Psalms. The line of development in the Western church is followed and, after the Reformation, that in the churches of the Reformation - the confessional tradition the researcher specifically has in mind with this study. The goal of this exercise is to demonstrate the continuity of the proposals made in this chapter with the line of tradition in which the researcher finds himself.

Early liturgy was heavily influenced by the Psalter. Phrases like “*Kyrie eleison*” and the acclamation “*Alleluia*” were taken from the Psalms and given an independent life in liturgy (Holladay 1993:166). Psalms were sung responsorially²³ from the fourth century on (Holladay 1993:167). When the tradition of readings was introduced, the prescribed psalm was not used as a reading, but was regarded to be a *response* to one of the readings (Holladay 1993:167). By the seventh century certain psalms had found their way into the set liturgy for the Eucharist. They were sung responsorially. A psalm was also chanted during the distribution of communion.

The emergence of monastic communities saw the inception of a novel use of the Psalter in the Christian community - that of reciting the whole Psalter, in canonical sequence, over a given period of time. Normally this was completed in a week. This evolved into the practice of the Divine Office in the West, with the eight daily prayer hours that consisted largely of psalms, but also including readings from the Old and New Testaments and various other prayers. This practice has been in existence to this day. In monastic communities, where training was available, the office was chanted to traditional melodies (plainsong) that have come to be called “Gregorian chant”, though no connection with Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) can be proven (Holladay 1993:177).

Eventually the recitation of the Divine Office spread to the private devotions of lay Christians - mostly men and women who were at leisure and had had the necessary education to be able to do so. The last requirement was necessary since the Divine Office was only recited in Latin (Holladay 1993:177).

21. See Holladay (1993) for a good summary of Jewish use of the Psalms in devotional and liturgical life. He covers the use of the Psalms in the Qumran community (Holladay 1993:95-112) and the era from the first century AD to the present (Holladay 1993:134-60).

22. See Balantine (1993:113-33; 161-284).

23. In this case a cantor was used to sing successive sections of the psalm, to which the congregation would respond with the refrain.

This development was especially encouraged by the new literacy of the Carolingian period. This led to the perception of the Psalms as be the property of lay Christians in a way that the rest of the Scriptures were not. Holladay (1993:178) quotes from a Frankish penitential of the early eighth century:

“A layman may not read a lection in the church nor sing the alleluia but only the psalms and responses without the alleluia” (Holladay 1993:178).

A further development made the Psalms the domain of the laity to an even greater extent. They became the textbook through which the young clerk-to-be learned his letters. They were used in primary education. They were often learned by heart (Holladay 1993:178).

The Psalms also played an important part in the Eastern liturgical tradition and Divine Office (Holladay 1993:179-84). In the Eastern tradition the Divine Office never made the transition to private recitation (Holladay 1993:182). But the Eastern tradition differentiated itself from the Western tradition in another way - it always believed that the Divine Office should be performed in the vernacular (Holladay 1993:184).

Developments in the Western church led to the situation where the Psalms had pride of place in the lives of the laity. They were so central to their faith that numerous folk superstitions evolved around them. The opening verse of Psalm 91²⁴ was a favourite inscription for protective amulets. Psalm 34:9²⁵, commonly recited during the distribution of communion in the liturgy of the Eastern church, was reputed to have the power to prevent wine from turning. One was instructed to write the verse on an apple and then to throw it into the wine (Holladay 1993:184).

The Psalter had a decisive influence on Martin Luther. As a monk he prayed the Divine Office as part of his daily routine. He kept this up until 1520 - three years after his break with the Roman Catholic Church (Holladay 1993:192). Roland Bainton is quoted as saying the following about the way he translated the Psalms into German:

“Luther’s liberties were greatest with the Psalms because here he was so completely at home. They were the record of the spiritual struggles through which he was constantly passing” (Holladay 1993:195).

24. “He who dwells in the shelter of the most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.”

25. “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.”

Luther, apparently, made many surprising translations of parts of the Psalms on the basis of his personal experience.

The Psalms played an important role in Luther's liturgical reforms. He maintained that the entire book of Psalms should be used in worship and not only short selections. He made metrical paraphrases of a number of psalms for use as hymns, the best-known being that of Psalm 46 - "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*". These hymns had such an impact that a Jesuit was quoted as saying

"The hymns of Luther killed more souls than his sermons" (Holladay 1993:195).

John Calvin found the Psalms to be a full reflection of the human condition before God, "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul" (Holladay 1993:196). On a very personal note, he found the Psalms to be representative of his own experience:

"For although I follow David at a great distance, and come far short of equalling him, ... I have no hesitation in comparing myself to him" (Holladay 1993:196).

For Calvin, the Psalms were as much a part of personal devotions as of the liturgical life of the faith community. He often found solace in the Psalms as he prayed them as his own prayers in the midst of personal struggles (Holladay 1993:196).

With the Reformation came the advent of the metrical Psalters, meant to be sung by the whole congregation. Luther had done some work in this regard. The Calvinist movement, though, was the primary source of the adaptation of the Psalms for congregational singing. The singing of the Psalms became one of their distinguishing characteristics.

Calvin comments on this in the third part of the Institutes, significantly enough, in his extended section on prayer. He holds them up as a way to arouse one's ardour for God. He calls the singing of Psalms "public prayers" by which one prays or sings God's praises so that all hearts may be stimulated to zeal and fire (Calvijn 1931:433). Calvin was convinced that communal singing is a necessary component of public worship, and it is the Psalms that should be sung (Holladay 1993:199).

Calvin, together with the French humanist Clément Marot and the composer Louis Bourgeois, collaborated to produce the first Genevan Psalter in 1551. It was to undergo many additions and translations into 24 languages and had a telling influence

in the development of congregational singing of the Psalms. Many other metrical Psalters followed, as well as hymns based on paraphrases of Psalms.

The Psalms continued to exert considerable and varied influence. They even found their way into humanist poetry during the sixteenth century, when they were deemed models to be emulated (Holladay 1993:207-8), and were used as battle hymns (Holladay 1993:209-10).

The Catholic Church, after the Reformation, persisted in using Latin in the liturgy. This meant that lay members of the church, who were not well versed in the language, could not have the same worship experience with the Psalms as their Protestant counterparts. There were, however, grudging concessions to the private use of strictly controlled translations of the Bible (Holladay 1993:224-32).

The Second Vatican Council changed all this. The Psalms have emerged with new power in Catholic liturgy. New freedom for Catholic scholars meant new stimuli in the field of biblical studies - including study of the Psalms. The mass could now be celebrated in the vernacular (Holladay 1993:271). A comprehensive restoration of the pattern of the early church took place, with the result that many more psalms found their way into the liturgy (Holladay 1993:274). The daily office was now also performed in the vernacular and altered to four daily hours instead of the customary eight. This resulted in a cycle in which most of the Psalms are now covered every four weeks (Holladay 1993:274). This new daily office makes allowances for omission of daytime prayer hours and this encourages its use by lay persons (Holladay 1993:276).

Finally, we have to mention the past few decades' growing use of lectionaries. Many Protestant churches have been encouraged to make greater use of the Psalms in their liturgies by this development (Holladay 1993:271).

This brief overview of the history of the use of the Psalms gives us an indication of the important role of the Psalter in the history of worship in the church. While we are presently experiencing new interest in the Psalms, we still have not arrived at the level of use that previous generations had made of the Psalms.

Of course we should not view the specific ways the Psalms were used as our norm, even when we try to learn from this tradition. Still, it is our conviction that a full reintroduction of the Psalter into the prayer life of the church would be a tremendous asset - but then in a manner attuned to the specifics of our present context. Both the prevailing secular culture and the new search for spirituality, alluded to in the first

chapter, will need the contribution of the Psalms to spiritual formation. We are sorely in need of a spiritual discipline that may lead us into a spirituality that is, simultaneously, thoroughly focused on God and solidly grounded in material existence. We need not pull new rabbits from our ecclesial hats. There is an old one in the wings that has served the church well over many centuries.

5. Summary

The chapter began by stating some of the reasons for our proposal of using the Psalms as prayers. The Psalms' integrated focus on God and life is presented as the main reason for our conviction that their use as prayers will result in integrated spirituality. A number of other reasons are also listed.

Next, we turned to some practical considerations for praying the Psalms.

Our focus then shifted to the settings in which the Psalms would function as prayers. We discussed the Psalms' use in liturgical settings (including liturgical prayers, liturgical singing, and preaching), prayer meetings and small groups, personal devotions and pastoral work. Our discussions focused on how the Psalms might be used in all of these settings to facilitate integrated spirituality. We made some practical suggestions for each of these areas.

The chapter ended with a brief summary of the liturgical and devotional use of the Psalms in the history of the Christian church.

CHAPTER 7: FINAL SUMMARY

1. Concerns

This study is concerned with integrated spirituality; that is, with spirituality that displays a concern for a relationship with God, while immersing itself simultaneously in concerns for concrete reality. The title of the study expresses this as “taking God seriously, taking life seriously”. Neither of these two aspects may lose our attention, but they are not of the same order. We consider the focus on God to be constitutive of integrated spirituality, without in any way diminishing the importance of the material dimension. Our hypothesis, stated at the beginning of the study, is that praying the Psalms as a congregational strategy will facilitate growth in such integrated spirituality.

2. Integrated spirituality

We began our argument with an investigation into the nature of Christian spirituality (Chapters 1 and 2). We demonstrated how studies of religion and spirituality constantly refer to the otherness of the human encounter with God. Concepts such as “an overplus of meaning”, “numinous”, “liminal”, “transcendence”, “anti-structure” and “the receptive mode” were employed. This intangible dimension of spirituality was held up as the constitutive element. The encounter with God is the true source of all forms of Christian spirituality. Any attempt to express the nature of spirituality should take cognisance of this fact.

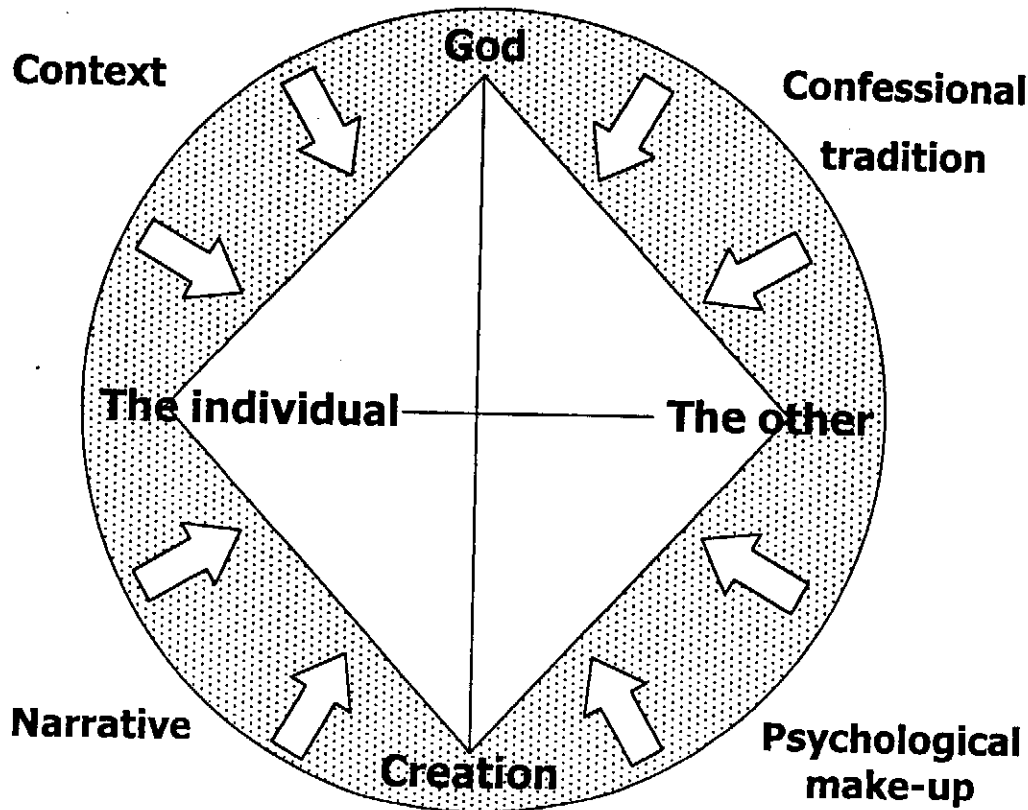
An overview of the definitions of spirituality in literature on the subject led to the isolation of the three most important elements found in most of our sources:

- Getting to know God as the source of life,
- embracing the material world, and
- discovering the unity between everyday life and a relationship with God.

This overview of definitions led to the following working definition of spirituality:

Spirituality is a life-orientation that presents itself as worship (communion with God) and as a continuous growth in understanding and ordering of the elements of our lives to a correspondence with the reality presented to us in worship.

Chapter 2 of the study focused our attention on the material dimensions of spirituality. An analysis of various typologies of spirituality led to the recognition of four broad categories of elements that impact spirituality, namely *context*, *confessional tradition*, *narrative*, and *psychological make-up*. These elements are in a dialogical relationship with spirituality and they form the matrix in which it develops. Spirituality itself, is then described in terms of concrete acts. These acts may all be described in terms of three relationships in which the individual finds himself or herself, namely *the relationship with God*, *the relationship with the other*, and *the relationship with creation*. This presented us with a web of interaction which was offered as a model of spirituality, together with the matrix. This model is depicted in the following diagram:



3. The integrated spirituality of the Psalms

Chapters 3 to 5 formed the next major section. These chapters were devoted to an analysis of the Psalms. The analysis aimed to indicate that the Psalms offer us an expression of integrated spirituality. Therefore Chapters 4 and 5 were offered as mirror images of each other. They cover the same terrain, but whereas Chapter 4 focused on the Psalms' seriousness about God, Chapter 5 was concerned with the Psalms' seriousness about life. The manner in which God and life is viewed in the

Psalms led us to the conclusion that these concerns are, in fact, inseparable for Psalmic spirituality. The Psalms know that God is faithfully committed to caring and liberation. Life is deemed to be worthless and unworkable if not lived with reference to God and his care and liberation.

We utilised two different approaches to the Psalms. *The first approach* was that of Walter Brueggemann in *The message of the Psalms* (1984). We used his three major categories of psalms (psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation and psalms of new orientation) as a grid to explore the concern for God and for life exhibited by the Psalms.

Psalms of orientation demonstrate a seriousness about God by interpreting the well-being and order during times of equilibrium as proof of God's sustenance and caring rule. In this way they prevent us from falling into the trap of reliance on human proficiency. Simultaneously, these psalms take life seriously by offering us a careful analysis of the way things work. They dig deeper than the surface structure of things and seek out deeper meanings and patterns. They forge these two concerns into one by offering us two perspectives: They present God as the Creator of all that exists whose character indelibly stamps his creation and as the One who is deeply committed to the work of his hands. Concomitantly, they depict life as something that can only be experienced as meaningful if lived in accordance with the character and nature that our corporeal reality receives from God.

Psalms of disorientation take God and life seriously by their candor about the concrete experiences of disequilibrium. Candor demonstrates seriousness about God by persisting with dialogue in situations where his absence is experienced. They refuse to disdain God by hiding behind politeness-barriers, by mute subservience, or by denial. Instead, they plead their case before God in the firm conviction that his ברית (covenant fidelity) will prevail. The resistance to disorientation presented by these psalms demonstrates a deep and persistent trust in God. On the other hand, their candor also demonstrate utter seriousness about life by their refusal to allow disorientation to dominate their existence and to exclude any part of life from God's attention. They also refuse any form of escapism. These psalms seek resolution for pain and disjunction. They view all of life as worthy of discussion with God and they believe, unflinchingly, that ultimately, life is worth living. Therefore, they are prepared to do battle - even if it has to be directed against God Himself.

The manner in which our two concerns are presented in the psalms of disorientation, once again alerts us to the inherent unity of these two passions. God is presented as

One who cares for the downtrodden and the helpless. The abrasiveness of life is viewed as a problem of theodicee - as a *theological* problem, in the first place.

The psalms of new orientation also present us with this dual focus. Their undiluted passion for God is displayed in exuberant revelling in the person and acts of God. Resolution of disorientation is viewed as the interventions of God and not as fortuitous twists of fate. On the other hand, these psalms demonstrate a joyful abandonment to life. A change of fortune is not simply greeted with a sigh of relief, but rather with a whoop of joy. For these psalms, life is too precious to be allowed to go uncelebrated.

Our first approach focused on the subject-matter of the Psalms. *The second approach* we used is concerned with the canonical structure of the Psalms. We paid attention to elements in the Psalter that display editorial activity. We attended to the following elements of the editorial structure:

- Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction,
- the division of the Psalter into five books,
- the development from lament to praise,
- the development from delighting in the *torah* to praising God,
- the development from a focus on human kings to a focus on God as king and
- the headings of individual psalms.

We found the same seriousness about God and life in evidence in the structure and order of the Psalms:

The introductory psalms insist on God as the dominating factor in life. The introduction also finds joy in God's instruction when Psalm 1 casts the whole Psalter in the light of a focus on the *torah*. The seriousness about life in these two psalms can be seen in their comprehensiveness which covers both the private and public spheres.

The five-book structure of the Psalter casts the Psalms as a response to God's words; as a way to take his initiative seriously.

The progression from lament to praise reveals the Psalter's deep-seated confidence of God's trustworthiness towards his suffering servants. This progression also demonstrates Israel's remarkable tenacity to move towards praise. This demonstrates an unyielding thirst for life at its fullest and a resolute refusal to settle for anything less.

The development from delighting in the *torah* to praising God displays a life-orientation that is a brazen disregard for the world's truth that one has to trust in one's own devices. We are led to put our trust in God's instruction as the entrance point to delight in life and to abandon ourselves to trust in God's kingship. Seriousness about life makes this the only option, since life is discovered to be only available as a gift from God. Praise, the destination of this development, is simultaneously a full ceding of life to God and a joyous abandonment to the richness of life.

The development from human kings to *Yahweh* as king presents a full turn away from human agencies of power to God as one's only hope for life. However, this does not lead to otherworldliness or escapism, since the sphere of God's reign is located both in heaven and on earth, with Zion as the focal point of God's earthly rule.

Most of the headings are late additions to the Psalter. Their express purpose is to personalise the specific psalms so that they may be applied to the life of the congregation of believers and to the lives of believing individuals. The editorial concern for life led to these additions which have the express purpose of making the Psalms functional for a theological interpretation of life.

Each of the three chapters devoted specifically to the Psalms also gave attention to the sociological aspect of world-making displayed in the Psalter. The Psalms *articulate* faith. Brueggemann's scheme of orientation, disorientation, new orientation, makes this particularly clear. But the Psalms also *shape* spirituality. We made extensive use of Peter Berger's work in the field of sociology of religion, as well as the perspectives found in Walter Brueggemann's *Israel's praise*, in our enquiry into this function of the Psalms.

The writings of these researchers help us to recognise how the Psalms present us with an alternative world-view, based on an alternative vision of God. The Psalms articulate resistance to the status quo-preserving ideologies espoused by those favoured by present socio-economical structures. They do this by calling on and praising God as the liberator of the עֲנִי (the helpless poor). The Psalms contain a strong current of creation themes, which articulate God's preserving and stabilising activity. However, this emphasis on God's sponsoring of stability, is juxtaposed with themes of deliverance. This juxtaposition acts as a constant reminder that no human ideology can claim permanent ascendancy. Therefore, praying the Psalms is a

subversively political act. It unsettles any truth claims that run contrary to those of God's reign of justice.

4. Applications

The last component of the study consists of some considerations for congregational strategies, and specifically those which attempt to induce integrated spirituality. We suggested that the Psalms should, first and foremost, be prayed. No other practice has such a profound influence on spirituality. We also suggested that the whole Psalter and whole psalms should be prayed in canonical sequence (except for specific informed liturgical uses of certain portions). We suggested ways in which the Psalms could be employed in liturgical settings, in small groups and in prayer meetings, personal devotions and pastoral work.

We made specific suggestions for overcoming problems in praying the Psalms, such as their unfamiliarity for many believers and the harshness of some of the so-called imprecatory psalms. We suggested regular courses on psalm-praying and preaching on the Psalms in congregations, to promote proper understanding. We recommended that some parts of the Psalter should not be expurgated from our liturgical life, due to their omission from lectionaries, but that these omissions from lectionaries should be inserted in the lexical cycles. We also recommended retranslations for liturgical and personal use, of harsh psalms so that their meaning should be preserved without the use of the violent images in the original. Other suggestions were that brief prayer-helps should be provided to facilitate praying of the Psalms and that singing of the Psalms in their full sense should be encouraged by shorter, comprehensive renditions of psalms for singing, set to music resonant with the musical horizons of modern-day believers.

In conclusion, we feel justified to contend that praying the Psalms as a congregational strategy would result in integrated spirituality. The kind of prayer-life emanating from this discipline cultivates spirituality that takes God and life seriously, doing so in a manner which integrates these two dimensions of reality. We submit that believers with integrated spirituality would seek engagement with the world, but will do so in terms of their vision of God and his acts of caring and liberation expressed in this world.

ADDENDUM: MATERIALS FOR MINISTRY

The following materials have been developed and used by the researcher in the Helderberg Dutch Reformed congregation in Somerset West, South Africa. They represent concrete attempts at putting to work the insights gleaned from this study in congregational ministry. They are added to provide examples of how the Psalms can function as prayers in a congregational setting.

Addendum 1: Praying the Psalms - The outline of a weekend course in praying the Psalms

The Dutch Reformed Church Helderberg has conducted a yearly prayer-seminar for a number of years. Various speakers were brought in from outside the congregation to conduct the seminar on various aspects of prayer. In 1997 the researcher was asked to conduct the seminar himself and to concentrate on helping members of the congregation to pray the Psalms. The seminar was conducted on the Friday evening, and Saturday afternoon and evening. It was then decided to repeat the seminar on a yearly basis and make an attempt to motivate as many of the congregation's members as possible to attend it at some time.

The aim of the seminar is to establish the links between the Psalms and the concrete lives of the attending parishioners while, simultaneously, alerting them to the way in which the Psalms function in pointing one's life towards God. The seminar explains the shape of the Psalter, Brueggemann's scheme of "orientation - disorientation - new orientation" and, then, discusses various types of psalms and how they could be prayed. It concludes with some practical suggestions.

What follows is only the outline, since the full seminar would be too bulky. The seminar consisted of lectures, with some discussion questions and applications at various points.

A) The structure of the Psalter

1. 5 large blocks
2. Psalm 1 + 2: an introduction
3. Psalm 3 - concreteness
4. Psalms 4 en 5 - God's rhythm
5. Movement: from lament to praise
6. Movement: from David as king to God as king

B) Orientation, disorientation, new orientation

1. Psalms as prayers for times of orientation
 - 1.1 Songs of creation
 - 1.2 Songs of *torah*
 - 1.3 Wisdom psalms
 - 1.4 Songs of retribution
 - 1.5 Songs for times of well-being

2. Psalms as prayers for times of disorientation
 - 2.1 Personal lament
 - 2.2 Communal laments
 - 2.3 Two problem psalms
 - 2.4 "A second opinion" on the disorientation
 - 2.5 "The seven psalms"
 - 2.6 After the deluge - Thou!

3. Psalms as prayers for times of new orientation
 - 3.1 Thanksgiving songs
 - 3.2 Thanksgiving songs of the community
 - 3.3 The once and future king
 - 3.4 Thanksgiving generalised to confidence
 - 3.5 Hymns of praise

4. The flow of the Psalms and the seasons of life

C) Enemies and imprecations

1. Extreme examples
2. The process that leads to lament
3. Functions of the enemy-psalms

D) Laments

1. The theology of laments: Crying out and hearing
2. The God of the laments
3. The function of laments
4. The costly loss of lament

E) Praise

1. Two types of hymns
2. The theology of praise
3. The last six psalms
4. Three important practical aspects of praise

F) The royal psalms and the enthronement psalms

1. David and Christ
2. God as king
3. Praying the royal and enthronement psalms

G) Practical pointers on praying the Psalms**H) The place of praying the Psalms in spiritual life****I) For further reading: A list of books with notes on the contents and writing style*****Addendum 2: Examples from a “starter kit” for praying the Psalms***

The following is a shortened version of a “starter kit” given to members of the Dutch Reformed Church Helderberg to begin praying the Psalms. These prayer helps are a way of priming the pump. They simply give the persons using them a feel for using the Psalms. They are recommended to pray the Psalms in the “starter kit” and then to start praying the Psalms in sequence, from Psalm 1 through 150.

For starters ...

The most important thing is to begin. But it is often also the most difficult thing. To help you to get started, here are some notes on a few psalms with suggestions on ways to pray them. I would recommend that you begin with only one psalm at a time. Read the psalm through attentively, with the help of the first part of the notes. Then read it as a prayer, using the suggestions in the prayer notes. Then proceed with the rest of your normal time of prayer.

PSALM 1 - DELIGHTING IN THE TORAH

- Psalm 1 is an extended beatitude. The essence of the psalm is found in the first two verses: “Blessed is the man... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord...”
- **VV 1 and 2** opens the psalm with a beatitude. V 1 tells us what the blessed person avoids. V 2 tells us how he or she acts. V 3 provides an extended metaphor for the blessed person. V 4 provides a short metaphor for the wicked and follows it in vv 5-6 with a description of the failed life of the wicked.
- Psalms 1 and 2 function as an introduction to the Psalter. They are bracketed by the two beatitudes of the first verse of Psalm 1 and the last verse of Psalm 2. They state the main themes of the book. Psalm 2 confesses God as the most important factor in public life. His rule determines the outcome of public affairs and history.

Psalm 1 concerns the heartfelt conviction that God has given us his *torah* (the Hebrew word for the law or word of God) as a key to life. Nothing else will suffice. No other counsel will lead us to true meaning and joy. This theme is taken up again and again in the Psalms. It is sometimes the subject of severe scrutiny, in the light of evidence to the contrary.

Psalms 1 and 2 function as a kind of entrance into the Psalms. If you can pray them with your whole heart, you will be able to pray the other psalms with conviction. If you do not share the convictions of Psalms 1 and 2, if you are not thoroughly convinced that God’s words offer the only viable and reliable perspective on life (Ps 1) and that He is the dominant factor in public life, then you will not be at home with the rest of the psalms. Therefore these two psalms deserve our full attention. We need to come back to them again and again. They are, together with the exultant hymns at the end of the Psalter, the heartbeat of the whole book.

- The Hebrew word translated with “meditates” in v 2 refers to an approach to the Bible that is far removed from the factual and hasty way the Bible is read by most modern-day Christians. The word paints a picture of time spent in a leisurely reflection; of ruminating and of turning a part of Scripture over and over in one’s mind to consider all possible angles. The Jews involved their whole body in reading the *torah*. They swayed forward and backwards; they walked about and mumbled to themselves. They learned to love the sound of these well-known words. The word “meditate” recommends this way of reading the Word. In Is 31:4 the same word is used for a lion when it has caught its prey. He conjures up a picture of a lion with his paw on his catch: “This is mine!” This is what the person is like who has discovered

the joy of the *torah*. It fills his mind. Even mouthing the words provide him or her with joy!

PRAYER NOTES

- Psalm 1 is, strictly speaking, not a prayer. If uttered it in the presence of God, it rather has the feel of a credal statement. Use it as such. Use Psalm 1 to reaffirm your conviction that God provides the only key to life and then continue your conversation with God. Reaffirm your trust towards God that his way is the only way to live. Confess the degree to which you still sometimes look for meaning and joy in other things. Discuss this state of affairs with God.

PSALM 2 - THE LORD LAUGHS AT THEM!

- Psalm 2 is the second part of the introduction to the Psalms. Psalm 1 starts with a beatitude. Psalm 2 ends with a beatitude. These two beatitudes are the cover around the introduction to the Psalms. Psalm 1 is concerned with the individual's personal choice for God and his ways, against the lure of the wicked. Psalm 2 is concerned with power; it is concerned with the faith community's relation to a world filled with people using power to influence the course of life and history. Therefore: Psalm 1 helps me to take God seriously in my *personal life*, while Psalm 2 helps the faith community to take God seriously in *public life*. The themes of Psalms 1 and 2 run through the whole of the Psalter. The faith community constantly faced situations that apparently seemed to contradict the notion that God's way provided the only workable key to life (Ps 1) and that He was in full command of the world's destiny (Ps 2). Life is complex and often makes it difficult to persist in our belief in the world-view of Psalms 1 and 2. The Psalter is unflinchingly forthright about this fact. But, after squarely facing all that life can throw at man, this faith in God and his way as the prevailing fact of life, is exuberantly reaffirmed by exiting with six passionate hymns of praise (Pss 145-150). There is no shortcut to this joyous affirmation. One has to pray through every part of one's life with Psalms 1 and 2 as one's points of reference.
- **Vv 1-3** is an exclamation of indignation and surprise at the presumptuous display of power of nations and their kings. In **vv 4-6** the focus shifts towards heaven. The wrath and scorn of the Ruler of the universe is described, as well as his plan to curb their arrogance: He has instated his own king in Jerusalem. In **vv 7-9** this king (this King) speaks out. He repeats the decree with which he was instated. The two terms "anointed" and "son" are indications that God has favoured him above all else. In **vv 10-12a** the kings of the earth are cautioned to submit to God. This is the only way to

avert his wrath. The psalm concludes in v 12b with a beatitude for those who take refuge in the Lord.

- Psalm 2 is a Messianic psalm. How does God rule on earth? Through the Messiah, his Anointed (the direct translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”). The Israelites spoke of their kings as “anointed.” They were instated as kings by a ritual act of anointing. This was seen as the way God empowered them for their office. Psalm 2 initially referred to the ordinary human king in Israel, David’s antecedents on the throne in Jerusalem. These kings were often referred to as “sons of God.” These kings had the responsibility to rule in accord with God’s will. This meant that their rule and God’s kingdom were identical.

With the passage of time, however, it became clear to Israel that none of the kings reached the high expectations of the Messianic psalms - as seen in vv 8 and 9. Also, none of them could be said to have completely fulfilled their God-given commission (as we find it expressed in texts like Psalm 72:1-2; 12-14). Even the best of them could only lay claim to a partial fulfilment of the injunction to rule in accordance with God’s will, that they should act as protector of the helpless. Ultimately, the people of Israel were stripped of their kings when they were taken into exile in Babylon. The Psalms were collected and edited in this kingless time. One would have expected them to have dropped the psalms centred around the king. This did not happen. They had come to the insight in God’s plan for his people that the king that would fulfil all these psalms was still to come - the Messiah. Therefore they persisted in praying these psalms and, in this way, kept their hopes alive for a new future, inaugurated by the Messiah.

While the Jewish people are still waiting for the Messiah, Christians have identified Jesus Christ as the one who had fulfilled all that psalms such as Psalm 2 spoke of. He is the One through Whom God’s rule breaks into the world, by Whose power the power of nations and rulers is eclipsed. In spite of the show of control by the nations and their leaders, Jesus Christ is the One in command of the outcome of world history. It behoves all who are in positions of power to keep this in mind and to act accordingly (vv 10-12). This is also the great consolation for believers who often seem to be helpless before earthly powers.

- It is ironic that Jesus Christ is marginalised in the public arena in the modern world while Psalm 2 (together with many other parts of the Bible) points to Jesus Christ as the One anointed by God to determine the course of human history. Modern society has banned religion from the marketplace, the political arena, schools and other public places. Psalm 2 makes it clear that these are the very places where God’s rule

is to find expression. Christians should enter public life with boldness and should not allow themselves to be intimidated. If they are accosted by boastful power-brokers, they would do well to remember that “*The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them ...*”

PRAYER NOTES

- To pray Psalm 2 is to profess God’s rule and to relativise all human powers. It would be a good discipline to examine your own heart before praying the psalm to determine which aspects or persons in society intimidate you: The rulers? Economic factors? Circumstances you find yourself in? Whatever it may be, think about these things when the psalm speaks of nations and rulers. Use the psalm as a confession of God’s omnipotence. Pray it with conviction. Place yourself in the protection of God and his Messiah (v 12b).

PSALM 15 - WHO MAY ENTER...?

- V 1 reminds us of a fact we are too apt to forget: It is not a matter of course to have communion with God. It is something to marvel at. Moreover, the fact that this question is directed at God in this verse makes it clear that the right to enter his presence can only be given by the Lord Himself.
- Psalm 15 is concerned with the character of the person who is about to enter God’s presence. A quick reading of the psalm might leave one with the impression that it is sung at the entrance of the sanctuary, where a kind of moral test is applied to determine who could be regarded worthy to enter God’s presence. The preconditions seem rather stringent, so that many would be turned away.

Such a psalm would be out of harmony with the rest of the Bible. In truth, this psalm is sung *inside* the sanctuary and by those who have already been given access to God. The wonderful thing we should not miss about this psalm is that it is, in fact, a kind of character description of the believers already in God’s presence. We do not recognise ourselves in the words of Psalm 15. This is, however, the gift we receive from God when we enter his presence. Ferdinand Deist tells of the reference he received from his school principal after finishing his final exams. The reference painted a glowing picture of virtue - one he did not feel comfortable with. He went back to the principal and said, “Sir, this is someone else you described!” The principal retorted, “Well, then be that person!” This is close to what God does for us in Psalm 15.

PRAYER NOTES

- Take some time with the first verse. Meditate on the verse. Think about the fact that Christ has won free access into the presence of God (Heb 10:19). Express yourself to God about this.
- Read vv 2-5 as a description of the character of Christ. Meditate about the fact that this life of Christ has been planted in you. When God looks at you, He views you in this light. Now read these verses slowly and hear God saying these things about you. Enter into conversation with God at each new point.

PSALM 32 - WHEN I CONFESSED MY SINS

- Psalm 32 is one of the 7 penitential psalms (together with Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143). It is, however, not a psalm in which sins are confessed, but rather a prayer that advocates the practice of penitence.
- Vv 1-2 consists of two beatitudes that extol the blessing of the forgiveness of sins. Vv 3-5 is a personal testimony of the pray-er's own penitence. Vv 6-8 is a call to confession, directed at those who love God. Vv 9-10 is an extended proverb that elaborates on the previous verses. The faithful are counselled not to act like an obstinate horse or mule, but to confess their sins. V 11 concludes the psalm with praise.
- This psalm starts with a double beatitude. The Psalter contains more beatitudes than any other book in the Bible. Taken as a whole, they paint a picture of the well-being of the life lived according to the ways and orders of God. Psalm 32 teaches us that the confession of sins form the basis of such a blessed life. Well-being is impossible without confession of sin, since sin cuts us off from God. Calvin observes in his commentary on the Psalms that all that Scripture says about blessedness in other beatitudes depends on the blessedness commended here.
- The description in vv 3-4 of the psalmist's life experience when he was still obstinate (like the horse or mule of v 9) and refused to confess his sins, depicts the opposite of the blessedness of which the first two verses speak. Sin spoils life. The only way to resume life, in the true sense of the word, is to make use of God's offer of eradicating guilt by way of repentance.
- The Christian tradition has always followed Paul in making much of repentance. The danger now exists that we might start viewing it as meritorious, as something that buys us forgiveness. This is, of course, pure heresy. It helps to realise that God's

work is always previous to mine. God is always the one with the initiative. “Voordat ek kon kies, kon vra, het U Seun my vloek gedra”¹ we sing in Hymn 10 of the Dutch Reformed Church’s hymnal. When I confess my sins I find, like the prodigal son, that God had always been on the lookout for me and that He is there to meet me. Even more, He has been calling me for quite some time like He did with Adam and Eve in the garden.

PRAYER NOTES

- This psalm offers us the opportunity to acknowledge the wisdom of penitence and to thank him for the possibility He offers us of freedom from guilt. The psalm offers us the opportunity to practise confession of our sins. I would recommend that it be done before praying the psalm, and that the psalm should, then, be prayed as a kind of reflection and celebration of what had conspired.

Addendum 3: Examples of prayer meetings issuing from praying the Psalms

What follows are a few examples of the way the Psalms have been used in Helderberg Dutch Reformed church in the weekly congregational prayer meeting. One psalm is used in each meeting to create the agenda for the first part of the prayer meeting. This is done by a reading of the psalm, followed by a short meditation on the psalm, and then a time of free prayer using the psalm as a point of departure. Parishioners use this time to personalise the psalm. The psalm itself is often read as the first prayer of the session, followed by an open time of prayer along the same thematic lines as the psalm. At other times a portion of the psalm is offered as a first prayer. If possible, the psalm can be sung at the end of the prayer session.

The Psalms are not used at random. The canonical sequence is followed. the use of Lectionary readings from the Psalms to fit in with the church year, could also be considered.

The part of the prayer meeting structured around the psalm is followed by a structured time of intercessory prayer.

Psalm 17

Read Psalm 17.

We were never taught to pray this way - to deny our guilt. (Read vv 3-5.) We were taught a readiness to accept responsibility when things go wrong, to submit to bad things

¹ This can be freely translated as, “Before we could choose or ask, your Son had already borne our curse”.

that come over our lives as part of God's will for us. Not David! There are a number of these (for us) strange psalms that teach us to deny our guilt. What do we make of them? How do we reconcile this with what we have learnt from childhood?

But we have to be careful not to misinterpret these psalms. David is not teaching us to deny our sin. Far from it! Psalm 51 is a passionately remorseful prayer. We find a readiness to concede guilt in many other prayers. But if we understand what he is doing in this psalm, we will receive wonderful consolation in difficult times. David is in trouble. His enemies have him in a quandary. They are all over him. It seems as if they have won the day. Now David comes to God for shelter, and he has only one thing to rely on: (Read vv 8 + 9). He is the apple of God's eye. He is more than a mere number in God's sight. Why then this terrible situation he finds himself in? And (and here we find the denial of guilt) he has always been faithful to God. He did not follow other gods. Certainly he has done his share of sinning. But it never cancelled his loyalty to God. He always returned to God; he always repented. And then he plays his trump card - the same one Peter played at the lakeside in Galilee: "*Lord, You know my heart ... You know that I love you.*" David knows that he is a victim in this situation. And he has the trust in God to know that He shares in this knowledge.

Psalm 17 and the other psalms where guilt is denied teach us that we can still profess our loyalty and love for God, even when we know that we are not without sin. They teach us that, even when we are aware of our imperfections, we can find refuge in God. We can live by this truth.

PRAYER TIME:

Let us now reaffirm our loyalty to God and thank him for the refuge He offers us.

[The psalm is read as a prayer and followed by a time of free prayer that confesses loyalty to God and thanks him for refuge.]

Psalm 18

The first part of V 46 is the focal point of this salvation song: "*The Lord lives!*" This verse means to do more than merely state that God is not dead. It means to convey the fact that God is actively working out his purpose in the world. He has not withdrawn from the world. He is a living reality. The whole (lengthy) psalm is a song about the One (spelled with a capital letter!) whose activity is the determining factor for the destiny of our world. The psalmist tells the story of how God overcame his enemies; how the Lord saved him in impossible situations; how God provided strength when it seemed that he could not go on. When he reminds himself of all these things, he breaks out in praise:

Read Psalm 18:2-4; 29-35.

When he reaches the climax of the song, we hear him calling out in v 46: "*The Lord lives!*" The Lord is at work, turning our world on its head and inaugurating his kingdom! Is this not exactly what all God's children are longing for?

PRAYER TIME:

Let us now join David in praising the living God - the one actively involved in our lives and in our world.

Psalm 19

Read Psalm 19.

Psalm 19 consists of three sections. In the first seven verses all creation praises God. [Read vv 2-5a.] Creation praises God - for those with ears to hear its silent voice. The second part praises the *torah*, the teaching of God. David exhausts all the words Hebrew has for the law, for God's teaching, to express his delight in it. God's law gives life; it gives the only life worth having. [Read vv 8, 11.] Just as the sun's warmth gives life to all creation (v 7), the law of God animates all humanity. The third major part of the psalm (vv 13-14) petitions God to take away all transgressions that might spoil this energising work of the law.

The psalm ends with v 15, that might be viewed as the capstone of the whole psalm: "*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*" This is sacrificial language. He prays that his words and thoughts may be a pure and acceptable sacrifice. This is our prayer every Wednesday evening. This is our prayer every time we go to church. This is our prayer whenever we speak to God in our private devotions: "May my thoughts and words be a pure sacrifice to You, O Lord." Let us pray along the lines of this prayer:

PRAYER TIME:

Let us go through all the movements of the psalm. I will announce them one by one.

- Firstly, let us agree with the silent roar of creation as it sings out the glory of God. Let us praise our creator. [*Give time for a few prayers.*]
- Let us thank and praise God for the wonderful gift of his guidance through his Word. [*Give time for a few prayers.*]

- Let us pray for God's cleansing work in our hearts - that He may forgive and root out all our sins. [*Give time for a few prayers.*]
- Let us offer all our prayers of this evening to God as a sacrifice. [*Give time for a few prayers.*]

Psalm 20

Read Psalm 20.

Psalm 20 is a prayer for the king. There are quite a number of them in the Psalter. The people of Israel knew that their fate was inextricably bound with the fortune of the king. If his reign faltered, their fortunes took a turn for the worst. When he flourished, they shared in his good fortune.

This knowledge was tied into a deep knowledge of the source of all good fortune. They knew that the king's fate depended on God and not on his own prowess. Vv 8-9: "*Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.*" Salvation comes from God. The king is only his servant, his instrument of salvation. The king is not the saviour, but one of the saved. To pray like this is an antidote to the human error of hero worship. "*Do not put your trust in princes ...*" cautions Psalm 146. Trust only God. Therefore this striking sentence is repeated in three other psalms - Psalms 33, 44, and 147. *Only God can save.*

But we should pray for his instruments. Our society is deeply flawed; so flawed that only God can save it. Let us pray that God will use our government to bring about healing. To bring an end to the violence, corruption, and moral decay in our public life. God can use any instrument. He can heal any wound. *Therein* lies our hope.

PRAYER TIME:

Let us pray for our God to bring healing to our land. Let us pray for those in positions of power in our country; let us pray that God may use them to bring about justice and well-being for those who cannot care for themselves.

[*End the session by praying Psalm 20.*]

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